

# **Better Together Project Final Report**

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**Better Together Project Report**  
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## **Better Together Project Report Executive Summary**

### **Background and Purpose**

In 2012, Synod took note of the sharp rise in Article 17 situations in the past decade. As a result, the Board of Trustees charged Pastor-Church Relations (PCR) with the task of discovering how the Christian Reformed Church (CRC) could be more proactive in avoiding these separations, rather than being in the reactive mode. As part of the response, PCR created the Better Together Delivery Team to work with classis functionaries to explore some of the underlying issues and uncover possible interventions for reducing and preventing the type of conflicts that can lead to Article 17s.

### **Participants and Procedure**

Over a period of three years, the Better Together Delivery Team methodically connected with and listened to the experiences and advice of classis functionaries in most of the classes, including Stated Clerks, Regional Pastors, Church Visitors, Mentors, and Classis Counselors. These connections were made via questionnaires, interviews, and gatherings of functionaries from clusters of classes. Themes and issues were extracted from those conversations and presented to sample classes for validation. Recommendations were then developed and presented to PCR and others.

### **Results**

What has been amassed is a treasure trove of stories of wisdom, pain, hope, weariness, love for the church, and a collection of what are hoped to be promising practices. Great ideas and recommendations for how to better support classis functionaries, who often find themselves on the front lines when congregations and their pastors experience stress and conflict, were gathered. Pastors are stressed, as trending challenges in the denomination and the wider culture result in more and more expectations on them. Councils and congregations face tough issues. Lay leaders are stressed as they get involved in more and more complex issues and conflicts and don't know how to work the system in healthy ways. Wonderful growth in the diversity of leadership can often mean leaders who have not grown up with the mental map of CRC Church Order and come in with expectations that run against the expectations of seasoned CRC leaders and congregations. It was discovered that the Church Order is not well-known and often is not used well by those who do know it. Encouragement and training was voiced as a priority for virtually all functionaries. Healthier relationships are urgently needed throughout the system if the challenges are to be met in Christ-like ways.

### **Next Steps**

- Many recommendations have gone to PCR. Implementation has begun and will expand.
- PCR will report extensively to the Board of Trustees on this project and its response to it at Synod 2016.
- Conversations about ways to strengthen the mentoring program have taken place with Calvin Theological Seminary. The hope is that mentoring will be coordinated with training for classis functionaries.
- Several pilot projects are underway to strengthen classes as they work to support congregations in both mission and governance.
- The CRC's Director of Ministries and Administration has convened a Classis Renewal Group to coordinate and nurture efforts to strengthen classes for better support of congregations.

## **Better Together Project Report**

### **Introduction**

In 2012, Synod noted the rising number of separations between congregations and their pastors and requested the Board of Trustees (BOT) to take action to address this issue. At the BOT's request, the administration asked the Office of Pastor-Church Relations (PCR) to develop recommendations for action steps. PCR formed the Better Together Delivery Team (BTDT) to determine how to better equip classis leaders for helping churches and their pastors build strong and healthy relationships.

For two and half years, we (BTDT) have been asking questions and listening—learning the lay of the land and learning from classis functionaries. We initially focused our work on 15 pilot classes but quickly found our work spreading out to include more classes. Overall, we've had interactions with the functionaries of almost every classis in the denomination. We've been involved in a sequence of gathering and interviewing Church Visitors, Regional Pastors, Stated Clerks, Classis Counselors, and Mentors/Mentees. We then visited classes and convened regional events to reflect back on our findings so that we could validate or revise them. During our visits and our gatherings we've mostly simply shared information, invited feedback, and asked questions. We found that setting the table for good dialog, prayer, encouragement, and the sharing of stories has a profound value for leaders. Gathering and interacting around generative questions, coupled with intensive listening, has impressed us with its power. This in turn became a format for offering training which was also much appreciated.

At the beginning of the work of the BTDT we formed an Advisory Team made up of members with broader perspective on the issues being addressed. They met with the BTDT quarterly to help with networking, strategic guidance, and concrete useful outcomes. Members of this Advisory Team were:

Norm Thomasma (Facilitator)	Pastor-Church Relations
Carl Kammeraad	Regional Pastor, Classis Grand Rapids East
Cecil Van Niejenhuis	Pastor-Church Relations
Dee Recker	Synodical Services
Karen DeBoer	Faith Formation Ministries
Kathy Smith	Calvin Institute for Christian Worship
Kiwoong Kim	Pastor, Hahn-In CRC
Peter Kelder	Home Missions
Sean Baker	Pastor, Creston CRC; Classis Ministry Committee GR North

## **Better Together Project Report Findings**

### **I. Current Scene**

As we engaged classis leaders across the denomination, we heard a consistent theme of concern and stress. While there are many bright places of flourishing and life, there are also consistent concerning trends with which we all live: the CRC seems to be shrinking, it's aging, it appears we're losing our young people, and resources for ministry are getting harder to come by. The more these realities characterize the denomination, the more they increase our concern and our stress, and the more they get in the way of the work of our pastors, congregations, and classes.

The growing anxiety within the denominational systems takes a unique shape because of our historic structures, which are set up to make sure that no real power is ever housed in one person or one office of the church. Congregations are governed by councils that are accountable to gatherings of neighboring congregations (classes) and classes are accountable to synods. (For more on this, and examples of how this dynamic plays out in our denomination, see the section of this report on "Church Visiting and Church Polity" in Appendix E, page 29.) Our Church Order is designed to make sure that nowhere along the line is there an accumulation of authority in any one person. This can result in decision making that is very slow, often unclear, and often fails bring about lasting resolution.

Situations that are extremely painful can drag on for months or years, seemingly without end. Our fear of power leads to frequent turnover of leadership which can result in even more deliberation and deferred action. We're very good at carefully building highly cohesive and articulate studies of issues. However, when issues of leadership and personal relationships are on the table, we fail far too often to achieve healthy reconciliation and healing—in part because of how long the process takes, and that relates to our diffusion of decision making authority.

When anxiety rises, our systems begin to show the symptoms. We tend to get critical, competitive, and resistant. We look around with increasing urgency for someone to resolve the issue, take charge, and fix things. But in our system we can't readily find anybody to blame, nor to follow! Our denominational office has experienced multiple leadership crises in the last decade, and that has only increased our anxiety and our stress. The obvious target, the only enduring office with enough heft to be salient in our system, is the ordained clergy and that is where the pressure gathers. It's the pastor who's expected to stop the membership drain, retain the young people, ensure robust giving, attract new members, give freely of his/her time to classis and denominational duties, and pastor the church with endless love, patience, and creativity. Every day we see the effects of this pattern on the health of our clergy and our congregations. Congregational and classis leadership can be tiring, lonely, and overwhelming. In our conversations we noted a pattern in both pastors and councils of hiding our individual and collective weakness and neediness.

We realize that a significant cultural change is needed in order for the Better Together Project to realize the hoped for outcome of building strong, healthy relationships between congregations and their pastors by equipping classis functionaries to more effectively support congregations and pastors.

What follows are summaries of what emerged from our conversations with Regional Pastors, Church Visitors (two classis functionaries that are often at the forefront when there are challenges between congregations and pastors), Stated Clerks, Mentors, Classis Counselors, and Home Missions Regional and Ethnic Leaders.

## II. Findings - Summaries by Functionary Role

### a) Regional Pastors

The theme of the vital importance of healthy relationships among pastors and classis leaders was probably the most common theme we heard as a team, and the Regional Pastors (RP) sounded this note loudly and clearly. There are two dimensions to this theme: the RPs need to cultivate the kind of relationships that are truly supportive of pastors, and all the relationships within classis need to be healthy in order for the polity, governance, and mission dimensions to be healthy.

Some obstacles to RP work were noted, such as geographical distance, time constraints, costs of travel and hospitality, language and translation. Classes need to take these factors into account in choosing RPs and in providing resources for them.

A hopeful and healthy sign is that there is a longing among leaders for healthy relationships—for healthy communities of peers, for encouragement, advice, and accountability. And yet the stresses that mark the lives of pastors can easily result in “hunkering down”, assuming a defensive posture, and resisting deep peer relationships, all of which can be significant obstacles in the work of the RP. Pastoral self-care can be strengthened by good RP practices.

Clearly, having the right people serving in the role is crucial. Rather than filling it with someone who is “available”, the assignment needs to be given to someone gifted for the task, with the necessary time, and who demonstrates a willingness to serve. It’s essential that classes and councils value, and have a vested interest in, the work of RPs. We found a difference of opinion as to whether the RP should be emeritus. Obviously more time is available to do the RP work if the RP is retired from active ministry, but there is also a question about credibility, especially among younger pastors, if the RP is a more mature or retired person.

We also found that there is a real need and longing among RPs for face-to-face interaction for mutual support and sharing of best practices. They’re interested in training opportunities as a subset of that mutual support and encouragement. They also want to know, “Who is my pastor?” The emotional, spiritual, and physical health of the RP is important! The Office of Pastor-Church Relations recognizes this and already provides bi-annual conferences for refreshment and renewal for RPs and their spouses. These conferences are highly appreciated and there is conversation about holding regional conferences in the alternate years.

Convening peer groups of pastors for support and learning is a tool often used by RPs. Obviously, this can help the classis get “more bang for the buck” out of the RP. Some classes also have more than one RP as they try to address obstacles of time and distance. This seems to be a promising practice for those who’ve adopted it.

