



Gather Des Moines | 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 Monday to Wednesday, April 28-30, 2025 at the Hotel Fort Des Moines.

Seventy (70) participants from classes Central Plains, Zeeland, and Arizona, along with individuals from other CRCNA classes who were referred by previous Gather participants.

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 wide range of primary disappointments, often centered around leadership, lack of congregational engagement, growth, and community connection. These include unmet hopes regarding staffing, leadership stability, member participation, and the overall spiritual vitality and outreach of the church.

Here are the primary disappointments experienced by congregation members:

Leadership and Staffing Shortfalls

- A significant disappointment is the lack of stability in leadership positions, including office bearers and pastors, and the unmet hope for new, motivated leaders.
- Congregations are experiencing leader gaps in critical areas like Bible studies and small groups, and a general lack of people stepping up to lead various groups, including youth and Sunday School.
- Concerns exist about church leadership willingness to participate in faith-growing opportunities such as workshops, Bible studies, and prayer meetings.
- Leadership development has been a slow process, particularly in Hispanic church plants, and some ministries have even ended due to a lack of leaders.
- There are disappointments concerning the youth not being interested in participating in ministry and the 30-40 age group not getting involved in leadership roles for children and youth programs, despite wanting the programs.
- The hope that staffing would help support church ministries has not been fully realized.

Challenges in Engagement, Growth, and Discipleship

- Congregations long for more movement toward God and for more people to engage in corporate prayer, noting that this has only happened in limited situations.
- There is a pervasive disappointment regarding newcomers lacking commitment or interest in programs, volunteering, leadership roles, and finances.
- Churches struggle with consistent growth, often losing momentum and people with changes in service location and times. Numerical growth in members and church attendance is a hope that is frequently unmet.
- Hopes for initiatives like church planting have completely failed in some cases.
- Programs often see a quick and enthusiastic response that then fades, or they receive limited response and commitment because people are too busy or the offerings are not exactly what they want.
- There is difficulty in re-gathering those who have wandered to the fringes of the congregation.
- Many members are disappointed by the lack of broad engagement with teaching/studies and a general lack of desire to engage in personal faith growth.
- A significant concern is the struggle in equipping laypeople for the work of evangelism , and outreach programs not effectively leading to deeper discipleship. Members desire for more groups or Bible study formation to display a desire to learn and grow, wanting to avoid being apathetic or lazy Christians.
- A consistent disappointment is that members walk away from the church, or friendships are broken. Similarly, community projects do not seem to result in increased members.
- There's disappointment that some people are still stuck after years of following Jesus, not living in freedom or victory, despite their traumas and hurts being real.
- Congregations report that preaching can be somewhat flat, lacking clarity and application, leaving members feeling “unfed.”

Intergenerational and Youth Concerns

- A common disappointment is missing the generation of young adults in their 20s and 30s. There is a desire for young adults to invest their faith in fellowship and ministry, but this is often not happening.
- Churches struggle to find the leaders and resources necessary to run successful youth ministries. Lack of a strong youth ministry can draw young people away to other churches.
- Parents struggle with their children having left the church, as youth becoming young adults often do not stay within the church.

Community Connection and Outreach Struggles

- While there is a desire for intentional evangelistic outreach and reaching the community around the church, this hope is often unmet.
- Churches desire to be more intentional about serving in the community and to connect with local schools and businesses to make an impact outside their immediate ministry.
- A particular disappointment is that while congregations may have a great and generous heart for missions, it is often not so locally, meaning people are willing to give money but not their time.
- The power of benevolence has not impacted outreach and witness because congregations are not overly generous with outsiders.
- There is a noted lack of a good culture of testimony or sharing of faith within the church.
- Some members hoped their local church would have been more involved in justice issues and advocating for the marginalized.

Internal Relationships and Unity

- Congregation members report deep frustration and genuine hurt with synod's processes and the pain discussions have led to.
- There is a desire for reconciliation in cases of offense and for the church to be a place of reconciliation rather than division.
- Within small groups, there can be a struggle with even basic vulnerability among members, despite years together.
- Concerns exist that the church may be unified in opinions, views, and politics, but not necessarily unified "in Christ."
- It is a disappointment that many new members find it hard to feel welcome and fully part of the community.

