



Gather Chicago | 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 Chicago was held Thursday to Saturday, March 27-29, 2025 at The Drake in the Chicago suburb of Oak Brook.

Fifty-six (56) participants from classes Illiana, Grand Rapids South, Wisconsin, Hudson and Northern Michigan 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.

Several primary disappointments appear to be commonly experienced by churches across different locations. At Gather Chicago participants expressed a range of significant disappointments primarily centered around lack of growth, ineffective outreach, and various internal challenges related to community, leadership, participation, and spiritual depth.

The following is a summary of the primary disappointments shared by participants.

Lack of Growth and Membership Decline:

- Many expressed disappointment that church growth is failing, that organic evangelism has not materialized, and that overall church health has not led to more growth.

- The church has not experienced growth from the community and is often described as being half the size it was previously. Growth that does occur is often seen as "growth by transfer," meaning a "dying" of other local churches rather than new conversions.
- There is a particular struggle to retain or attract new young adults, youth, and young families. Concerns were raised about children and young people leaving the church post-2020, and the significant drop in Sunday School attendance in recent years.

Ineffective Outreach and Community Engagement:

- Congregation members are disheartened that church social events, like Easter egg hunts or craft fairs, have not always led to sharing the gospel.
- There is a recognized lack of strong outreach, with some noting they "don't do a lot of outreach" due to time commitments or lack of ambition.
- Despite outreach events, there is little effort to maintain or pursue connection after events, with people often attending once and never being seen again. This means outreach often blesses the community outside the church but does not lead to church growth.
- The desire for diaconal work has not created a parallel desire for evangelism and discipleship.
- There's disappointment about the church's limited impact on its local community and a struggle to effectively engage neighbors. Churches are often seen as "commuter churches," with members traveling from outside the area, resulting in a poor sense of a church's immediate neighborhood identity.

Internal Challenges:

- *Community and Relationships:* Members long for the church to "feel like a family," but conversations often remain "very surface level," and congregants don't see each other outside of church. There are concerns about church cliques limiting participation and an inability to enfold people who are different, leading to discomfort when socializing. The loss of members due to unresolved conflicts is also a significant concern.
- *Leadership and Vision:* There's a struggle to attract new elders and deacons for council, with an "older generation unwilling to lead" and the next generation "not picking up the threads of leadership." A significant concern is the lack of a clear mission and vision for the church. There's also a noted lack of trust in leaders.
- *Participation and Service:* Many participants expressed "volunteer fatigue" and disappointment that the same people seem to participate and volunteer for Church events. Some members show a general lack of involvement. There is also a desire for people to be more willing to offer financial support.
- *Spiritual Depth and Discipleship:* There's a recognized need for a solid adult discipleship program, with adult education being almost non-existent and small group ministries not yet thriving. Participants were disappointed that people don't seem to prioritize Jesus and the church over other activities, as evidenced by how they spend their time and irregular worship attendance. There's also a perceived lack of a spirit of prayer throughout the church.

- *Diversity and Inclusivity:* There was a desire to be more welcoming to diversity and to grow in ethnic, racial, and socio-economic diversity. Disappointment was noted regarding the lack of a church-wide connection with a Congolese congregation meeting in one church's building and the slow progress of the Spanish Language Ministry at another church due to a lack of council vision and Hispanic leaders. There was also a desire for the church to be more hospitable to women leaders.
- *Facilities and Resources:* Disappointments at individual churches included a stalled building project, a lack of their own dedicated worship space, and the need for new financial resources for basic ministry budgets.
- *Pastor Dependence:* Some expressed concern that the pastor has to do "absolutely everything" and is seen more as a social worker than a pastor, indicating a heavy reliance on the pastor rather than shared ministry.

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

Heavenly Father,

We come before you, acknowledging our foolishness and slowness to believe. We confess particularly that we have been slow to believe that you are working, especially when we can't see results or when things don't meet our expectations. We tend to lose faith and hope when we observe the difficult circumstances around us, doubting that, as a church, we can positively impact the world.