RPs are significantly affected by the way their classis signals that it values their work. Careful selection, stipends and expense accounts, having more than one RP, regular reporting to the classis interim committee or executive team -- all these practices can help to create a climate in the classis that increases the effectiveness and the morale of the RP.

*For some specific comments we heard from RPs, see “Comments from Regional Pastors” on page 9.*

## **b) Church Visitors**

We listened to a variety of pastors and lay leaders who are serving as Church Visitors (CVs), some of whom have experience in church visiting stretching across multiple classes and decades. Stories of deep satisfaction with the practice of church visiting and of pastors who practice their visits with faithfulness and creativity were shared. We also heard about classes who have spent years of creative energy rebuilding a healthy practice of church visiting. The sad truth is that these are exceptions.

We heard a clear message that, in general, the perception is that the church visiting system is broken and the practice has come to have negative connotations. Church visits are seen as an exercise, something to check off a to-do list, or a way to search for problems and therefore are not generally perceived as positive. The “church visiting” and “Church Visitors” labels themselves have a check-up-only tone which is resented. Unfortunately, we found that trust issues are common, visiting is infrequent, relationships are thin, anxiety is widespread, and the inclination to hide the real issues is commonplace.

All of this is resulting in reduced respect for the people (CVs) and the process, and a lack of trust and honesty. The practice of church visiting is seen by many as unworkable, underappreciated, and undervalued.

The culture in which our churches exist has changed, but the church visiting system and the role haven't. This makes CVs feel ill-equipped to deal with issues that call for anything more than following the rules or guidelines. Most CVs don't find the questions in the *Guidelines for the Conversation with Church Visitors* overly helpful. Except for a few classes, most CVs aren't trained, nor do they think they have the authority to respond—which, when dealing with problems, makes next steps all but impossible. In addition, many CVs are working with time and distance constraints.

Another major concern among CVs is how reporting is handled at classis. Expectations are often not clear, what is done with the reports is often a mystery, and whether the classis values the reports at all is frequently in question. Most CVs are eager to carry out their role well, but struggle in the face of these challenges. One of the most seasoned pastors we spoke with made it very clear that he saw no hope in attempting to “repair the system” of church visiting. His wisdom: it needs to be re-invented.

*For some specific comments we heard from CVs, see “Comments from Church Visitors” on page 10.*

## **c) Stated Clerks**

In moving on to sample the experiences of Stated Clerks (SC), we thought we might be getting farther away from the heart of the issue. But in fact we heard an important additional perspective which speaks helpfully and directly to the experiences of the congregations and pastors across the denomination. We were affirmed in the overall tone and specifics of what we had been hearing from others. In general, the denominational systems and policies are not being used or not being used creatively and wisely. Is this because the structures and the Church Order themselves are somehow outdated or because we no longer know how to use them well—or at all? Perhaps it's a combination of all these things.

Stated Clerks affirmed that the church visiting concept is in such disrepair in so many places that it needs immediate and urgent attention. Stated Clerks seem to agree that the concept itself has significant merit and that it's the practice that's broken. Learning how to work the system, how to adapt it creatively, and how to do it in real-time in response to developing situations are the challenges facing many SCs. In other words, we're venturing to say that our listening to SCs confirms our tentative idea that church visiting may need some radical relearning rather than being abandoned and replaced.

Other ideas that came into focus as we listened to SCs are that traditional assumptions about the roles and rules for pastors need a fresh look. It was also suggested that we take a hard look at how classes are made up. Changes in congregations, increasing diversity, and geographical distance are all factors that need to be taken into account in getting a classis to work effectively.

*For some specific comments we heard from SCs, see “Comments from Stated Clerks” on page 11.*

#### **d) Mentors and Mentees**

In general, the majority of Mentors are requested by their Mentee (pastors in their first five years of ministry) based on the mentor’s experiences and availability. The typical pattern of conversations between Mentors and Mentees is monthly, but meeting more frequently is not uncommon. The majority of Mentors make use of the resource *Toward Effective Pastoral Mentoring*, but quite a few Mentees are not aware of it. Time and distance are common challenges for the Mentor/Mentee relationship.

Mentors note that a frequent theme for Mentees is boundaries. Councils may have high expectations of a newly ordained pastor and the pastor may also expect way too much from him/herself. Taking time for learning new contexts and situations, as well as doing lots of listening pays off for these new pastors.

Several of the mentors’ comments/suggestions relate to themes we heard from other classis functionaries. For example:

- We need to re-examine the way we conceive of the relationship between pastor and congregation. Is it possible to think of this relationship as less “fixed” and more open to change, term limits, renewable contracts, transfers without having to assess blame, etc.?
- Training, training, training. This comes up over and over. Leaders and functionaries need training, support, advice, and a context which is supportive and safe.
- How is authority and power perceived and used in our system? We’ve been deliberately reluctant to house it in individuals and instead have designed assemblies with power. This is a system that takes a special approach, value system, and skill set.

In general, Mentees are appreciative of their Mentors. Trust and respect are key to this relationship. Mentees report a wide variety of benefits including companionship, thinking through new issues, developing identity, accountability, and keeping balance in tough times. Having good chemistry with the Mentor is important. This seems to happen more often when the Mentee gets to participate in choosing her/his Mentor. Some Mentees note that either spiritual formation or professional development can be the goal of meeting together, and that having clarity about this is helpful. Several responses indicate that the Mentee wasn’t informed about the mentoring program, or for some reason hadn’t been able to find a Mentor. There seems to be a need for more emphasis on this program to ensure that there are enough Mentors and that the program is well known. It was also noted that mentoring shouldn’t be limited to the first five years of ministry, but should be a lifelong practice.

*For some specific comments we heard from mentors (and mentees), see “Comments from Mentors and Mentees” on page 11.*

#### **e) Classis Counselors**

Perhaps the key issue for Classis Counselors (CC) could be summarized like this: How much of a role will the CC play in a given situation? It all depends on what’s going on in the church. How much help does the church really want? How much time and experience does the CC have to offer?



The role of CC varies from being almost purely limited to signing the letter of call all the way to helping the congregation define its issues, discern the kind of leader they need, and determine who might fill that particular role. If conflict has been present (or continues to be present), then the questions about the CCs role with the council intensify. Only a couple of situations were reported in which CCs were kept at a distance from the process. A question raised by several respondents is whether to relate exclusively to the search committee or to the council as well.

Perhaps the heart of the issue for our team comes in the question of how CC think they could affect the number of Article 17s in the denomination. Fully a third of CCs who responded were dubious as to whether CCs could really make a difference. The other two-thirds were more positive, but almost every one answered with a “Yes, IF...” ....if there is trust and respect and the church is willing to listen; ... if the CC had more (or more clear) authority; ... if the CC is willing to become well-informed and then be proactive and assertive; ... if the classis is strong and willing to support the CC; ... if the CC is involved early enough in the calling process.

*For some specific comments we heard from Classis Counselors, see “Comments from Classis Counselors” on page 12.*

#### **f) Home Missions Regional and Ethnic Leaders**

There’s great diversity among Home Missions Leaders (HML) when it comes to their interaction with Regional Pastors (RP) and Church Visitors (CV). It ranges from none to connecting only when there are challenges between a pastor and his/her church. Most are closer to the little/none side of the spectrum.

Very rarely do HMLs feel that they’re acting as a RP or CV in their work. However, due to some HMLs length of service, there are pastors who are more comfortable talking to a HML than to a RP or CV they don’t have an established relationship with.

*For some specific comments we heard from HMLs, see “Comments from Home Missions Regional and Ethnic Leaders” on page 13.*

### **III. Findings - Comments by Functionary Role**

#### **a) Comments from Regional Pastors**

Regional Pastors (RP) shared the following comments and suggestions regarding the RP program:

- Peer groups are important and should be considered mandatory for new pastors. Lone rangers tend to have trouble in their ministry/life.
- The calling system needs to be looked at. “Quality control” needs to go back upstream (to seminary) because some pastors shouldn’t get into ministry. Can the Candidacy Committee do more? Also need to look at fit between churches and pastors.
- Trying to balance pastoring a church and being an RP is challenging. Regional Pastor work could easily be full time.
- Regional training events for RPs would be good. Each situation RPs engage in is a learning experience. That learning needs to be shared and regional events are a good place to do this.
- Regional Pastor-Church Relations (PCR) consultants are needed. The Office of PCR is overloaded and can’t do it all. Regional folks often know churches better than someone coming from Grand Rapids.
- There needs to be authority that goes along with the RP role. Councils have the final word in difficult situations. The RP doesn’t have an avenue into the council. They need to be invited in.

- A culture of conflict avoidance, and putting up a good front, has developed. This prevents problems from being addressed in the early stages.
- There are best practice stories, but the trick is to get them told, unpacked, and replicated without any hint of prescription or “imposed solutions”.
- Lack of funding for RP activities can make things difficult. Classes should allocate funds to cover mileage and meals.
- There’s some controversy regarding retired pastors serving as RPs. Some classes are fine with it and some won’t allow it.

In various conversations we heard about the way in which RPs have involved their spouses in the work. The following summarized what we heard:

- Some RPs include their spouses in the work and report this to be quite helpful in relating to pastors and their spouses.
- There can be benefits to an RP including his/her spouse but this should not be an expectation of the role.
- There are also occasional reports of when it may have been detrimental for the RP to include his/her spouse.
- Regional pastors are wise to consider the situation of the pastor or pastor couple being responded to before automatically including the RP’s spouse.

#### **b) Comments from Church Visitors**

Church Visitors (CV) shared the following comments and suggestions regarding the practice of church visiting.