Financial and Facility Limitations

- Congregations express concerns about facility growth/expansion.
- Hopes that church finances would grow in step with church size, and that the church would be funded through giving rather than needing renters, are unmet.
- For Hispanic church planters, there is a struggle to develop financial partnerships with area churches.

- Acquiring their own building has been a long and overdue journey for some congregations.

Spiritual and Programmatic Discontent

- There is a struggle for clarity on a discerned next step for the congregation's future.
- Members hoped for more times where people are challenged to invite Jesus into their lives or re-dedicate their lives to Him.
- The lack of prayer groups is a specific disappointment.
- Some congregations feel their worship services have been too commercialized or “a production,” and wish for less of that.
- Congregations often feel a lack of a real strategic plan for ministry and the future, despite having a vision, mission, and values.
- There is a desire for fewer “consumers” and more “producers” within the church community, along with long-term discipleship strategies and foundational systems.
- The tension with non-Reformed views that new members bring is a disappointment for some.

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 to Jesus, “Lord, in your mercy, stay with us” – in spite of our foolishness and slowness to believe.

Prayer

Oh, Lord, we come before you acknowledging our foolishness and slowness to believe. How often we are slow to walk by faith, not sight, letting our own efforts and grit lead us, rather than relying on your strength. We confess that too many of our assumptions and expectations for the life of your church have been shaped by pride. We foolishly assume that our sin is more powerful to lead us astray than it actually is.

We admit that we are slow to believe that you will raise up those you choose to lead your people, and that you will continue using us to advance your kingdom here on earth. We struggle to believe that your power is perfected through our weakness. Sometimes, we even question if our own hearts can truly be aligned with your heart, given our fallen nature.

Lord, you are in control, and you are always working for your glory and our good, doing a thousand different things while we only see three. you are still working out your plans and building your church even when our human relationships break down. Yet, we are so often slow to believe that you love our people more than we do and that you will provide for them.

We pray, as one of us has expressed, "I believe, help my unbelief." Rebuke us for what we thought we knew, and help us to trust in your perfect timing. Guide us to get out of your way and let you use us as you determine. May we be diligent in simple obedience, with an open hand, knowing that your Spirit is truly powerful and at work in the church.

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:

Intercultural Ministry and Welcoming Diversity

A significant theme emerging from the sources is the active embrace of diversity and the intentional movement towards intercultural ministry. Churches are recognizing and responding to the changing demographics of their communities.

Multilingual Worship and Ministry: Several churches are incorporating multiple languages into their services and programs. One particularly striking example is a combined yearly worship service: "Our combined yearly worship service that is done in English, Korean and Mandarin. We have 3 congregations, and in this combined service, we sing, preach and conduct the service in all 3 languages. Many people say this is their favourite worship service and that it feels and sounds like heaven."

Bilingual Leadership and Programs: The presence of bilingual pastors and the establishment of ESL classes are facilitating connection with non-English speaking communities. "We are starting

to incorporate bilingual elements into our worship services. We have a bilingual pastor. We have started an ESL class. A few Spanish-speaking families are attending!"

Integration of Diverse Communities: Churches are actively working to integrate new cultural and ethnic groups into the life of the congregation. At Calvary, "Our growing diversity... We've had 4-5 Hispanic families attending now for the last 2-3 years. We now frequently have a greeting, a song, Scripture, other closing blessing spoken in Spanish. Hispanic attendees are integrating into the life of the church by attending church school classes, chairing the annual Sunday School Christmas program, serving on a praise team + volunteering for other tasks."

Partnerships with Ethnic Ministries: New partnerships with specific ethnic ministries are expanding reach and fostering collaboration. "A new partnership with a Portuguese ministry. This has led to collaboration in ESL ministries, combined worship services and collegiality." Similarly, hosting an Eritrean Church for a combined Candlelight service demonstrates a desire for deeper inter-church collaboration.

Refugee Sponsorship and Newcomers: Refugee sponsorship programs and new housing developments are contributing to increased ethnic and racial diversity within congregations, leading to broader community engagement. "Our refugee sponsorship program has also added people from diverse backgrounds."

Intentional Community Engagement and Outreach

Churches are demonstrating a strong commitment to serving and connecting with their local communities, often stepping outside traditional church walls.

