



Gather Calgary| Report

Introduction

An overture about membership decline led Synod 2023 to talk openly about the membership challenges our churches are facing. In response, synod instructed the Office of General Secretary “to develop a comprehensive unified strategy and plan to arrest and reverse the trend of decline and bring about a positive trend of membership growth to our denomination,” and to “work with the Council of Delegates, each agency, and churches and classes to continually update this plan and to report its progress regarding this plan to synod annually until such time as synod decides that this issue has been satisfactorily addressed.” *Acts of Synod 2023*, pp. 975-976.

From these assignments and that discussion, the idea for Gather was born. Gather was a series of events in 2024 and 2025 that were intended to inspire, encourage and bring together CRC leaders from across North America. Thanks to the contributions of generous donors, these events were held at 10 locations across the United States and Canada, with all costs for participation fully funded.

At each event, approximately five classes came together to celebrate how God is moving in our communities and our churches. Together, participants prayed, worshiped, shared stories and challenges, and discerned where God is leading us in our mission.

These events encouraged and assisted CRC congregations in their renewal. Stories that were shared and lessons that were learned at each event were captured so that a comprehensive report could be written. From these learnings, some clear next steps were established.

As the report below demonstrates, God has blessed us with gifting and calling, and he has a vision for our mission and our future.

Gather Event Details

Gather Calgary was held Monday to Wednesday, September 23-25, 2024 at Carriage House Hotel & Conference Centre.

Sixty-three (63) participants from Classes Alberta South Saskatchewan, British Columbia South-East, North Cascades, Ko-Am, and Central California came together to discern and celebrate how God is moving in our communities and churches.

Description of the Event

The purpose of Gather was to engage in spiritual discernment with church leaders. The event was structured around the Emmaus Road story found in Luke 24:13-35. With scripture as our guide, participants acknowledged our expectations and desires to God, testified to the redemptive work of Jesus through storytelling, aligned ourselves with God and his mission, and were empowered in our witness of God's renewing work.

The Gather event was designed using a dialogue education pedagogy (engaging in interactive, collaborative learning through dialog) with an emphasis on discernment rather than making decisions. Curiosity for what God is doing in the local congregations of the Christian Reformed Church framed the experience. The process created space for the equitable contribution of every invested attendee regardless of the size of one's church, the role they held in the church, or whether or not they were ordained.

Those who attended were assigned to a small group of 6-8 participants with a team of 2 staff facilitators. The groups were intentionally diverse, composed of participants from each of the classes in attendance, as well as diverse in gender and ethnic composition. Small group exercises followed a rhythm of prayer, reading scripture, personal reflection, small group sharing, categorizing the contributions of everyone in the group, and posting the work of their small group on the wall to share with the whole group.

The goals that were set and accomplished for the initiative included: encountering God through the text, prayer, worship, and fellowship; naming unmet expectations about our church, its ministries, and its impact; telling and hearing stories of God at work; identifying themes of how God is at work in CRC churches; celebrating our common desire to follow Jesus together; and preparing to share these stories with people in our congregations and communities.

Disappointments and Unmet Expectations

Over the course of the life of a congregation, dreams, hopes, and expectations emerge about the future for the church, its ministry, and its impact in the community. After reflecting on Luke 24:18-24, participants shared hopes and expectations that they have had for their congregation that have gone unmet.

The following is a summary of the disappointments shared by participants. Several primary disappointments appear to be commonly experienced by churches across different locations:

Congregation members express a range of primary disappointments, often related to church growth, leadership effectiveness, internal unity, and the application of faith in daily life and ministry.

Through the facilitated process, participants shared the following disappointments:

Declining Church Attendance and Membership

- Many members note a dwindling church population and a lack of numerical growth, with some churches experiencing a huge drop in size. This includes concerns about young families leaving and new families not joining, leading to losses in Sunday School and Children's Programs.
- There is disappointment that youth and adult children are walking away from their faith or not remaining in the church, despite prayers for their return.
- Members also observe a lack of spiritual growth among church members and within the community, noting that people often do not want to think biblically or theologically about their lives.