- It’d be helpful for church visiting to use a small group model. Having more people at the visit presents opportunities for sharing observations and recommendations, and learning from those who are more experienced with church visiting.
- Half of the questions CVs are to use at a visit are irrelevant. CVs can’t ask some of the questions if they don’t have a relationship with a church.
- Church visiting feels much like elders doing home visits. It’s frustrating and impossible to create a schedule for visits.
- “As a church visitor, if a problem arose that I didn’t know how to deal with it scares me to death. There are experts in the denomination who can deal with those situations, but many church visitors aren’t equipped to deal with them.”
- Being able to observe CVs who are good at the job is helpful.
- There’s an understanding of what church visiting should be, but CVs often don’t have the resources to make it happen. Better structure and equipping/training is needed.
- The focus shouldn’t be only on the preventive because there’s a lot of encouragement work that should also be done. Prevention will be more effective when there’s a structure that’s built on relating to one another.
- Peer groups for pastors are vital.
- The church visiting system is very flawed, very complicated. This model probably has to end, but the principles on which it was built, including accountability, need to continue.
- Church Visitors could learn from church plants. Plants willing to be helped, to try new stuff, and to fail, learn and keep going forward.

### **c) Comments from Stated Clerks**

Overall, there was virtually unanimous concurrence with the BTD *Findings* document (July 2014 version). Only a tiny minority of SCs disagreed. They made the following comments.

- Councils need to be much more professional in their relationships with pastors: accurate, clear, defined job descriptions; regular, meaningful performance appraisals; wise feedback and support in the face of changing and/or conflicting expectations; and making use of professionals to complement the pastor's gifts (if necessary).
- The "old model" sees the relationship of pastor and congregation as a marriage. If the fit proves a poor one, everyone needs to just make the best of it. But, in fact, we need to find a way to make a much simpler and cleaner end to a relationship that isn't working. And we need to respect civil law as well as ecclesiastical law.
- The issue of the programmed or intentional checks on the pastor's leadership is important. CRC Church Order is careful to prevent power from clearly residing in any one position. This is an important issue.
- Given the situation in the CRC, with its wide expectations and no really good way to fix a poor match up, good support from the classis is vital when pastor-church relationships get strained. Competent and available Church Visitors and Regional Pastors are very important tools in the classis' tool bag. (Often noted is the reality that the church visiting system is in serious disrepair.)
- Time constraints, distance, and finances are real factors in how well Church Visitors and Regional Pastors work. Take them seriously. Don't allow these factors to contribute to ineffectiveness in the system.
- Peer support groups are valuable.
- SCs can be helpful because they're usually experienced and knowledgeable (re: the Church Order), but too often they're not used well.
- Often there's a lack of good working knowledge about the Church Order among pastors and councils, and more so among younger pastors and those coming into the CRC by way of non-traditional routes. The system is mostly okay. What's lacking is thorough knowledge and skill in how to use it well.
- When stress and tension begin to develop in a congregational setting, the all too frequent response is to deny it and hide it.
- Nurturing the health of leaders must be intentional and must have allocated time. Busyness is a chronic stressor.

### **d) Comments from Mentors and Mentees**

Mentors shared the following comments and suggestions regarding the mentoring program.

- Create a better system of moving new pastors around. Sometimes the "best solution" is a switch to a new environment.
- More clarity is needed regarding authority. Councils should not be autonomous, and classes need to step in more and speak into situations that need direction.
- More spiritually mature lay leadership is needed. We do much to train pastors, but we need to work more with congregational leadership (especially elders and deacons).
- New pastors need more training in listening, self-awareness, and conflict management.
- Regular church visiting is important.
- There's often blame and shame toward pastors who've gone through an Article 17. Some churches leverage this against their new pastors to "keep them in line."
- Troubles arise when a new pastor comes to a dysfunctional church.

- There's denominational anxiety—changing values toward the denomination which is leading to an increased sense of loss and competition. How do we address this?
- Mentees should continue in the mentoring relationship after the initial five years.
- Congregations need to be sensitive to the learning curve and expectations they place on first time pastors. Mistakes will be made. It's part of learning. Honest communication between council and pastor is of utmost importance.

Mentees shared the following comments about their relationship with their mentor.

- "I value the time spent talking with a colleague in ministry. Parish ministry can feel isolating at times. Only fellow ministers understand the challenges and roles of ministry that others do not."
- "It's been very helpful to have a relationship with an experienced pastor who is able to journey with me through new and difficult experiences at the church. She has been both encouraging and challenging--pushing me to explore certain topics further."
- "He's helped me in sorting out my pastoral identity, gaining confidence, growing in my gifts, navigating hard conversations, and staff dynamics. He tells stories of his own challenges and failures in ministry that are both amusing and comforting."
- "I think I really benefited from choosing my own mentor. I would encourage others to ask someone they already have a relationship with and that they think would be a good fit."
- "The first 5 years are filled with so many new experiences and situations that need to be navigated well. Seminary trains a new minister well, but "on the job" support is crucial to help ensure success in the critical first-years."
- "Sometimes when we get all trained up in seminary, we think we have all the answers for the church. Some of us need to be knocked down a peg so that ministry can start. Others of us constantly feel inadequate to the tasks and a mentor is helpful with encouraging and reminding that there are not always answers."
- "Mentoring is vital to success and thriving in ministry. Mentoring, coaching, spiritual direction, peer groups, any form of creating safe space to share and receive prayer and wisdom."
- "My mentor has guided me through the messiness of ministry, helping me go beyond the theories learned in the classroom. It impacted my ministry simply knowing that he cared enough about me to help me be successful."
- "I always come away feeling encouraged and knowing that my voice has been heard. I can be completely honest with my mentor. I'm incredibly blessed in this mentoring relationship."

#### **e) Comments from Classis Counselors**

Classis Counselors' (CC) involvement can range widely depending on whether there is a healthy sense of the role and what's going on in the congregation.

- The quality of the relationship that is anticipated or experienced between council and CC is vitally important. A knowledgeable, supportive presence carries the freight.
- The role of the CC varies widely depending on many factors, both in the congregation, as well as in the CCs own personality and style.
- Classis Counselors may be selected by classis, requested by vacant churches, or chosen by geographical proximity.
- Classis Counselors are classis functionaries but in actuality it's the council that pretty much shapes the role and defines its effectiveness.
- Experience (of the CC, and/or of the council) makes a huge difference in how the role is carried out.
- Even the minimalist approach of just signing a letter of call can involve significant issues.

- The stance of the classis toward the CCs role and report is an important factor in whether the role is meaningful or not.
- The desire for resources is basically a desire for just the right information at just the right time. There doesn't seem to be a widespread desire for more training or even for more resources for that matter. But when things blow up, many do not know what to do. A simple "how to" guide could help.
- Getting together with other CCs seemed to have appeal -- for support, prayer, stories, mutual learning.
- Councils (and CCs too) need to be better informed about the who, why, and what of the role of CCs.

#### **f) Comments from Home Missions Regional and Ethnic Leaders**

When asked for ways in which to improve the work of Regional Pastors (RP) and Church Visitors (CV), much of what was shared mirrored what we were hearing from the RPs and CVs. The following comments and suggestions were made:

- Relationships are key when navigating difficulties between churches and pastors.
- Need to do a better job when selecting RPs and CVs. Classis may not have the best people to choose from.
- Need more collaboration and gathering people together to share best practices. This will get the inertia going.
- Need to get beyond the generic level and address underlying issues.
- Coordination and communication are an issue. There are confused roles (people serving in multiple/overlapping roles), lack of clarity, and frustrated pastors.
- Put RPs and CVs on teams. Perhaps classes could hold an annual retreat so they get to know each other.
- Need younger pastors in the RP role who are in touch with their communities.
- Admit when it's not a good fit (between a pastor and congregation) rather than trying to make it work. It's important to address this quickly and in a way that's open and caring.
- There's a spiritual dimension to the problem. We need key leaders who meet with God on a regular basis.
- Remember, it's not a one-size-fits-all solution.

#### **g) Comments from Classis Dialog Events**

The *Findings* document was presented at several 2015 classis meetings: Central Plains, Lake Erie, Northern Illinois, Southern California, and Yellowstone.

The findings were strongly validated.

- There's a strong theme of tiredness and stress among classes. At the same time there are stories of caring, healthy experiments, and urgency for a new day.
- It's hard to say that we have to reinvent everything. There is a stronger impression that our systems are useful if used wisely and robustly, and if everyone knows the rules and how to apply them artfully instead of mechanically.
- Diversity is a frequent challenge and turning it from liability to resource requires ongoing attention.
- Listening well is a gift that classes need from denominational figures. The resistance to a central source of authority, advice, and answers is common almost everywhere.
- Pastors crave support and encouragement. Peer groups are a vital resource that classes need to foster.
- Active Regional Pastors are also vital. Creating/recreating a vibrant practice of church visitation is an almost universal priority.

- Mission opportunities abound and when classes mobilize to meet them it can generate energy, hope, and cohesion.
- All of these classis level challenges take persistent commitment from leaders. Old patterns of going it alone, soldiering on, being faithful instead of changing, being over-committed, and meeting pain and crisis without seeking help are habits that strongly influence our ecclesiastical culture.
- At the core of much of our denominational pain lie spiritual issues where fear edges out love, busyness gets in the way of Christlikeness, competition overwhelms community, and authority becomes more valued than servanthood.