Forgive us for our presumption and for our narrow faith that does not extend beyond our walls. We confess that we often listen to ourselves reinforcing what we already think, instead of listening to your voice. We are slow to consider what you, Lord, want us to do.

We have foolishly assumed that if we come up with the right programs, growth will automatically come. We rely too much on our own plans and ideas, forgetting to seek your plan for our churches. We have been slow to believe that things like participation and attendance can truly change while also wrongly expecting you to provide a larger church through immediate growth.

We have a narrow vision of what the church should look like, and at times, have allowed a long-term lament of what has been lost to hinder what you are doing. Lord, make us content and faithful with what you have given us.

We confess our over-reliance on our own abilities, as we often forget to pause, be still, and trust in your leading. We have struggled to believe that you will use us in challenging situations.

Lord, help us remember that it is not by our might or power, but by your Holy Spirit, that you will build your church. We ask for patience and endurance, trusting that your time is better than our time and knowing that you are never hasty or delayed. Remind us that we can't always follow you and be comfortable, and that your ways and plans are always righter, higher, and better than our own.

May we learn to trust that Christ is sufficient, knowing that you are Lord of the church., May we remember that the church will succeed with or without us, but not without the work of God the Father, the sacrifice of Jesus, and the power of the Holy Spirit.

Lord in your mercy, renew 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 responses 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 following stories, told by Gather participants, reveal several overarching themes that underscore the presence and activity of God within their churches:

Divine Providence and Transformative Faith

A recurring and central theme is the manifest evidence of God's active involvement in the lives of individuals and the life of the church. God's presence is often seen in unexpected provisions, miraculous healings, and profound personal conversions.

Unexpected Provision and Guidance: Participants described moments where "God surprised us with His provision" even "When we thought there was no way out," demonstrating a deep trust in divine sustenance despite financial limitations and a lack of participation. Some examples

participants gave were providing a van, paying bills, and securing enough volunteers for ministries like food pantries and thrift stores.

The arrival of new leadership is frequently attributed to divine orchestration: "God led us to a church planter who in turn was led to us by a dream (on the same day we said farewell to our former pastor)." Another leader stated, "It was so clearly God who orchestrated it. It came in an unexpected time in my life, but has brought together all my prior training & experience."

A remarkable narrative recounted a child born despite a severe chromosomal disorder, described as a "miracle" and "the only living person on this earth with his chromosomal disorder," inspiring the congregation with "exuberance and joy."

Profound Personal Transformation and Healing: Numerous accounts detailed individuals experiencing radical life changes, often after periods of deep suffering or wandering. Examples included "A man who is 72, an ex-convict still on a bracelet on parole and gay, has come to know the Lord and is ready to attend our church. He is convinced to be celibate because God is moving in his life."

The concept of "inner healing prayer" was mentioned, leading participants to "see Jesus walking with them through their pain, giving it to Jesus at the cross & filling them up with his love, mercy, grace, peace & embrace."

Stories of recovery from "church hurt" highlighted the church's role as a place of restoration: "They experienced healing in our church and partook in communion together for the first time in years."

The sheer number of adult professions of faith and baptisms – "34 adult professions of faith and baptisms since January 2022. So many amazing stories! Aged 13-98. Long term church folks and those previously antagonistic to God/church. Real life change!" – underscores a vibrant spiritual awakening.

Resilience in the Face of Adversity: Congregations exhibited remarkable strength in times of decline, internal conflict, or crisis. One church, facing decline and the impact of COVID, declared, "we are not looking for an off ramp," shifting from "longing for the past and started anticipating what God will do with us next."

Even after a "church suffered a split in the congregation, God brought healing to us and peace to us. My church went from a place of conflict back into a people of love and worship."

The account of the pastor who had his visa offer retracted and was "obviously devastated" but embraced by the church shows how "God has built us back up together into a beautiful community of believers."

A powerful story of an ex-con's journey to faith culminating in baptism amidst a "demonic attack" and the simultaneous death of the pastor highlights the church's spiritual warfare and resilience.