Challenges in Leadership, Engagement, and Ministry Effectiveness

- A significant concern is the difficulty in finding, retaining, and developing leaders and volunteers, with a new generation of leaders often not stepping up or leaving. The current model of leadership often lacks servant leadership, leading to burnout.
- There is disappointment regarding members' lack of engagement in church activities and outreach, with many simply "consuming church" rather than participating or volunteering. Outreach programs are described as disappearing or not effectively attracting the community.
- Congregants feel that ministry efforts often do not meet expectations, whether it's youth outreach, church plants struggling, or a general inability to find a vision for the future.

Internal Disunity and Relational Struggles

- Many express disappointment over division and disunity within the church, sometimes stemming from differing opinions on issues like COVID, or finding that efforts for unity, such as engagement with Reformed tradition, become divisive.
- There is concern about the failure to maintain connections among members and a potential loss of the church's hospitable reputation. Newcomers are often not truly incorporated, and cliques persist.
- Members note difficulties in addressing conflict with love and honesty, leading to intense hostility or avoidance. There's also a feeling that the church or denomination is no longer a safe or encouraging place for those who "do not fit."

Theological and Biblical Application Issues

- Disappointment is expressed regarding people's unwillingness to seriously engage with God's Word or apply biblical and theological thinking to their lives. There's a concern that church leadership does not always embrace "Truth and Grace."
- Congregants grapple with the unfulfilled hope that prayer would lead to healing or conversions, questioning why God appears not to keep promises, especially concerning children walking away from faith.
- There is a desire for discipline to be carried out in keeping with scripture and for accountability in leaders' teaching, lifestyle, and beliefs, which is often seen as lacking.

Unfulfilled Personal Hopes and Expectations

- Many express a general disappointment when personal or ministry plans do not turn out as expected or hoped. This includes personal struggles in one's faith walk.
- Financial difficulties are a recurring disappointment, impacting staffing, ministry space, and overall church operations.

Prayer Confessing Our Foolishness and Slowness to Believe

Hopes and expectations for our churches are often influenced by our personal attitudes, preferences, and assumptions. After reading Luke 24:25-29, participants reflected on their own assumptions about how God would act in the way they preferred, or in a way that they could predict, or in a way that was comfortable, or in a way that preserved something they cared about. Participants wrote responses to the question, "About what attitudes, expectations, or assumptions for your church, its ministry, and its impact in the community might Jesus say "how foolish you are?" or "how slow to believe?"

The following prayer was composed from the descriptions of misplaced expectations and assumptions offered by the participants. Similar to the response of the disciples on the road to Emmaus (verse 29), participants were invited to respond by asking Jesus to, in his mercy, stay with us in spite of our foolishness and slowness to believe.

Prayer

O Lord, we confess our pride, egoism, and self-recognition, which often supersede Your governing over our lives, situations, and environments. We admit that we try to take matters into our own hands, not listening to Your Holy Spirit speaking to us or respecting the values and understanding of others. We have been self-righteous and prideful within our congregation, letting pride spring up inside and block our eyes from seeing Jesus Christ. We recognize the pride that blocks us from seeing You working in others, and our tendency to get a "high" from leading a team. Forgive us for this foolishness.

We confess our unbelief and have been slow to believe that when we step out in faith, we will be joining Jesus, who is already present and already at work before we arrive. We have been slow to believe that You are always there and that You are with us, especially in down times and distress. We have lacked faith in what You could do and have had doubts when we didn't see results quickly. We repent our unbelief in Your almighty works, especially when looking at the small size of our church. We confess our unbelief about Your willingness to change hearts, minds, and behaviors.

Forgive us for believing that cultural truths, secularism, and distractions are too big for Jesus to reverse. We have been slow to believe that You have so much to teach us through someone we thought we were called to mentor. We confess that we often forget about Your Word and You, Lord, in times of repeated sins. We confess our tendency to judge or doubt if things don't happen quickly, forgetting that Your plans are the "long game" and not a quick fix. We have

mistakenly measured Your presence and work primarily by numerical growth, and for not seeing and valuing the other ways You work.