## **Better Together Project Report Delivery Team's Recommendations and Progress Updates**

The following recommendations were made based on the many conversations we had and careful consideration of the findings summarized above. It is interesting to note that in most cases people are not calling for structural change. The way forward seems to be through the implementation of small changes in approach, training, or posture to bring about cultural change. General themes of improving relationships, improving learning and training opportunities, and improving the culture of support and togetherness outweighed calls for changes to the way our classical system is organized or the way our classis leaders function in the field.

Below you will find details on the recommendations the Better Together team have made for each functionary as well as an update from the person/people tasked with following up on the recommendations.

### **1. Regional Pastors – Recommendations from Better Together for the Regional Pastors' Program**

Based on the Delivery Team's work, the following recommendations are offered to the Office of Pastor-Church Relations (PCR) for the Regional Pastors' Program (RP):

- Ensure a process for selecting and evaluating RPs.
- Provide training and develop materials to better equip RPs.
- Take a fresh look at the RP's job descriptions, and other items related to RPs which currently are found on the PCR website.
- Provide ongoing support and encouragement to RPs.
- Implement a more structured accountability process.
- Ensure that all RPs have a pastor.
- Explore and clarify role of RP's spouse.
- Ensure that RPs are notified when PCR is working with a church—better communication.
- Increase the frequency of the RP conferences from biennial to annual OR have the biennial conference and regional retreats in the "off" years
- Clarify the authority RPs have in their work with pastors.
- Investigate the funding of RP expenses, and the importance of stipends for their work.
- Determine how to address a situation when the RP is a member (but not the pastor) of a congregation experiences challenges with the pastor.
- Encourage communication between RPs and Church Visitors (CV). Have CVs share their reports with RPs.
- Ensure that mentees have significant input into who their mentor will be.
- Ensure that mentors are appointed to pastors in their first five years of parish ministry.
- Make plans for the mentee's transition from working with a mentor to having a relationship with the RP—if such a relationship didn't exist during the mentoring years.
- Create a tool for RPs to use in their work.
- Work toward having more than one RP per classis.
- Consider asking RPs' council to allocate time for RP work.
- Collect and post "promising practices" on PCR RP webpage.
- Take the Mirrors Diagram, created by PCR, and determine how it can be used effectively in the RP Program.

## **Update on Regional Pastor Recommendations – November 2015**

We received the following report from Denise Posie:

“Pastor-Church Relations (PCR) graciously appreciates and accepts recommendations made by the Better Together Delivery Team. A critical part of how Regional Pastors provide effective pastoral care to pastors hinges on building relationships on multiple levels: Regional Pastors and pastor; Regional Pastors and Regional Pastors; Regional Pastors and churches; Regional Pastors and classis; Regional Pastors and PCR. Based on the recommendations of Better Together and a review of challenges and concerns presented by Regional Pastors at the 2013 Regional Pastor Conference, progress is already being made in the following areas:

- 1) A google site for Regional Pastors was created to accommodate sharing of documents, resources, listing of all Regional Pastors and Mentor assignments. An introductory letter was sent in the spring and it created some positive interaction. A significant number of Regional Pastors are already utilizing this site. It will be expanded to include tools and recommendations for selecting, assessing and retiring a Regional Pastor.
- 2) This summer PCR send a letter to each Regional Pastor with the name(s) of Calvin Seminary interns for the purpose of meeting and assisting them during their summer experience. One classis now has two Regional Pastors who are People of Color. More diversity will be encouraged.
- 3) PCR was highly encouraged by the evaluation forms received at the 2015 Regional Conference. The plenary speaker, worship, free time, fellowship and continuing education were appreciated.
- 4) The CRCNA Executive Leadership team joined us in sharing stories about their transition and encouraging the Regional Pastors and their wives. Each Regional Pastor (present or not present) was recognized for their years of service and given a book gift certificate as a token of appreciation.

As we look ahead, each recommendation will be given adequate consideration. As PCR continue to understand its role and authority, it is critical that we use a bottom-up approach versus a top-down approach in meeting their needs. PCR’s work is meaningful and successful if it creates a culture for Regional Pastors for communication, celebration and community. PCR’s work is meaningful and successful if it helps Regional Pastors take responsibility for imaging, creating, and experimenting with new ways to minister to pastors and spouses with financial support and encouragement on a classical level.

I would like to organize a committee of Regional Pastors to cast a vision for growing a new culture that responds to today’s needs.”

## **2. Church Visitors – Recommendations from Better Together for Church Visitors**

Based on the Delivery Team’s work, the following recommendations are offered to the Office of Pastor-Church Relations (PCR) in regards to resourcing Church Visitors (CV):

- Provide training and develop materials to better equip CVs.
- Work toward a re-branding of church visiting to reflect the healthy relational aspect of the task and the position/role of the CV.
- Play an active role in supporting classes when it comes to how CVs are selected and assessed. Perhaps a tool could be created for this.
- Work with successful models of church visiting to refresh and renew the practice in all classes. This would include the CV pilot project conducted in 2015.



- Engage in an experiment to create a new approach to church visiting based on an additional arrow(s) on the PCR flowchart.
- Collect and post “promising practices” on PCR CV webpage.
- Provide CVs and classes with more effective reporting procedures following a church visit.
- Clarify the authority CVs have in their work with councils.
- Create a guide to CVs for classis.
- Encourage communication between CVs and Regional Pastors (RP). Have CVs share their reports with RPs.
- Ensure that a church visit takes place in a church with a “new to ministry pastor” within his/her first year.
- Orient CVs to basic principles of conflict intervention including situations that involve personnel issues.
- Take the Mirrors Diagram, created by PCR, and determine how it can be used effectively with CVs and their work.

### **Update on Church Visitor Recommendations – November 2015**

Norm Thomsma reports that PCR has begun to take several steps in response to our recommendations. This fall PCR gathered 16 Church Visitors in Denver, CO to engage them around "provocative propositions" and discuss small but strategic adjustments to church visiting. PCR is also working on identifying all current CVs, developing a communication strategy for engaging with them, gathering "effective practices" and finding a way to make them available to others, and looking for a way to generate new creative practices that promise greater engagement of CVs with local councils.

### **3. Stated Clerks – Recommendations from Better Together for Stated Clerks**

Based on the Delivery Team’s work, the following recommendations are offered regarding Stated Clerks (SC):

- Gather SCs periodically for learning and sharing.
- Support SCs through coaching and training specific to their role.
- Equip SCs to know how to respond to inquiries regarding conflict, especially in the “first stages.”
- Create a quick reference guide including information on who the RPs and CVs are in each classis and what their roles are.
- Promote the goodness of church polity.
- Develop a protocol for the transition of one SC to the next.
- Send Mirrors Diagram to all SCs. Those currently serving and then on an ongoing basis as new SCs begin to serve.

Since SCs are often the most continuing and stable classis functionary, it’s very important that wisdom and knowledge of resources concerning how best to respond to pastor/church challenges are found in them.

### **Update on Stated Clerk Recommendations – November 2015**

Discussion about the role of SCs has been tied to larger ongoing conversations about classis renewal in the denomination. In the fall of 2015, these discussions resulted in the anticipated creation of a new position within PCR to help oversee classis renewal efforts. (note importance of relationship of this role to Office of Synodical Services [drecker@crcna.org](mailto:drecker@crcna.org). We are hopeful that this coming renewal initiative will carry out the SC recommendations we have made.

#### 4. Mentoring Program – Recommendations from Better Together for the Mentoring Program

Based on the Delivery Team’s work, the following recommendations are offered to the Office of Pastor-Church Relations (PCR) for the Mentoring Program.

- Revise/update the 2008 mentoring manual, *Toward Effective Pastoral Mentoring*. (Create an electronic publication.)

*Suggested revision:*

Page 7: “Regional Pastors Play a Strategic Role”—in 2<sup>nd</sup> paragraph add the word “classis”

“Usually, this will be another ordained pastor in the CRCNA, but there may be situations in which it is wise to select a mentor from another **classis**, denomination, or church.”

Consider adding the following topics:

- Boundaries
  - balance: ministry & personal life
  - self-care
  - unrealistic expectations: by the council/congregation; by the pastor
  - ministry context: rural vs. urban, ethnic, theological spectrum, community dynamics
  - church’s history/story—celebrations, recent crises, points of contention, etc.
  - strengths/growth areas: for the pastor, the church, the neighborhood
  - Superman complex: when the pastor thinks he/she can do it all/knows it all (there may be a lack of humility coming out of seminary)
  - accessing support: for issues pertaining to gender (female pastor not getting support in her classis), race/ethnicity (pastor only one of his/her ethnicity in area/classis), being a commissioned pastor (only one/one of few in classis – how roles/perceptions may differ from Ministers of the Word)
  - special needs: pastor with a special needs (mental, physical, emotional) family member
  - spouse/family involvement in the church: spouse doesn’t attend regularly/at all
  - immigration issues: mentor could keep track of the process to ensure that details/dates are being attended to (This doesn’t mean the mentor knows what’s required regarding immigration. It does mean that if a permit is to expire during the first five years, the mentor would assist others—council, the pastor—in remembering important dates/need for paperwork to be filed in a timely manner.)
- Ensure mentors use a virtual meeting format (Skype) for conversations with mentees that are geographically distant. Face-to-face contact is very important.
  - Create a brochure for the mentoring program. To be posted on the PCR website as well as distributed to seminary students in their final year.
  - Provide a checklist, for non CRC mentors, of the key mentor tasks and the discussions to have with the mentee. Include using the mentoring manual, *Toward Effective Pastoral Mentoring*.
  - Include the clerk of council, of the mentee’s church, when letters are sent to the mentor/mentee at the beginning of a mentoring relationship so that the clerk/council is aware of the mentoring relationship. Send a copy of the mentoring manual, *Toward Effective Pastoral Mentoring*, to the clerk.
  - Encourage, strongly, that mentors use the mentoring manual, *Toward Effective Pastoral Mentoring*.