Addressing Community Needs: Practical acts of service, such as food distribution, providing emergency shelters, and flood relief, are central to community engagement. "We have food distribution handed out in our church once a month. We get to connect and share love." After the 2021 flood, one church "allowed our church to help the community with a donation center, clean up help, funds for restoring, rebuilding... We 'showed up' for our neighbours."

Meeting People Where They Are: Shifting activities to community centers or holding outdoor events (like BBQs) makes the church more accessible and less "scary" for neighbors. "Recognizing that many people struggle w/ entering a church; years ago we held our Neighborhood Table in the community centre. It was also a witness that we were willing to meet the community where they were at."

Collaborative Community Initiatives: Partnerships with other organizations and churches for community good are highlighted. "Over the past several years, Oskaloosa has had a growing ecumenical diaconal ministry called LOVE INC. Our church provides dozens of volunteers and mentors that are assisting hundreds of our neighbors each year."

School as a Ministry Hub: Christian schools are identified as crucial ministries, serving as points of connection and evangelism within the community, with parents and grandparents attending

chapel services. "The ministry of our Christian School -- which is a ministry of our church and in our church."

Creative Outreach Methods: Utilizing church property for a community garden ("Garden of Eatin'") and holding popular community meals (like the Thanksgiving Day service transformed into a meal) are fostering new relationships. "Choosing to change a Thanksgiving Day service into a community Thanksgiving Meal, and finding it to be a popular opportunity to meet people from our community who we might otherwise never have met."

Spiritual Growth and Discipleship

The sources frequently describe transformative spiritual journeys for individuals and congregations, emphasizing intentional discipleship and a renewed focus on core spiritual practices.

Personal Testimonies of Transformation: Numerous accounts detail individuals coming to faith, being baptized, and experiencing profound life changes. Examples include a young woman from a Jehovah's Witness background saying "Yes!" to Jesus and getting baptized with her sons, and a man recovering from drug and alcohol addiction becoming a men's group leader.

Intentional Discipleship and Mentoring: There is a clear emphasis on nurturing faith through small groups, Bible studies, and mentoring relationships. "CrossPoint is growing through evangelism and needs spiritually mature leaders, the elders and deacons have committed to increase their investments in discipleship, mentoring, leading, and small groups."

Youth Engagement and Leadership: Youth are not just attendees but active participants and leaders in various ministries, from music to Bible studies. "2 High school kids are involved in leading praise + worship in the last 6 months." "Youth doing their own ministry. Starting up Bible study. Testimony in services. Regularly answers + gives out Bibles."

Deepening Spiritual Disciplines: Some churches are encouraging deeper engagement with spiritual disciplines, such as prayer and fasting, and observing liturgical seasons like Lent. "Our move to lean into the full Easter season. We have been doing an Ash Wednesday Service, observing Lent and inviting our congregation to engage in more spiritual disciplines in this season."

Prayer as a Central Practice: Prayer is frequently mentioned in connection with miracles, healing, and answered requests, as well as drawing new people to the church. "People are reaching out more + more + asking for prayer. New people are attending church after prayers are answered." Stories of physical healing and spiritual deliverance through prayer are noted.

Leadership Development: The commitment to theological education, commissioning and ordaining pastors, and developing lay leaders (like workplace chaplains and deacons) points to a focus on equipping the church for future ministry. One source reported: "The theological laity, the education of 6 people + commissioning of 3 pastors in the last 3 years, as well the ordination of a prison congregation."

Nurturing Community and Care within the Church

Beyond outreach, the sources underscore the importance of fostering a loving, supportive, and interconnected community within the church itself.

Intergenerational Connection: Initiatives like inviting college students to visit elderly members for Christmas or involving a grandmother in starting a teen club, demonstrate efforts to bridge generational gaps. "This created an opportunity for connection for these students without family in the area. This also forged friendships which have lasted over the years (+ continues now!)."

Care for the Vulnerable: Churches are actively supporting those in need, including the homeless, pregnant mothers, and families with behavioral issues. "One family took in a single, pregnant mother into their house until she was able to be financially stable. The parsonage is currently being used to house a homeless family."

Authentic Fellowship: The desire for deeper connection is evident in people coming earlier to church to socialize and in the formation of small groups that foster vulnerability and support. "After 6 months, one of the women, who has attended church her whole life, shared that she had never felt this connected in a church community."

Responsive and Adaptable Care: The continuation of newsletters and services to housebound seniors during COVID-19 highlights a commitment to ongoing pastoral care, deepening existing connections.