Lord, help us to believe and completely trust in You. Help us to have faith in what You are doing, even when we see few results from our perspective. Remind us that You can and do change people to become more faithful, and that Your Spirit will guide and direct, bringing about Your will in every situation. We pray for help in establishing assurance, free of worry and fear. Help us to realize that things are done in Your time, not ours, and that You are in complete control. May we learn to hold things lightly, knowing that with or without us, Your work will continue.

Lord in your mercy, stay with us.

Amen.

Stories of God's Work in Our Churches

Luke 24:28-35 records the disciples recognizing Jesus in their midst and returning to Jerusalem telling the good news of his resurrection. Gather participants were asked, "How have you seen Jesus present and at work in your church or community?"

The following synthesizes insights from Gather detailing personal accounts of God's work within local church communities. The common thread throughout these narratives is the tangible impact of faith on individuals, relationships, and the wider community. The reports highlight diverse expressions of God's work, ranging from personal transformation and spiritual growth to active community engagement and outreach.

Key Themes and Most Important Truths:

The stories told by Gather participants reveal several overarching themes that underscore the presence and activity of God within their churches:

Deepening Faith and Spiritual Transformation

A prominent theme across the sources is the active and transformative work of God's Spirit in individual lives and within the congregation.

Conversions and Baptisms: There is a strong emphasis on new professions of faith and baptisms across all age groups, from young children to individuals in their 90s.

- "Jesus by his spirit has been 'showing up' & 'showing off' by revealing himself to people in all the age groups (infant to the oldest) being brought to faith in him & asking to be baptized."
- Specific examples include a 90-year-old woman baptized in the hospital, a Sikh lady seeking baptism after receiving church assistance, and "40+ baptisms this year and 29 people joining this church this past July."
- Many of these conversions come from unexpected places or backgrounds, such as a "woman who grew up Jehovah Witness became Christian and Reformed" and a "Muslim background" friend converting.

Healing and Restoration: Stories abound of personal healing, reconciliation, and overcoming significant life challenges through faith.

- "The restoration of a marriage that was near divorce. Jesus showed up in counseling, in a men's accountability group, and supportive church family."
- A pastor's wife experienced remission from a "usually fatal form of cancer" after congregational prayer and fasting.
- A member struggling with mental illness and drug issues for years is now "sober and living at home" after consistent prayer.
- "Many Young Families who experienced brokenness or separation or premarital parenting... have experienced healing and reconciliation."

Spiritual Growth and Discipleship: Churches are actively fostering environments for spiritual growth through various initiatives.

- "Raising up mentors and teachers to guide fellow believers toward greater faithfulness."
- Bible study groups are experiencing significant growth and "People are anxious to learn more about Jesus!"
- Congregants are encouraged to "share Jesus moments in their life" and engage in deeper biblical study, learning "to see Jesus in the O.T."
- A "Mentorship Model has had deep theological and spiritual effect" within youth ministry.
- "The "Disciple a City" movement, led by dozens of young adults who are alive in their faith + recognize Jesus' call to love + serve the hurting + marginalized."

Community Engagement and Outreach

Churches are deeply involved in serving and connecting with their wider communities, often transcending traditional church boundaries.

First Response and Shelter: Churches act as vital community hubs during crises.

- "In Nov of 2021, a flood occurred in our area... Our church jumped into action and became the beacon of help and hope in God's love through action!"
- "Our church was used as a First Response/shelter. Through that How church and community got together as one."

Addressing Basic Needs: Providing practical support is a significant aspect of outreach.

- "Volunteer support for our community pantry and the number of people helped. Able to continue through the shut downs."
- "Monthly Food Distribution through Central California Food Bank served over 200 families."
- "Christmas with Dignity" allows parents to "provide for their children" by selling donated gifts at a discount.
- The "THRIVE Ladies group... turned into a community giveaway," providing gently used items.
- Assistance to the homeless includes preparing and delivering lunches to build relationships and "break the stigma against the homeless."