- Recommend that mentors encourage a church visit within the first year of a new pastor (the mentee) arriving at a church.
- Consider translating the mentoring manual, *Toward Effective Pastoral Mentoring*, into Korean and Spanish—taking cultural differences into consideration. (Create an electronic publication.)
- Collect and post “promising practices” on PCR Mentors webpage.
- Ensure that pre-ordination mentors (those assigned during seminary) connect with post-ordination mentors shortly after the post-ordination mentor is in place.
- Take the Mirror Diagram, created by PCR, and determine how it can be used effectively in mentoring relationships.

#### **Update on Mentoring Program Recommendations – November 2015**

Cecil VanNiejehuis reports that they have not made any formal headway on this, but he intends to propose to the team that they engage in a meaningful revision of the mentoring manual as suggested. It was last adjusted in 2008 and will benefit from a revision. He notes the recommendation to consider the translation of the manual seems right and good. Finding a way to incorporate the Mirror Diagram into the manual could provide some additional modules/topics for conversation.

As for the other protocols recommended, Cecil has noted that these can be implemented quite readily, and will be.

#### **5. Classis Counselors – Recommendations from Better Together for Classis Counselors**

Based on the Delivery Team’s work, the following recommendations are offered to the Office of Pastor-Church Relations (PCR) in regards to resourcing Classis Counselors (CC).

- Develop a pilot project cluster of classes which would gather CCs for a day of mutual encouragement, exchanging stories, prayer, and learning.
- Develop a one-page resource that CCs can reference for quick orientation and a position summary.
- Provide classes with assistance to assure CCs are carefully chosen, appropriately valued, and well supported.
- Encourage classes to involve the Regional Pastor, and Church Visitors (CV) if appropriate, in orienting CC to a new assignment *if* congregation has experienced unusual difficulty prior to “vacancy”.
- Renew marketing of *More Than a Search Committee* as a resource for both CCs and Councils.
- Create classis-based training module to accompany *More Than a Search Committee*.
- Explore possibility of CVs serving as CCs.
- Consider ways to enhance CCs guidelines in order to make position more pro-active.
- Have CCs work with churches to clearly define church’s expectations for pastor’s spouse. (ie: Some spouses don’t attend services on a regular basis. Will this be an issue?)
- Collect and post “promising practices” on PCR CC webpage.
- Take the Mirror Diagram, created by PCR, and determine how it can be used effectively with CCs and their work.

#### **Update on Classis Counselors Recommendations – November 2015**

The recommendations were sent to Pastor-Church Relations in late November so it’s too soon for any updates.

## **Better Together Project Report**

### **Next Steps**

So, what's next? The recommendations outlined above need to be processed, coordinated with all the other ideas percolating in this time of structural and cultural renewal, and implemented wisely. But what else? Here are some thoughts about next steps to be considered at a somewhat broader level.

1. The Synod 2015 said some very specific things to stimulate and guide classis renewal, and this will necessarily focus attention on classis functionaries, including Regional Pastors and Church Visitors, two of the roles that are key in building healthier relationships between pastors and their congregations. Follow-up reporting is built into synod's future agenda.
2. The denominational leadership has responded to synod with the creation of a Classis Renewal Group (CRG). This group is responsible for thinking creatively about how to assemble and integrate resources to nurture classis renewal, and for experimenting with ways to do this better. A full time position for a Classis Renewal Coordinator has been posted.
3. Pastor-Church Relations is just one important dimension of this classis initiative, as reflected in their plan to strengthen support of Regional Pastors, and to initiate increased support for Church Visitors.
4. Many classis level conversations are already underway about how to renew vision, strengthen mission, nourish healthy relationships, and better serve congregations. These conversations will benefit from intercessory prayer on their behalf, encouragement from congregations and denominational leadership, the opportunity to gather regionally for worship, prayer, and learning, and the availability of competent coaching as needed.
5. Several pilot projects to experiment with ways to build classis health are underway. Clusters of classes that participate in the pilot projects will be able together to explore opportunities to learn, get coaching, synergize resource use, and build leadership capacity. The CRG referred to in #2 above will carry on one of these pilots; the denomination has received grant from Lilly Endowment to fund the Connections pilot project focusing on regionalized resourcing, and a leadership development initiative is underway in cooperation with the Reformed Church in America.

## **Better Together Project Report Conclusion**

### **General Comments from the Better Together Delivery Team**

1. When classis functionaries are invited to gather and reflect in safe dialog, their commitment, their willingness to invest, and their desire to make a positive difference is clear.
2. The basic practices and protocols of our Church Order will take us a long way, provided they are used with competence, compassion, common sense, and creativity. The Church Order is not the boundary of our Spirit-led creativity, but the framework.
3. As we noted early on in this report, the system is stressed, and working within it is very often stressful. This is a fruitful context for fear, defensiveness, discouragement, competition, and conflict. The toll this takes on mission and on the humans in the organization is high. The spiritual and emotional health of our leaders is more important than ever; no leadership competence can last long without the foundation in place.
4. In the light of #3 above, two things need to be noted: leaders must be people who attend to their own spiritual and emotional health and the community must be a true reflection of the body of Jesus—where broken people are safe, can repent, be forgiven, and find healing in a genuine fellowship.
5. We have generated two kinds of results: (1) Dialogs of encouragement and learning in classes and among functionaries across classes. These need to be continued, built upon, and learnings must be harvested and reseeded faithfully. (2) The creation of recommendations, especially to Pastor-Church Relations.
6. Of course the “results” mentioned in #5 above are still short of “outcomes.” These are not in and of themselves evidence of reduced conflict between congregations and pastors, for example. It’s still up to leaders, classes, and resourcing bodies to build on what we’ve learned, to be disciplined in follow-through, and not to be weary in well-doing. And somewhere in there we’ll have to talk about resources like staff and money. Though not as much as we might think.

Those six “thoughts” or general comments can hardly begin to express what it’s been like for our Better Together Delivery Team. From our first meeting we saw the importance of the task we’d been given and the challenge touched our hearts. In conversation after conversation we were reminded of the deep love and commitment for Jesus’ church that marks classis leaders’ hearts. And we were equally made aware of the stress and pain that conflicts cause. Family fights hurt -- deeply. Together we confess with the leaders we connected with that we don’t know how to disagree in love and work through to loving outcomes that honor Jesus and witness his love to our society.

As we listened and learned, we saw conflict from different perspectives, and we saw the bright spots where hope, grace, and love came together in repentance, forgiveness, healing, and renewal. And so we collected a harvest of stories, learning, promising practices, failures, and ideas for how to do things better. We were privileged to have classis functionaries share their stories with us, to share their pain and discouragement, their frustration, their sorrow, and their joy. We caught a glimpse of the Body of Christ that began to come into focus over top of the stark contrasts of Church Order, structure, polity, unresolved conflict, and old

practices. The Bride is beautiful behind the dated clothing and the market-driven accessories. Love and healing move along the powerlines formed by arteries and nerves of trusting relationships, not along the rigidities of rusty machinery and frayed wiring. We saw it. The Kingdom is at hand.

Being on this team has been a rare privilege and a stimulating generative experience. Perhaps the biggest learning has come from seeing what happens when brothers and sisters in Christ are brought together, provided a safe place to talk, invited to dialog around stimulating and hopeful questions, and then listened to with no pre-cooked advice, no thinly veiled pressure to say it this way or do it that way. Together we saw new opportunities; together we generated new energy; together we rekindled hope. That is the experience we had alongside leaders from all over the denomination.

So now the challenge is to keep recreating contexts in which the hope is nurtured, the permissions to create remains vibrant, and the leadership healthy, energizing, and affirming. All the while praying for the unity Jesus himself longs for. This is what it means to have life as a Body, and to have it abundantly.

Yes, we are exhilarated. Yes, we are charged up. At the same time we do realize that organizational change is a breathtaking challenge. We need leadership in the denomination that is unlike our previous kinds of expertise. It's all that and much more. And the Holy Spirit is not weak or tired. We need to be a church that prays for its leaders, affirms them, offers them the gift of straight and loving feedback, trusting that God will do more than we can ask or imagine through his church.

It was a privilege to serve on this ad hoc team, especially at this time of lots of change and innovation in the denominational structures. The crucial question is: In 2020, will congregations and classes attest to the effectiveness of this work? Lord willing, we hope they will.

## Appendix A Project Process

### September – December 2013

- Formed a bi-national five person team—Delivery Team (DT). Derek Atkins, Holly Koons, Karl Westerhof, Karen Deboer, and Lis Van Harten.
- Received a broad overview of classis functionary roles: Church Visitors (CV), Regional Pastors (RP), Synodical Deputies, Classis Counselors (CC), and Mentors.
- Brainstormed potential strategies.
- Identified RPs and CVs as the two functionaries to begin working with.
- Met with advisory team.