Generosity within the Congregation: The church's financial health and its members' willingness to give generously for both internal needs and external community causes is a recurring theme. "Generosity. The church has always been faithful and generous in the area of finances. Each year the budget is met and at times has a surplus."

Resilience and Mutual Support: The accounts of churches rallying around members facing illness, loss, or hardship (e.g., cancer diagnosis, injury, death of a spouse, infertility) underscore a strong sense of family and practical support. "The church becomes family for those in need."

Strategic Planning and Adaptability

Several entries reveal churches engaging in thoughtful self-assessment and strategic shifts to enhance their ministry and impact.

Vision-Driven Leadership: Leaders are actively seeking God's will and embracing new roles to guide the church forward. "I got asked to lead our vision team, so I accepted... when before I would have said I was too busy. Instead, it was an answer to prayer."

Learning and Renewal: The "Renewal Lab" is mentioned as a catalyst for discerning future directions and seeing positive results in attracting new visitors. "Started the Renewal Lab to discern our future moving forward and over the past 2 months have seen a number of people visiting + sticking with us."

Adapting to Change: The decision to focus on relational ministry through "Life Groups" during COVID-19 instead of traditional programs, demonstrates adaptability and a willingness to try new approaches.

Impact of Pastoral Leadership: The positive influence of new pastors, associate pastors, and one pastor's focus on children's ministry are highlighted as contributing to church vitality and cultural shifts.

Networking and Collaboration: Churches are actively networking and collaborating with other congregations and non-profits to address changing demographics and share resources. "Walking hand in hand, networking < honesty for organic understanding with other churches + non-profit to dialogue @ changing demographics + sharing stories + resources to network + succeed."

Evidences of God's Work and Divine Intervention

Throughout the narratives, there is a strong sense of God's active presence, intervention, and guidance in the life of the church.

Miraculous Healing and Provision: Specific instances of healing (e.g., from an evil spirit, cancer, substance abuse, brain injury) and financial provision (e.g., for a new bus, church building improvements, nursery renovation) are attributed directly to God's work. "God is healing sick people through prayers."

Unexpected Growth and Blessing: Churches are experiencing growth in attendance and new members, often in ways that surprise or exceed expectations, leading to expressions of gratitude and praise. "Our Senior Pastor had a vision... Easter of 2024, he saw that come to pass with 1003 individuals in attendance... Easter 2025 we welcomed 1500 to our two services. Praise be to God!"

Divine Appointments and Connections: Stories of individuals "moving right next door" to a church after prayer, or a non-Christian business associate suggesting a pastoral path, are seen as evidence of God's orchestration.

Guidance of the Holy Spirit: People are described as "responding to the guidance of the Holy Spirit," and leaders "seek God's will for his church together," indicating a reliance on divine direction.

Faithfulness Amidst Challenges: Even in difficult circumstances, such as a pastor battling cancer or a new member losing his wife, the enduring faith and trust in God's plan are highlighted.

"Ripple Effect" of Transformation: The idea that one person's conversion or growth in faith can profoundly impact their families and communities is a powerful testament to God's expanding work. "The ripple effect of people coming to Jesus. 'Come + see the man who...'"

In conclusion, these narratives paint a picture of vibrant, dynamic faith communities that are deeply rooted in their theological convictions while remaining outward-focused, adaptable, and responsive to the needs of both their members and their wider communities. The consistent thread throughout is the belief in God's ongoing work, leading to transformation, growth, and renewed purpose.

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 and the Next Generation:

God is actively providing responsive leaders who are answering His call, raising up a new generation of leaders from within the church, and raising leaders from a variety of generations. He is also specifically discipling the next generation, providing leadership for ministry on the margins, and drawing the next generation to Himself and equipping them for leadership. This includes nurturing faith and leadership in young adults, engaging and equipping youth, and shaping and empowering youth to engage in ministry in His name. God is also leading and using youth to further His Kingdom and equipping the church to fulfill its mission through the gifts of the Spirit.