- A church financially assisted a Sikh family in need of rent money after their temple denied them, leading to an inquiry about Christianity and baptism.

Building Bridges with Local Organizations and Individuals: Churches are actively seeking partnership and presence within secular spaces.

- "The Public School District invited C.E.F. into the school for 2024-2025," a shift from previous proactive outreach by the church.
- Hosting AA and NA groups weekly demonstrates support for recovery.
- "Watching and being part of relationships between churches and local, secular non-profit organizations move from mistrust and suspicion to mutual appreciation and collaboration."
- A new "estuary group" aims to "engage in meaningful conversations in-person" with neighbors.

Hospitality and Relationship Building: Creating welcoming spaces and fostering personal connections are key.

- "Increased participation in our hospitality ministry... God has done something in her heart. She has let others in, has helped some others when they asked for help, and now even called and told me it has been a blessing to see others learn to do hospitality."
- Regular events like "dinner/movie night" or "Dine and Discover" provide community even for "those people do not come to church on Sunday, this dinner + movie is their church."
- Personal relationships with neighbors lead to spiritual conversations, such as discussing "heaven and hell, and about his struggles with reading the Bible."
- A church boat in a marina led to "wife's coworkers, who were hostile to faith... soften[ing] and more open to spiritual conversations."

Adaptation, Resilience, and Leadership Transitions

Churches are demonstrating remarkable adaptability and resilience in navigating challenges, including leadership changes, global events, and internal shifts.

Leadership Transitions and Staffing: Churches are experiencing significant pastoral changes, often finding divine guidance and unexpected blessings.

- "God guided us in great ways in the process of finding our new lead pastor - so many stories of God leading us - then him & his family - now all of us together. Transition of leadership has his hands all over it!"
- A church without a pastor saw "So many of our members have stepped up to fill these holes."
- A 22-year-old "temp" was hired as a worship pastor, and "The Holy Spirit has moved powerfully since."
- A seamless transition for a retiring 40-year founding pastor was answered through prayer.
- Hiring three part-time pastors in the absence of a full-time one resulted in "consistency."

Navigating Challenges and Growth: Communities are learning and growing through difficult experiences.

- "Through the struggle of losing a pastor, losing members through COVID and the HSR report... we have become better disciples to each other. Reaching out better. Supportive to outliers. Learning to communicate + listen."
- A small youth group found "a huge blessing" in having fewer attendees at a conference, leading to "wonderful conversation" due to the intimacy.
- Concerns about a new university campus led to the "greatest joys" for a pastor now leading a thriving young adult ministry.
- "Since the shake up of COVID, people seem to crave the opportunity to meet (in-person) and seem more open to redefining vision - not just business as usual."

Embracing New Models and Ministries: Churches are open to innovation and evolving their approaches to ministry.

- The "woman who has run [hospitality] for 30+ years was asked to allow others to participate and do it differently," initially causing upset but ultimately leading to a "blessing to see others learn."
- A new initiative for young families to connect through "play time" and "Tot-romp" evolved into a consistent outreach to "many community young families."
- The establishment of a parochial school and interest in a "faith (in)forming lecture series and podcast" indicate new educational and spiritual formation avenues.

Diversity, Inclusion, and Global Perspective

The sources reveal churches actively embracing diversity, supporting marginalized groups, and engaging with a global outlook.

Inclusion of Individuals with Disabilities: The "Friendship ministry" is a long-standing commitment to those with "physical & intellectual challenges."

- "One of the most enjoyed Sundays annually at our church is Friendship Sunday. On that day, those with mental challenges are invited to lead us into hearing the Gospel of Christ - and it is always done with so, so, so much joy."
- Children's ministry "meet the needs of those with special needs, etc. - so they can participate in church life."

Multiculturalism and Refugee Support: Churches are actively welcoming and integrating people from diverse backgrounds.