### January – June 2014

- Explored options for resourcing classis functionaries: website, stories, webinars, hard resources, gatherings, etc.
- Identified 15 classes to work with:

Alberta N	GR South	Lake Superior
BC South East	Hackensack	Pacific NW
CA South	Heartland	Rocky Mountain
Chicago South	Holland	Toronto
Eastern Canada	Lake Erie	Southeast US
- Interviewed almost 100 CVs and RPs about their work – joys and challenges.
- Held two gatherings to listen to/learn from CVs and RPs (Kitchener, ON and Grand Rapids, MI).
- Observed four classes meetings: Grand Rapids East, Georgetown, Grand Rapids South, and Kalamazoo.
- Interviewed several Home Missions Regional, and Ethnic, Leaders.
- Met with advisory team.
- Ongoing relationships/communication with the classis functionaries the DT has connected with. Relationships are important.

### July – November 2014

- Reviewed and approved a Church Visitor Pilot Project to be done in classes Grand Rapids East, Kalamazoo, Holland, and Zeeland.
- Disseminated a *Findings* document which summarized learnings to-date from listening to CVs and RPs.
- Worked on items for Pastor Church Relations' (PCR) website related to classis functionaries.
- Tracked best practices of CVs and RPs.
- Conducted virtual meetings with CVs and RPs.
- Met with advisory team.
- Ongoing relationships/communication with the classis functionaries the DT has connected with. Relationships are important.

### December 2014 – February 2015

- Decided to work with Stated Clerks rather than Synodical Deputies.
- Interviewed 27 SCs about their work as it relates to challenging situations between pastors and congregations.
- Began working on short video clips for each of the five classis functionaries the DT is working with: Regional Pastors (RP), Church Visitors (CV), Stated Clerks (SC), Church Counselors (CC), and Mentors.
- Engaged the Canadian SCs and Classis Leaders (in Burlington, ON) in a discussion on the *Findings* document which summarized learnings from listening to CVs and RPs.
- Launched the CV Pilot Project in classes Grand Rapids East, Kalamazoo, Holland, and Zeeland.
- Sent out surveys to Mentors and Mentees to gain insight into the two roles, the process of mentoring, and how things are going in the relationships between Mentors and Mentees.
- Submitted mid-project report to Ministry Leadership Council (December) and Board of Trustees (February).
- Partnered with Classis Renewal to make presentation at one winter classis meeting— Central Plains.
- Hosted one day event for RPs in Vancouver for relationship building, shared learning, and continuing education.

- Created *Brief Guide to Church Visiting*.
- Sent recommendations to PCR regarding RPs and CVs—based on work done to date.
- Ongoing relationships/communication with the classis functionaries the DT has connected with. Relationships are important.

#### **March – April 2015**

- Wrote summary of conversations with Stated Clerks (SC).
- Wrote summary of Mentor and Mentee survey findings.
- Updated *Findings* document with information gathered from SC, and Mentors/Mentees.
- Partnered with Classis Renewal to make presentations at two spring classis meetings— Lake Erie & Northern Illinois.
- Partnered with Candidacy and Classis Renewal to host two events in April—CA and MI.
- Partnered with Calvin Seminary to encourage seminary students on summer internships to connect with local RPs.
- Created diagram of DTs connections and outputs.
- Created short videos for two of the five classis functionaries the DT is working with: RPs and CVs.
- Hosted one day event for RPs and their spouses in Chicago for relationship building, shared learning, and continuing education.
- Launched webpages for RPs, CVs, SCs, CCs, and Mentors on PCRs website.
- Met with advisory team.
- Ongoing relationships/communication with the classis functionaries the DT has connected with. Relationships are important.

#### **May – July 2015**

- Received mid-project report from Church Visiting Pilot Project.
- Sent recommendations to PCR regarding Mentors/Mentees.
- Meet with some Calvin Seminary faculty to share DTs work.
- Conducted mini project with Regional Pastors (RP) and Seminary Summer Interns.
- Ongoing relationships/communication with the classis functionaries the DT has connected with. Relationships are important.

#### **August – December 2015**

- Interviewed and surveyed 79 Classis Counselors (CC) regarding their role and its joys and challenges.
- Made presentations at two Fall classes meetings—Yellowstone and Rocky Mountain.
- Wrote summary of RP/Seminary Summer Interns mini project and shared it with Calvin Seminary.
- Decided not to create videos for Stated Clerks, Classis Counselors, and Mentors.
- Made presentation at Regional Pastors Conference.
- Wrote summary of conversations with CCs.
- Sent recommendations to PCR regarding CCs.
- Updated *Findings* document with information gathered from CCs.
- Added “promising practices” to website for RPs, CVs, Mentors, and CCs.
- Received final report on Church Visiting Pilot Project.
- Wrote final Better Together project report and submitted it to Ministry Leadership Council for January 2016 meeting. Final report to go to February 2016 Board of Trustees meeting.
- Met with advisory team.
- Ongoing relationships/communication with the classis functionaries the DT has connected with. Relationships are important.
- Better Together Project completed



**Appendix B  
Connections/Outcomes Diagram**

**Better Together Delivery Team  
Overview of Connections & Outputs**

**November 2015**

(Connected with almost 500 leaders  
from 44 classes)



## **Appendix C**

### **Regional Pastor/Seminary Intern Mini Project**

At one of our meetings at Calvin Theological Seminar (CTS), we wondered if it might be useful to have Regional Pastors (RP) reach out to seminarians on summer internships. The Mentored Ministries office at CTS generously shared with us the details of their summer placements for the summer of 2015 and we reached out to the Regional Pastors in each of the classes where seminarian interns would be working.

This section reflects the work of the relatively few RPs who made contact with the seminary interns to introduce the seminarians to the role of RPs and the mentoring program. While the number of connections was low, it was interesting to note that in a couple of cases in-depth mentoring did take place.

Having spouses involved in these conversations was helpful. The seminarians represent a really wide range of experience and existing networking. In at least one case, the RP helped the seminarian couple do some realistic planning in the light of changed circumstances. Two RPs met six times with their seminarian interns. Being a listening and encouraging presence was especially valuable for a few seminarians who encountered a bit of a surprise or a dismaying development upon arrival at the internship site.

Interns sometimes get tangled up in conversations about the church's need for a pastor, and expectations of making tentative commitments far into the future. Mentors can help interns maintain healthy perspective.

Responsibility for setting up these mentoring relationships is sometimes unclear, leading to confusion.

#### Recommendations:

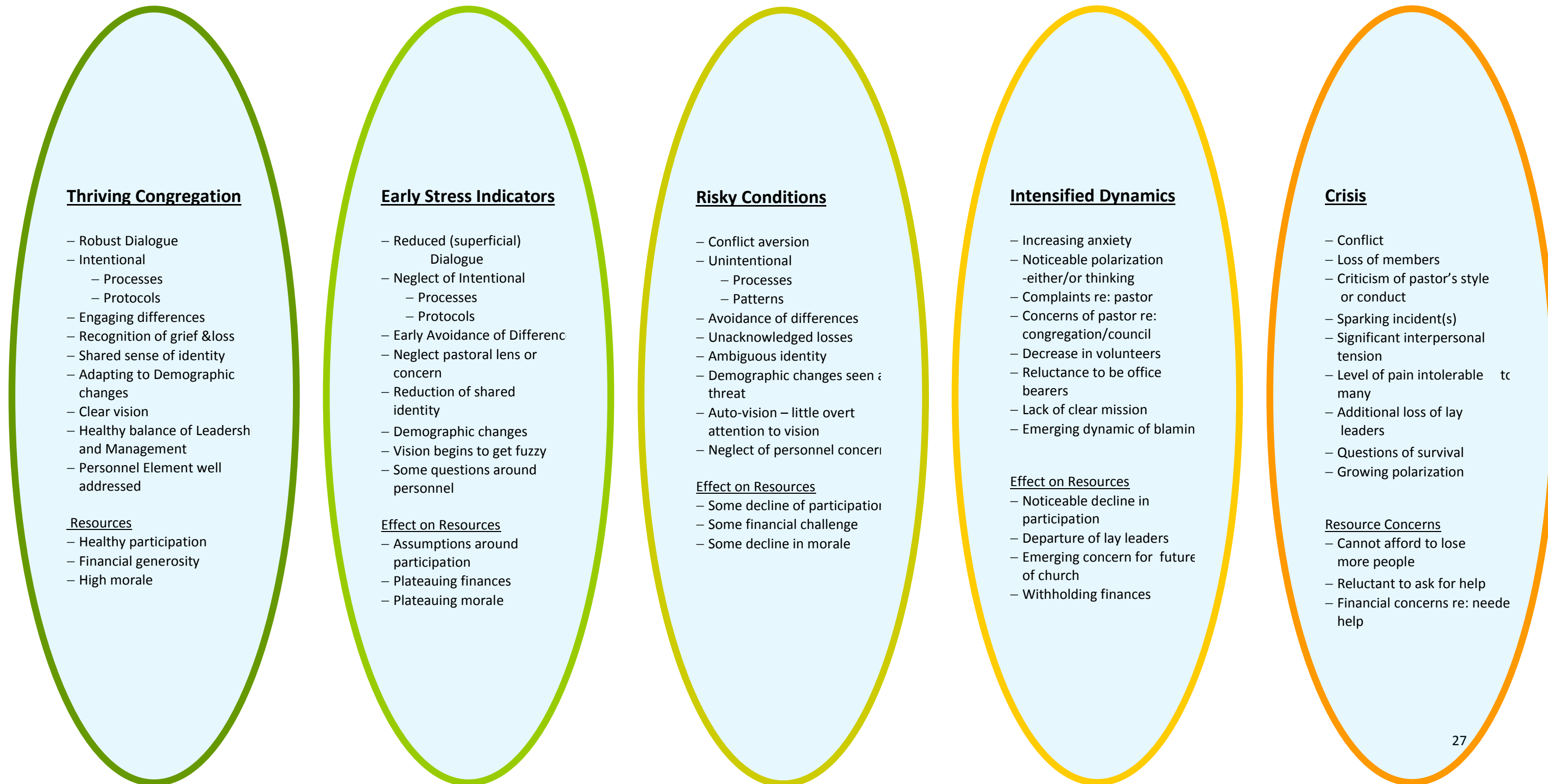
- Develop a brochure or resource on the PCR website that presents the mentoring package with clear expectations and guidelines.
- Share specific guidelines for how to access and use the book *Toward Effective Pastoral Mentoring*.
- Clarify the importance of mentoring and procedures for setting those relationships up to seminary graduates so that they bring informed expectations to classis.