Vibrant Community and Intergenerational Engagement

The participants emphasized the creation and sustenance of strong, supportive internal communities, marked by mutual care, hospitality, and intentional intergenerational connection.

Mutual Support and Compassionate Care: The church functions as a family, offering "the arms of Christ to those hurting and to those sorrowing" in times of loss, providing "meals, prayer, and Christ to those who have lost loved ones."

Acts of loving service are common:

- Members "demonstrated love and compassion by helping him for a week to clean his home" after a bed bug invasion, "They dove in rather than run away."
- The "Cradle of Grace program" provides a vital support system for mothers in need, where they "feel 'heard' because others truly know the struggles they face."

Intentional Hospitality and Belonging: "Hospitality demonstrated, and love given, in times of loss" is a cornerstone of participants' churches. Specific examples included a couple adept at "inviting new people over for dinner," leading many to become "part of the church."

Newcomers' experiences are overwhelmingly positive:

- One new member testified to being a "small church with a big heart," and a Google review highlighted a church where new families "loved to introduce our church to Long Island City neighbors."
- Efforts to create welcoming spaces at various churches included "Thursday Hospitality" with "Morning Coffee & Tea" and "Lemonade & Cookies" for school children.

Intergenerational Connection and Growth: A strong emphasis has been placed on fostering relationships across age groups: "I have seen God at work through a 'pod' program. We gather into assigned groups of people from each generation. It is so cool to see God work throughout the generations in our church."

- The success of "koinonia events intended for intergenerational worship & fellowship" and initiatives like a new staff person who "connects with both the youth and the seniors" underscore this commitment.
- Youth are not just recipients but active participants, with "high schoolers getting more active in leading worship" and even requesting to "plan, execute, and staff a service themselves."
- The elderly were recognized for their vital role in "the ministry of encouragement & intercession for the younger generation."

Outward Mission and Community Engagement

Congregations are deeply committed to extending their impact beyond their walls, reaching out to their local communities and engaging in global missions.

Local Community Outreach and Service:

- Food pantries and thrift stores are prominent, described as a "sense of security for our small church" and serving "about 150 families a week." These ministries often involve volunteers from other churches and the wider community.
- Churches are providing practical aid to the vulnerable, such as "utilizing our youth building as a warming shelter for the homeless" and operating a "Spa Day at church where homeless people from our neighborhood come for lunch, a haircut, and foot washing."
- Direct evangelism is also present, with members "going out visiting the neighborhood one home at a time."
- "ESL classes" and partnerships with local organizations like "The Bridge youth center" demonstrated a holistic approach to community needs.

Global Mission and Witness: Churches are actively supporting missionaries. Mission trips, both domestic and abroad, are seen as significant drivers of faith growth for young people.

- One participant shared that their church goes on "one to two mission field trips to our missionaries each year from our congregation to encourage the missionaries and give opportunities for service."
- A powerful anecdote illustrated a church's growing focus on "unreached people groups," celebrating when a supported missionary accepted a call to Japan where "Christianity is only 2% of the population."
- The unexpected global reach of online ministry during COVID-19 was highlighted. It led to the formation of "3 churches in Venezuela," "300 believers in Chile," and new churches starting in Ecuador and Mexico, demonstrating that the "Holy Spirit has no limit."

Inclusivity and Welcoming Diverse Populations: Churches are intentionally welcoming diverse groups, as at one church where "a small Congolese group of believers approached our church, looking for a place to worship in their own language."

- The shift to inviting a "Korean pastor to a dominantly Dutch congregation" and a "semi-regular rotation with a Puerto Rican, a few Hispanics" preaching indicated a commitment to cultural diversity.
- Testimonies included welcoming a "Chinese college exchange student, a South African single dad and his son, and a 60-70 year old guy who had never previously chosen to belong as a member of a church."
- The creation of a Dungeons & Dragons group for "a unique group of kids" who "did not feel as if they fit in in other groups" showcased innovative ways to build inclusive Christian communities.