- "God directs (leads) us to mingle/weave one another as one body" through different cultures.
- "The hiring of a Filipino pastor which has fit our vision for being a mosaic."
- "The first time I heard a baptism done in 3 different languages was a year ago at River Park Church, when a child was baptized in French, another in Korean, and another in English."
- Extensive refugee support includes sponsoring families, offering homes and jobs, and collaborating with secular organizations. "Hearing former refugees name the local CRC they are a part of as 'their family'."
- "Amor Viviente Church" specifically partners with the Border Agency to assist "turned away immigrants with transitional services."

- Annual "Stampede Breakfast reaches out to the community. Has encouraged persons of different ethnic communities to worship and fellowship with us."

Global Mission and Impact: Churches have a broader awareness of God's work beyond their immediate community.

- Support for a student scholarship program in El Salvador, enabling a "very poor family" student to graduate as a lawyer.
- A Chinese exchange student found Christ and returned to China professing faith.
- A pastor from South Africa is "preaching in 2 small towns around Regina" in Afrikaans, leading to potential church planting.
- "Foods Grain Harvest" raises funds for world hunger with government matching.
- An invited visit to a "House Church in Nepal" resulted in a healing.

Focus on Younger Generations

There is a consistent and intentional effort to nurture faith and provide community for children, youth, and young adults.

Vibrant Youth Ministry: Youth groups are seen as anchors and sources of growth.

- "The Youth Ministry has become an Anchor at our Church... Young families stay and new ones come to our church. Youth from non-Christian families have been saved."
- Teens are "professing their faith - clean articulation that is a heart of communication - applying it to their lives."
- Young people are "using their gifts in music/worship/volunteering in Sunday School etc + that's included their volunteering in community events."

College and University Outreach: Churches are actively engaging with students, leading to significant conversions.

- "Young adults (including university students) are coming in significant numbers on Thursday nights and many have become believers and are hungry for learning & growing & inviting others."
- A "newbies" small group for college students, comprising "non-believers and brand new Christians," is seeing "amazing" conversions, with "Up to 200 and counting!"

Children's Ministry and Nurturing Faith: Commitment to the youngest members is evident.

- "The commitment of our children's ministry staff/leaders to nurture faith in Kids - meet the needs of those with special needs, etc."
- "Parents teaching their children to know and love the Lord."
- "Through children's blessing and children's choir. God nurtures the next generations."
- "Both our GEM's and Boys clubs ministries are huge community builders! Both programs have students from multiple different churches and faith backgrounds!"

In summary, the sources paint a picture of vibrant, adaptable, and outwardly focused church communities. They highlight a clear sense of God's active presence in conversions, healing, and community building, alongside a deep commitment to serving diverse populations and nurturing faith across generations. Despite various challenges, these churches demonstrate resilience

and a proactive approach to being a tangible expression of God's love in their localities and beyond.

We Believe God is...

Based on the stories provided, there is a strong belief that God is powerfully and actively at work in Christian Reformed churches. Gather participants worked with their groups to contribute statements describing various ways God is perceived to be working within the church, its people, and surrounding communities.

Here are some of the key ways the stories and contributed statements indicate God is working within the CRC:

Raising and Equipping Leaders:

God is equipping leaders in churches to greater faith and faithfulness, calling, equipping, and fulfilling new leaders for His Kingdom, and faithfully preparing and equipping people for leadership. He is anointing the hearts that serve voluntarily with humility, positioning people for service and causing their hearts to burn, and raising up servant leaders with a passion for the church and community. This includes inviting and equipping all kinds of leaders for His church and raising up the next generation of leaders. God is also revealing hope and providing leadership resources in His time.

Engaging and Nurturing All Generations:

God is inviting all generations to use their gifts for the common good of all and is faithful from generation to generation. He is inviting children and youth to Himself and giving them a passion for the whole gospel, enfolded and equipping children for His glory, and maturing our younger members and using their gifts. God is working through our children and youth to encourage and inspire our churches and is still drawing His children to Himself. Furthermore, God is embracing and nurturing His children.