When PCR was asked to develop ways to “get involved earlier” in difficult pastor-congregation situations, it seemed important to raise awareness of early indicators that signal when a situation was shifting toward difficulty. The mirrors diagram is one set of lenses with which PCR is experimenting to see if it can foster observations and conversations contributing to the health and resilience of a congregation. This diagram is not intended to be exhaustive or objective but to stimulate imaginations and interactions among congregational leaders and, at times, with church visitors or congregational coaches.

**Draft** Our Congregation – What Do We See in the Mirror?

Resilience>>>Risk - - - Risk>>>Resilience

Appendix D



## **Appendix E**

### **Church Visiting Pilot Project**

#### **I. Reflections on the Church Visitor Pilot Project**

One of the joys of working on a project like Better Together has been seeing the various ways God has been using conversations as a sort of kindling for action. As we were wrapping up our work with Church Visitors, Stan Koster, Home Mission Great Lakes Congregational Coaching and Healthy Church Team Leader initiated a conversation with Lis Van Harten about church visiting. A few weeks later, after a conversation with Harold Veldman, pastor in Classis Zeeland, we had in our hands a proposal from Stan to pilot a new approach to church visiting using an adapted version of the Healthy Church Survey as a basis for the church visit conversation.

When we started Better Together, we didn't anticipate sponsoring any pilot projects. However, Stan's passion for renewing the practice of church visiting—along with the strong work his classis (Classis Holland) has done re-visioning church visiting—prompted us to consider how we might be able to help him explore the idea with a small group of church visitors from West Michigan. Stan, along with Carl Kammeraad and Rodger Rice helped lead the pilot and the three got to work gathering leaders from four classes to speak into the development of the survey and the process.

It's not often that we see something go from idea to paper to process within a few months' time, but given the timeline we were working with, the pilot project team did just that. After approval in late 2014, spring of 2015 saw CVS in classes Kalamazoo, Zeeland, Holland, and Grand Rapids East using the re-imagined church visiting approach with churches. In the fall of 2015, many of those CVs gathered in Grand Rapids to share stories of how their church visits went using the new church visiting process. I was amazed to hear many stories of success... of postures reimagined, doors and pathways to conversations reopened, and renewed thoughtful engagement between church visitors and councils.

Success in West Michigan is one thing, but based on these early returns we hope that what started as a conversation between two people finds a way to continue to grow into a church visiting process that can benefit churches and classes across the denomination. One of the most promising things about the pilot is the many ways CVs tailored the framework to meet their local needs. It's these kinds of flexible tools that will be the resources our churches ask for in the future. We were happy to be able to play a small part in getting this experiment off the ground and hope that in the future it will be piloted in other regions or clusters to see how it might bless others.

This pilot project in Church Visiting has demonstrated a creative and generative option for church visiting across the CRCNA. There is significant potential here to change the conversation by engaging the congregational leaders around fresh criteria and by introducing language with which leaders can discuss the health and vitality of the church's life. It is one of several approaches to church visiting that, we believe, holds significant merit. And it will be essential that church visiting teams recognize when this approach is recommended and when it is not.

There are a variety of congregational situations which church visitors will face. It is critical that church visitors have multiple approaches to their work and that there be sufficient pre-visit conversation to ensure that an appropriate process is selected for the visit. Situations in which there are significant personnel issues, knotty doctrinal/philosophical differences or polarizing factions may suggest something other than the "healthy church survey" approach for the visit in question.

## **II. Church Visiting and Church Polity - Some Further Discussion**

In the polity of the CRCNA there is a healthy, necessary tension between the authority of a local church council, and the authority of classes and synod. Authority is given by Christ Jesus, to the church—broadly and organically speaking—and with respect to the assemblies, this is identified as ranging from original (council) to delegated (classis/synod). As Henry deMoor puts it, “the local church is fully equipped for its government only after it is blessed with channels of accountability to the broader church...No congregation is an island.” (Christian Reformed Church Commentary p. 153)

In practice, it seems that the balance of authority often tilts towards that of the local church council. Thankfully, in situations of basic health, this tilt is not problematic: there are many examples where healthy, capable local leaders are committed to each other and to the congregation, and exercise loving, assertive, servant leadership in self-effacing, hospitable and Christ-like ways. But, there are also occasions when there is a basic misalignment of perspective and culture between the called pastor and the selected lay leaders (council). The tension arises early and, in most cases, the efforts to address the situation are hampered for the same reasons that the relationships are difficult from the beginning. Conversations are tense and seem more like the volley of the tennis match than the complementarity of an elegant ballroom dance. Outside help is not solicited until conflicts have grown quite intense. All too frequently, pastoral tenures end painfully.

Another example and perhaps more ominous for the church is when the pastor and the council are “on the same page”, but that page is fraught with dynamics that do not bode well for the long term health of the congregation or its members. In this case, the local church council can begin to smell like a cult – an impregnable cohort of persons who lead the local church without regard for the perspectives or potential input of the congregation or the larger church world. The collective “self-assurance” of the local church leadership creates an impregnable barrier through which neither the members of the church nor the larger church community can gain access.

Following the example of Paul, Silas, Barnabas, Timothy and the church leaders of the Protestant Reformation, the CRCNA has created a way for congregations and their leaders to stay in relationship so that local congregations and councils may be blessed by channels of accountability and encouragement from the broader church. This way is called “church visiting”. It is a tradition going back to Paul, but when appreciated and tended can become part of a rich and nourishing Body life. Specifically, it provides a way for the broader church to enter into the life and engage the leadership of a local congregation, even if assistance has not specifically been requested.

When, through the denominational administration, synod told the Office of Pastor-Church Relations to find ways to “get involved” earlier, the staff was faced with creating some new system, or, hiring some more people, or developing some other plan. It seemed to PCR staff that church visiting, while suffering from lack of respect, had also suffered from a lack of tending and a lack of innovation within this important tradition. And, it seems preferable to reinvent and renovate this process that dates back to the New Testament church than to invent something unique to the current conditions, context and culture.

So, our team recommends development of a new vision and roadmap for Church Visiting 2.0. (This roadmap begins with the recommendations we have sent to PCR regarding Church Visiting.) We intend to honor an old and venerable tradition with some new and helpful wrinkles. And, we intend both to create some sense of denominational standard for church visiting, while also honoring and taking account of the unique cultures and situations of each classis and congregation.

**II. Church Visiting Pilot Project Report begins on the next page.**

**Report on a Pilot Study**  
**On**  
**Redesigning Church Visiting**  
**for the CRCNA**

*Working Document - December 3, 2015*



*Carl Kammeraad*  
*Stan Koster*  
*Rodger Rice*

# Church Visiting Pilot Project

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***Appendices for Church Visiting Pilot Project Report can be found in a separate document.***

The Appendices are:

1. Church Visiting Proposal
2. Guidelines for Conducting Church Visiting Pilot
3. List of Participants
4. Copy of the Church Visiting Survey
5. Sample Chart of Results
6. Supplemental Questions Used in Church Visits
7. Definitions of Health Areas Used in Survey

# Church Visiting Pilot Project

## I. Background

In October 2014 the Better Together Delivery Team approved funding the one-year pilot proposal for revitalizing church visiting as conducted by classes (See Appendix 1). Four classes accepted an invitation to participate: Grand Rapids East, Holland, Kalamazoo and Zeeland. In January 2015 the Church Visiting Survey was tested at Maranatha CRC. In February 2015 twenty church visitors were trained in basic coaching and how to implement the new Church Visiting process, including using the online church visiting survey.

## II. Guiding Framework

1. The church visiting pilot was designed as an adaptive experiment to modify and revitalize the church visiting process by addressing the roles of the church visitor and leadership of the local church.
2. Church visiting was to be conducted within a spiritual discernment framework using an especially designed church visiting survey to help church leaders see more clearly how God wants them to lead the local church.
3. Councils will engage in purposeful conversations, focusing on self-assessment, healthy church language and action planning to grow faithful disciples eager to serve Christ's mission in the world. Church Visitors will assist in these.
4. This pilot project assumes a small number of congregations (two to three) for each church visiting team to aid in building healthy, supportive relationships with council leaders.