Commitment to Spiritual Growth and Discipleship

Internal spiritual development was a core focus, involving intentional practices, dedicated leadership, and a hunger for deeper understanding and application of faith.

Emphasis on God's Word and Prayer: There is a "resurgence in love for and commitment to His word and His truth, prayer, and outreach."

- Regular Bible studies are crucial, with women's Bible studies showing "real growth" and men's Bible studies longing for "more emphasis on living our faith, beyond just believing it."
- "Weekly prayer ministry & dedicated Bible reading groups" are expanding, and one church's "40 days of prayer" led to "more prayer and discussion as a church."
- Another church's "vespers evening services where we spend time with a Psalm, with song requests, and by sharing and praying over prayer requests" created a "culture of prayer."

Meaningful Worship and Music: Churches are "improving our music and worship" and recognizing that "God has used it also to build a lot of new relationships and grow our fellowship."

- There's an intentional focus on "introducing the next generation's anthems" and "recognizing the younger generation who have a heart for the worship, walking with them, training them to be involved."
- The synchronicity observed between sermons, song lyrics, and prayers is seen as "evidence of the Holy Spirit working in our services."

Leadership Development and Adaptability: Congregations have been "reorganizing our church leadership," a process that was "hard and a challenge, but our church feels so happy, peaceful, hopeful now."

- The presence of "young and talented members driving in & pursuing their gifts in music" and "two younger deacons on council who are very enthused about their individual roles" indicates a vibrant leadership pipeline.
- When traditional Sunday school faltered, it "forced us to re-think what will work best," leading to "two new ministries" that are "making a real difference."

Strategic Vision and Future Orientation

Despite challenges, a forward-looking perspective and a willingness to embrace new directions define many of these congregations.

Discernment and Strategic Planning: Churches engage in "a discernment process for our future" and demonstrate "a willingness to set aside differences for the sake of unity" for strategic decisions, such as "calling a Korean pastor to a dominantly Dutch congregation."

- One church decided "to let our church die" in its current form to "start a fund to plant a church" – a radical commitment to future mission.

Adaptation to Modern Challenges: Several churches are grappling with "the all-encompassing influence of technology on our hearts and our kids," with individuals making commitments to "giving up social media or switching to a dumb phone" during Lent.

- The growth of "virtual" ministry is remarkable, with one pastor's online teaching leading to the spontaneous formation of churches in South America and Mexico.

In conclusion, these stories paint a compelling picture of Christian congregations as dynamic, Spirit-led communities. These churches are characterized by a deep sense of God's presence,

a commitment to nurturing strong internal relationships, a passionate engagement with their local and global communities, and a hopeful, adaptive approach to their future. The narratives collectively convey a message of God's faithfulness in sustaining, transforming, and expanding his kingdom through the church.

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, demonstrating His presence, power, and purpose across various facets of church life and mission. 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 participants' stories indicate that God is working within the CRC:

Bringing Growth, New Life, and Expansion:

God was described as a God of new life even when things die, bringing light to the darkness. He is actively adding to his church, bringing in new members. This work occurs even when we don't see it, with churches growing while others might be declining. God is also building churches through supernatural ways like dreams and deliverance. He is connecting people with churches so they can discover (or rediscover) faith in Jesus.

Transforming and Discipling Individuals:

God is making disciples out of unexpected people and working through innovative methods of disciple making. He is changing hearts and minds so that individuals are more attuned to what he is doing. God is also changing lives and drawing people closer to him, and growing the faith of the church through families sharing their faith together.

Engaging in Outreach and Community Service:

God is actively working to fulfill his mission through local outreach and global mission. He is using acts of service in the church to care for communities and reveal his love, showing up for the hurting through the body of Christ. God is also caring for marginalized people through church acts of service and energizing his church to serve so that people come into the kingdom. His presence is visible and relevant beyond Sunday worship.

Cultivating Hospitality and Inclusivity:

God is challenging us to show radical hospitality and is showing up and changing hearts through hospitality. Furthermore, God is providing surprising opportunities for the church to host, serve, care for, and be led by diverse people, and is working interculturally through churches that respond to these opportunities.