Deepening Faith and Spiritual Growth:

God is leading us to firm faith and refining our faith. He is deepening our relationship with Him through teaching, preaching, and study, and through prayer, Scripture, and service. God is nurturing authenticity, curiosity, and passion, renewing the church one person at a time, and transforming lives. He is pouring out His love on us, making us more honest with ourselves, God, and others, and is working in us and through us, sometimes in spite of us. God is also growing disciples through relationships and hospitality.

Cultivating Unity and Community:

God is reconciling relationships and cultivating community, uniting the church through His presence, and using testimonies and stories of His faithfulness to bring people together. He

invites us into community and fellowship as a triune God. God is also building bridges and expanding our comfort zone to include more people as family, and is using the weak through our encouragement of one another. He is restoring the brokenness of our lives through care for one another and prayer.

Advancing Mission and Outreach:

God is creating mission in our community / neighborhoods and using us as salt and light in our communities and beyond. He is dropping outreach in our laps and bringing the world to our neighborhood. God is expanding our boundaries by reminding us of the harvest and is turning hearts to Him through our everyday relationships. It is noted that God does not need churches to be big to fulfill His mission, and He is faithful in advancing His kingdom and will NEVER STOP, being more creative than we are. God is also building empathy in us in order to build the Kingdom.

Fulfilling Promises and Working Continually:

God is fulfilling His promises to His people and is delighted to see His people sharing what God has done to them. He is working with the people around us, pushing us out of our comfort zone, and providing opportunities for creative discipleship. God is also continuing to nurture us, redirecting our vision for transformation.

At the culmination of this exercise, participants were moved to praise the Triune God for his faithfulness to us and our congregations. With the psalmist we declare, "The Lord has done great things for us, and we are filled with joy (Psalm 126:3)."

What did God do through Gather?

The following summarizes the key themes and important truths present in the provided excerpts, which represent reflections from individuals who participated in Gather. The responses overwhelmingly highlight a sense of renewal, encouragement, and broadened perspective on God's activity despite challenges.

Main Themes and Truths:

A dominant theme is the reassurance that God is actively at work, even in the face of difficulties, divisions, and perceived stagnation within the Church. Participants repeatedly emphasize God's faithfulness and sovereignty.

- "Has shown me that the Spirit is not moving at the same pace in all churches. Some of our churches are growing and flourishing while others are in danger of dying, but the people are all leaning on our Father and striving to follow our Lord. Why would He fail now? He won't."
- "Gave me renewed hope and energy to continue with the challenges our church experiences."
- "God showed me His Grace, my Facilitators were very kind and my group was very friendly and full of God."

- "Reminded me that it's God's Kingdom + God's [...]"
- "Is sovereign and is going to do His work despite our 'negativity' and self-imposed road blocks. He will work His will and grow His kingdom with or without me."
- "Encouraged & reminded & assured & showed me that He is bigger than any of my or our concerns. He is sovereign. He remains sovereign. He has us in His hands! He is always doing something new in & through His people despite what may hinder/[...] us."
- "Reassured me that He is still moving and working, despite our willingness and our difficulties."
- "I was hoping that I could find some solution to the difficulties that arose in the denomination and the difficulties that arose in the church, but God made me realize that I was already working on all of them."

Despite acknowledging internal struggles and denominational divisions, participants express a significant uplift in their hope and optimism for the future of the CRCNA and the broader Church. This renewed hope often stems from observing God's work in others.

- "Has been renewing my optimism/hope for the CRC (even in the midst [of] very difficult times for the denomination as a whole) hearing the prayers & hearts of so many participants."
- "After 3 years 'away' my love, joy, and passion for the Gospel mission through CRC came back! Even boosted more!"
- "Gave me hope about the future of CRCNA, through the amazing things He's doing in the congregation."
- "Encourage me. Get to know great brothers + sisters. Hope for the future of the church."
- "Gives me hope and assurance and encouragement that He is working to build His church world-wide and equips His people to do His work."

A crucial element in fostering encouragement and a sense of unity is the sharing of personal and congregational stories. This process helps individuals realize they are not alone in their struggles and highlights the diverse ways God is working.