## III. Progress to Date

1. December 2014 — Nine representatives of four classes were assembled for orientation to the project, getting feedback to the proposal, and initiating recruitment of church visitor teams
2. January 2015— Church visiting survey tested using Maranatha CRC's council. Results were used in a council retreat
3. February 2015 —Leadership Team conducted a training session for church visitor teams recruited from the four classes
4. March-June 2015 —Eight church councils completed their online church visiting survey, received their results reports and were proceeding with the new Church Visiting process, guided by trained church visitor teams
5. June 2015 —Leadership Team submitted a progress report to Better Together
6. July-October 2015—An additional nine church councils completed their online church visiting survey, received their results reports and were proceeding with the new Church Visiting process, guided by trained church visitor teams
7. These churches, listed by their classis, have completed their online church visiting survey and are in some phase of piloting the new church visiting process:

### Grand Rapids East

Calvin  
Eastern Ave  
Oakdale Park  
Sherman Street  
Shawnee Park

### Holland

Central Ave  
St Joseph  
East Saugatuck  
Gibson  
Pillar  
Saugatuck



Kalamazoo  
Community  
Comstock  
Heritage  
Third

Zeeland  
Bethel  
Drenthe  
First Allendale

8. November 2015—Sixteen people attended a debriefing on the pilot project on November 13. Recorded notes from four small group discussions and from a closing plenary session were collected. To date 18 churches have participated with 285 council member responses.
9. December 2015 -Drafting of final report with recommendation. Final report to be submitted early January 2016
10. Church visiting using this new approach continues due to expanding interest from church leaders. Classes are considering adopting this approach for use with all of its member churches.

#### **IV. Findings**

As the leadership team worked with church visitors and councils several important insights emerged that fall under three general categories of “Findings”:

1. What new possibilities emerged from employing an adaptive approach to church visiting?
2. What changes occurred in the role of the church visitor?
3. What changes occurred within church councils?

#### **A. What new possibilities emerged from employing an adaptive approach to church visiting?**

Since Church Visiting was on life support in many classes the team created an adaptive approach to Church Visiting, including an assessment tool to help inform councils of the current health of the congregation and a relational process for use by Church Visitors. Church visiting teams which have used this new approach report that it has rejuvenated church visiting for the participating churches and visitors. By means of a new survey instrument the church visiting team helped council members to identify and discuss questions for which there are no simple answers. These conversations required and have fostered a healthy level of trust among council members.

The survey results gave data on eleven areas of church health (see Appendices 4, 5 and 7) and provided a good foundation for a meaningful discussion of the spiritual health and missional vitality of the council and congregation. This more relational approach produced discomfort in some councils. Council members were hesitant to move from the old Q and A responses into a self-reflective conversation about their roles as elder and deacon. In addition the comments section of the survey proved to be a valuable tool enabling council members to put into words their perceptions of the church’s and their own spiritual health.

This more relational approach used by the church visiting teams combined with this new council assessment/survey tool opened up opportunities for councils to engage in a meaningful conversation about their leadership role and to risk attempting something new and different for the good of the church and its leaders.

#### **B. What changes occurred in the role of church visitors?**

One purpose of the Church Visiting Pilot Project is to experiment with changes in the role of the Church Visitor and, as a result, suggest a new identity for those working in this role. Because of the dead formality of church visiting in many classes of the denomination, many have come to abhor performing

the role. It has become perfunctory. In the recent debriefing of this pilot project, one of the Church Visitors wrote, “If we do church visiting and nothing changes, it doesn’t seem very worthwhile.”

How did the pilot project change the Church Visitor role? As a first step, the leadership team produced a training manual and facilitated a six-hour training session with church visitor teams that included three hours of basic coaching training with three additional hours on how to use the church visiting survey results and engage councils. Church visitors were trained to bring a “listening attitude” to their meetings in order to encourage meaningful conversations with councils. Written reports by church visitors were to capture points of discussion of survey results and appended comments as well as challenges and areas needing attention by church leaders. The primary goal of church visitors, then, becomes assisting councils in identifying and addressing issues important to them.

From feedback and debriefing, the team found the training of church visitors to be vital and well received. Church visitors reported being energized in this new process. Some said it was a delightful experience. Church visitors saw themselves as partners walking alongside the council rather than in an adversarial relationship. What we are finding is that one of the most effective ways to change others, such as councils, is first to change yourself. Changing the role of the church visitor seemed to have a positive impact on councils.

With a longer view in mind, church visitor teams were limited to working with only 2-3 churches and no more. This limitation will allow church visitor teams to develop and maintain a continuing relationship with the same set of councils over a longer period of time. In addition, we are strongly encouraging the makeup of church visitor teams to include a balance of laypersons and clergy. The church visitor teams in this pilot project, due to a one-year constraint, worked with one, at most two, councils. And several of the teams involved laypersons. Unfortunately, there has not been sufficient time to produce evidence of the impact of these project designs. What can be said is that the pilot church visitor teams affirmed that this redesigned church visiting approach will eventually produce positive results.

### **C. What changes occurred within church councils?**

A basic assumption in this approach is that church visiting should be conducted within a framework of spiritual discernment. The leadership team felt this was foundational in determining and addressing leadership and congregational health. The team found it was important to set an expectation that church visiting is a discovery process, led by the Holy Spirit; and that this approach was designed to help in assessment of both self and congregation through honest and open discussion on matters important to that council. Church visitors also found that being intentional about devotions by using *Lectio Divina* and similar exercises were important in giving spiritual language to councils and setting the tone for something new.

Perhaps it should not be too surprising to learn there is little institutional memory about the value of church visiting. Among some councils there was the attitude that this is just an annual formality, while others reported that they had not engaged in this activity recently. Many were initially slow to engage in conversation, although visitors reported on significant improvement during the church visiting sessions. Because significance and value needs to be re-established in the near term it will take more time and effort than might be anticipated. It took a lot longer than anticipated to get classes to identify churches and visitor teams, to train and mobilize them, and then to schedule the contacts necessary. This should become easier as classes become familiar with the process, but it does speak into limiting the number of churches each visitor team is given.

Many council members found it difficult to talk about faith and life, and were more comfortable talking about perceptions of the congregation than discussing their personal walk with Christ. However, one of the findings is that all councils agreed, after going through the visits, such self-assessment is fundamental.

It should be noted that one of the first goals in the process was to simply get council members comfortable in feeling safe, being honest and open, then beginning to identify substantive issues. The team found that in most cases the process resulted in more focused reflection on their own spiritual journeys and in finding ways to be supportive of one another.

All councils reported that having such conversations was a significant improvement over the previous method and in several cases expressed excitement about what could be celebrated and the specifically about what they needed to address. Councils were appreciative of have the survey results around stated areas of health. They found the supplemental question listing as very stimulating. The team also found that the size of the council can be a potential barrier which in some cases took more time and effort.

The team found that church visiting needs to be a process with multiple contacts. There is real value in having church visitors meet in a pre-meeting with the pastor and a couple of key leaders to set expectations, answer questions and encourage some preliminary discussion among council members about the process. It was important to make them aware that it is just not a one-time church visit, but has as its goal a continuing relationship through a variety of means, including emails, Skype and or face-to-face follow-up.

There were a variety of possibilities expressed by councils for action steps. One council identified the need for a visioning process within the congregation; another council was affirmed in some initiatives already underway. In a third situation, the process helped a council identify and own a long history of division revolving around the pastor and the council and to seek outside help. Another council discovered and made a commitment to work at improving communication with and involvement by the congregation regarding major decisions. It should also be noted that one council remarked that the conversation went well because church visitors did not push for “concrete” outcomes.

Because most visits were scattered through a six-month time window with most of them being conducted in later summer and early fall, the majority of initiatives are under consideration, and where plans have been made, implementation steps are just underway.

## **V. Recommendations**

Based on these findings the Church Visiting Leadership Team recommends that:

1. This Church Visiting process be introduced to additional regions of the CRCNA by embedding it within an expanding number of classes because it will strengthen and support classis renewal and congregational health and mission.
2. In the next 12 months church visitors be trained in six additional classes to continue this renewal process for church visiting. We will continue this process among the 4 pilot classes. We recommend that PCR be involved in how church visitors are selected and supported.
3. The guiding framework of this pilot project (see Section II above) be used to guide this next phase since they focus on congregational health and mission.

4. Ongoing evaluation be carried out in all participating classes to determine the effectiveness of this adaptive approach and to discover ways to improve it.
5. The Calvin Center for Social Research continue to participate in this process producing the church visitor reports and assisting in the ongoing evaluation.
6. The costs for continuing this adaptive approach be shared between the CRCNA and the classes involved.
7. Pastor Church Resources support, monitor, and provide materials and training required for continuing this church visiting process.

#### **VI. A Word of Caution**

The leadership team recognizes that according to church order Article 42B, church visitors must consider a variety of council functions and be sensitive to a variety of settings, not all of which can nor should be addressed by this approach. There are situations in which church visitors need to use other processes and/or tools to do their work. Some examples in which church visitors need to be cautious and adaptive: if they sense there are significant relational or doctrinal issues among church leaders or conflict between a pastor and members; in situations involving the death of a pastor; when the congregation is feeling fatigued by previous or current surveys or processes; or if it is a matter of discipline involving a congregant or ministry leader.

#### **VII. Concluding Remarks**

The church visiting leadership team wishes to thank all those involved in designing, supporting and implementing this pilot process. Among them are Pastor Harold Veldman (II Allendale CRC, Allendale, Michigan) who requested this approach be investigated, the Better Together Team (especially Derek Atkins, Karl Westerhof, Lis Van Harten and Holly Koons) and Norm Thomasma, Director of the Pastor Church Relations office, all of whom encouraged the leadership team to design a pilot as well as supported this effort prayerfully and financially. And a special thanks to the four classes and church visitor teams (Grand Rapids East, Holland, Kalamazoo and Zeeland – see participants names in Appendix 3) who were willing to invest time and energy in being trained, in soliciting congregations to participate, in conducting the visits and being willing to provide helpful feedback on what they found. Most of all we give thanks to our God for His continued guidance to all who worked on this pilot.

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*Appendices for Church Visitor Pilot Project can be found in a separate document.*