Raising and Working Through Leaders and People:

God is restoring and redeeming pastors and church communities. He is putting new people in unexpected positions of leadership and bringing new leaders—the right people at the right time. God is specifically raising young people for roles of leadership in the church. He is working in and through his people, not institutions, and is using different voices to build his church. God is also bringing generations together and using the generations to bless each other, as that intergenerational group becomes his body and family.

Responding to and Inspiring Prayer:

God is faithfully answering the prayers of his people to be present with them, and is seen as answering prayer more broadly. He works through the prayers of his people, bringing blessings through unexpected people. God is also continuing to speak to us through prayer and by his Spirit.

Demonstrating Sovereignty and Providence:

God is the master planner and is active and ahead of us as we go into the world. He is our provider, meeting ministry needs, including people, places, and finances. God is working in the midst of hard things for the good of his kingdom and is redeeming what we thought was lost. He is also making us uncomfortable to achieve his holy purposes and putting us in uncomfortable positions to further his kingdom. God is preserving and protecting his bride, the church, and is shining bright in our communities in spite of our failures. His work is evident even in the ordinary.

Providing Healing, Comfort, and Renewal Through Worship:

God is healing, saving, comforting, and encouraging his church, and is engaging us individually, personally, and intimately. He is renewing his people through vibrant worship and is happy when we gather. God is worthy of our gratitude and praise.

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:

The overwhelming sentiment from participants was a renewed sense of God's active presence, faithfulness, and continued work within their individual lives, local churches, and the broader

Christian Reformed Church (CRC), even in the face of difficulties and uncertainties. Many reflections emphasized a shift from personal anxieties or denominational struggles to a hopeful, God-centered perspective.

Key Quotes:

- "Gave me time & space to rest & reflect how he is working in my life & his church."
- "Reminded me of how there is still hope for those who are wandering. God showed me the powerful things he is up to in our denomination and world."
- "God is blessing and guiding us despite some of the challenges we are facing right now as a denomination."
- "Although hearing many answers on renewing his church from the people, God has the answers for us—the regular study, interaction with, and the proclamation of his word in the assembly of his people."
- "God met me at Gather Chicago. I came very sad, grieving loss, and in the midst of a process of wondering if our church is going to survive. Through the exercises of Scripture study, the care, prayers, and wisdom of my table group, and others I rubbed shoulders with over the weekend, I feel encouraged and hopeful."

Participants repeatedly expressed a re-affirmation that God is in control, has a plan, and works according to his own timing, often in unexpected ways. This included his ability to use challenging circumstances, like COVID, for his purposes.

- "Our God shows that he is working according to his plans. He can use COVID—answers prayers, provides the right people and builds his church."
- "Opened my eyes to ways I thought he wasn't meeting my expectations but the truth is, he is at work in his own way and in his own timing."
- "Has shown that he moves and grows the church at his perfect timing. His church goes through its own lifecycle: growth, decay, joy, sorrow. It isn't something to fight; it is something to experience and understand."
- "God has a plan for the CRC that he is starting to make clear."

A significant reminder for many was that the church is fundamentally God's creation and work, not merely a human endeavor. This perspective instilled a sense of honor and humility in their participation.

- "Revived in me a powerful sense that the church is his work and not merely a human institution... a work with fascinating depth and variety... something it's a real honor to be a part of."
- "Opened up a new space to meet me and show me that God is moving in powerful, transformative ways in his church; and it is his church, his bride, his body—not mine."

The event highlighted the broad spectrum of churches within the CRC (large and small, diverse experiences) while simultaneously fostering a strong sense of unity and shared purpose in Christ. There was gratitude for belonging to an "imperfect denomination that seeks to fix their eyes and be led by a perfect Christ."

- "Has given me a reminder of the diversity and unity of the Christian Reformed Church."
- "Demonstrated that his spirit is at work in a wide spectrum of churches from large to small in ways that are proclaiming the good news to their communities."