- "Helped us to connect each other and helped us to know better and helped us to know what God is doing in our own lives and in our Church and how better we can reach out [to] our community with the Love of God."
- "Has shown me that we all have stories to tell. Many churches struggle with the same issues our congregation does."
- "Has spread stories of encouragement and shown how He is walking still, in faithfulness to build His church. He has brought us together to build lasting relationships to continue the sharing of our stories and faith."
- "Reminded me that the CRCNA is a large family of believers with different and incredible stories. He encouraged us through hearing about where and how he is working and renewing, refining the church."
- "Showed me that ALL of us are struggling with something and there is beauty in coming together to share + be vulnerable."
- "Through stories I have heard of God at work in their churches."
- "Opened my eyes to the good + beautiful ways God is at work in our congregations + communities."

Many participants noted a shift in their perspective, moving away from an exclusive focus on internal church problems and frustrations towards a broader appreciation of God's overarching mission and the good work being done.

- "Helped me remember the good that is happening in our church. I so often fixate on the difficulties we are facing and my frustrations and I am so grateful God is reminding me He is still with me and us as a congregation."
- "Allowed me to focus on the overall mission of our church as opposed to all the problems within my church."
- "I have seen through our group discussions that I was so focused on the negatives in our church and in my own life. Gather has opened my eyes to see the amazing work being done within the church and my own life."
- "God is moving + growing His Kingdom, often despite ourselves."

Gather fostered a stronger sense of interconnectedness and unity within the CRCNA and the broader Church. Participants recognized the diversity within the body of Christ but affirmed the shared mission.

- "Showed that unity for the sake of His Kingdom is possible."
- "Wants us to listen to His ministries through churches. Leads us to connect each other building His body as oneness."
- "Reminded me (again) of the many beautiful members of the Body of Christ in the CRCNA and of how the Holy Spirit is working through them (us!) and our churches."
- "Showed me how interconnected and strong the CRC (and greater Church) is, because of His Faithfulness to work through the Body for his Glory and our Salvation."
- "Showed me that he is actively working in our churches and that no single church has everything happening but all our churches together have the full scope of God's activity among us. It's the body analogy all over."
- "Reminded me of kinship. Reminded me how BIG God is. Allowed me to practice living, worshiping + learning from others; especially those whom we may not see eye to eye [with]."

The experience facilitated personal spiritual growth, including increased courage, vulnerability, and a deeper relationship with God.

- "God showed me His Grace..."
- "Opened my heart to so much & got me excited to go back home & do his work."
- "Worked in my heart to see more of the bigger picture of what God is doing in His church - CRC. Encouraged me to continue to live out + work where God has called me in the CRC."
- "Has taken me out of my comfort zone and given me the courage to share my thoughts and feelings, even if it was just a little bit."
- "Gather created an environment where the Holy Spirit was welcome and was felt."
- "I have seen God closer. Has brought me closer to God."
- "Personally strengthens my Faith."

Most Important Ideas:

- God is actively working and moving in the Church (CRCNA specifically), even in difficult times. This is a fundamental assurance repeatedly voiced.
- The sharing of personal and congregational stories is a powerful tool for encouragement, connection, and gaining perspective. It helps individuals realize common struggles and shared triumphs.
- A shift in focus from internal problems to God's broader mission and kingdom is beneficial for morale and engagement.
- Unity within the diverse body of Christ is possible and necessary for God's work. This involves learning from those with whom one may not always agree.
- Gather fostered a safe space for vulnerability, leading to deeper connections and personal spiritual growth.
- There is a recognition that God works in surprising and creative ways, often outside of planned programs or through smaller churches. "He's full of surprises." and "God works through smaller churches but we may have to reimagine what it looks like - working cooperatively or letting go of ministries/programs."

In summary, these testimonies reveal a profoundly positive and spiritually enriching experience for the participants of Gather. It highlights the enduring power of community, shared faith, and a renewed focus on God's sovereignty as antidotes to the challenges facing contemporary church life.