- "Revealed that we are different but often share the same stories. Christ is with us and will continue to be with us until we get it."
- "Coming from the East Coast USA, my experiences, challenges, and accomplishments are/seem to be quite different than my fellow attendees. I have hope and know that God has a plan for my local church and I pray that he will equip me to that purpose."

The relational aspect of "Gather Chicago" was crucial. Participants found encouragement, support, and a sense of "not being alone" through networking, shared stories, and the formation of deep bonds within small groups.

- "Told me that I am not alone. Reminded me of the richness of God's word."
- "Often allows us to connect with brothers and sisters in Christ as if they are family. Can create life in a group where people are working well together, manifesting their faith, knit together by the Holy Spirit."
- "Great connecting and networking time with both denominational staff and leaders as well as CRC folks from across the US."
- "I am not alone in sharing the joys and sorrows of ministry."
- "We became the family that we are."
- "Created a sacred space to encounter His presence through tears, laughter, grief, hope, fellowship and God's word. I'm leaving with both emotional fatigue (in a good way) and a renewed spiritual energy. The groups I journeyed with at Gather gave me genuine hope for the future of the CRC. BECAUSE it's clear the CRC is full of people who share similar frustrations—and—who LOVE Jesus!"

Many participants felt a strong, personal call to increased leadership, active participation, and renewed commitment to ministry, prayer, and mission within their local contexts.

- "Awakened me to see my responsibility & opportunity to exert more effective leadership in my church's mission program. He has shown me that he has placed me in this role 'in such a time as this' for his purposes. So I need to move beyond my reticence to push for strategic change."
- "Not only that, but I need to be an active participant in working toward meeting these expectations for my church."
- "Revealed to me that He has purposes and plans for the CRCNA and I am a part of this journey. He has placed a holy discomfort, a burning heart within me to preach the gospel message, to see His power displayed through prayer, and grow our church community."
- "Challenged me to recommit to obey this command to make disciples & glorify his name."
- "My eyes were practically opened to understand that Jesus continues walking with us through the Holy Spirit and that our weaknesses and imperfections are transformed by a fire and a new passion rekindled in our hearts."

A recurring insight was the recognition of God's work in the mundane, routine, and seemingly insignificant aspects of life and ministry, as well as in smaller churches and "faithful remnants."

- "God works through small groups and churches as well as large ones. Often uses a faithful remnant of believers to do his work."
- "Showed me to watch for the ordinary things in our lives and in the Word that will help me grow spiritually."

- "Continues to reveal himself to us through our eyes being opened to ordinary things such as breaking bread & wine, inviting others to join in resting from journey and listening intently to each other."
- "Opened my eyes to the way he uses ordinary things, small things, routine things to accomplish his purposes."
- "I was inspired by stories of how God miraculously moves among us in extraordinary ways that we recognize as such (and in such ordinary ways that become extraordinary)."

Key Observations and Practical Takeaways:

- *Gather Chicago's Efficacy*: The event successfully served as a space for spiritual rejuvenation, discernment, networking, and the exchange of ideas.
- *Scripture-Centeredness*: The blend of scripture study, prayer, and discussion was highly valued, directly contributing to participants feeling "encouraged and hopeful."
- *Personal Growth*: Many reported learning "spirit lead tools of discernment" and gaining new perspectives on their own churches' "joys and problems."
- *Challenges and Hope for the CRC*: While acknowledging struggles, participants left with renewed hope for the CRC's future and mission. "God is not done with the churches of the CRC."
- *Need for Accessibility Considerations*: One participant specifically requested sensitivity to length and more downtime for future events, considering participants with cognitive disabilities like autism. "As a person with disabilities please be sensitive to length and include more downtime. Autistic brains can get overwhelmed and tire faster."

Gather Chicago proved to be a profoundly impactful event, moving participants from a place of potential despair or isolated struggle to one of renewed hope, spiritual energy, and a clearer understanding of God's ongoing work in his church. The emphasis on shared experience, God's sovereignty, and individual callings fortified attendees for continued ministry, reinforcing the belief that the CRC is "alive and well and moving forward while it does God's work."