Building Community and Fostering Relationships:

God is building relationships through shared service and people's desire to get to know one another. He is making and growing disciples where "more than one are gathered" in prayer, service, and education, and using relationships to lead people to new steps of faith. God is still building community, blessing neighbors in need through the merciful ministry of His church, and drawing people home to His church in ordinary ways such as through food, community, fellowship, and friendship. He is pushing and inviting churches toward creative community engagement by connecting people's passions to their calling.. God is also using the church's culture to help His people make friends and bring generations together for mutual ministering. Furthermore, He is building bridges between His people and communities through hospitality and service for mutual blessing, and using His people to nurture and grow others to become more Christ-like.

Transforming Lives and Growing the Church:

God is transforming lives, including bringing many adults to genuine faith and baptism via brokenness and life crises. He is allowing the church the privilege of being witnesses to and

participants in new life in Christ. God is also transforming the lives of individuals by providing healing from addiction, substance use, and emotional trauma. He is growing the church deeper and wider in a variety of surprising ways. God is working through the Holy Spirit to bring conversion, stirring up youth in new and powerful ways, and meeting the spiritual hunger of young people with solid teaching and applicable lessons from willing teachers. He is still encouraging and equipping individual believers to reach out to people and enabling them to see the Holy Spirit bring life and hope.

Answering Prayers and Providing for Needs:

God is always answering prayers, often in surprising ways, and is hearing and answering prayers. He is using His church to move in miraculous ways through answered prayers. God is answering prayers for healing, wholeness, leadership, and other needs. He is specifically answering prayers for healing—spiritual, physical, and mental. . He is calling the church to pray and working through those prayers. God is also providing for the needs of His church, working in the hearts of His people to provide emotionally, physically, and spiritually for those inside and outside the church, and opening eyes to His faithful provision. He is also present and sustaining the church, even in the face of loss and tragedy, and is faithful in life and death. God's power is acting through believers to meet their neighbors and their needs.

Using Ordinary People and Everyday Life for His Purposes:

God is using everyday and ordinary people for kingdom purposes and using ordinary life to exhibit His faithfulness and form His people. He is using the small, gradual steps of His people's obedience to carry out His Kingdom purposes. He is making His glory known in unexpected ways and through unexpected people. God is also using the gifts and talents He gave His people and even using the "goofy culture" of the church to help His people make friends.

Revealing Himself and Engaging People from All Backgrounds:

God is revealing Himself as He draws all peoples together, peoples whom He knows, sees, and loves. He is drawing His people to Himself from all nations, tribes, and even religions. God is still opening eyes and hearts through scripture.

Expanding the Church's Reach and Impact:

God is expanding the church's reach into the world through partnerships in ministry. He is still using His church to impact people's lives for His glory and their good.

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:

God's Sovereignty and Active Presence

A central and pervasive theme is the unwavering belief in God's active, sovereign, and continuous work in individuals, local churches, and the broader CRC denomination. Participants were repeatedly reminded that God is in control and actively engaged.

- *God is Always at Work:* Many affirmed, "God is ABSOLUTELY at work in our churches and He is inviting us to join Him in His work..." and "[Gather] Reminded me that he is at work everywhere all the time doing what he wills." The belief that "God is still at work in His Church" and "He is working in our churches, community, and denomination" is foundational.
- *Trusting God's Timing and Plan:* There's an emphasis on surrendering to God's timing and trusting His plan: "God told me through Gather that everything/everybody is in its journey according to God's timing, at their own pace. Show respect with hope. See blessings. Surrender to God!" and "[God] Reminded me to trust His timing... it's His, not mine. He's got this."
- *God's Creative and Sustaining Power:* God is seen as "birthing the next season of the CRC," demonstrating "His creativity, love & care," and "dynamically working in & through us despite our brokenness to bring about His Kingdom." Furthermore, "He has not failed the CRC, in fact he is just as powerful of a God [as] when it began, and he is sustaining it through today and tomorrow."
- *God Working Through Broken Vessels:* A humbling insight shared was, "God can use even a broken vessel like me for His Glory."
- *Jesus at the Center:* Several responses highlight the importance of Jesus as the core of faith and church life: "[At Gather, Jesus] Reminded me that All Scripture is about Him " and "Reminded me to put Jesus at the center of all things. We are HIS church."

The Nature and Future of the CRC

The following excerpts reveal a hopeful, yet evolving, understanding of the CRC, embracing diversity and a re-imagination of its identity.

- *A Multicultural and Diverse Future:* "[Through Gather, God] Revealed that he is birthing the next season of the CRC. It is a multi-cultural and diverse community that is reimagining what it means to be 'reformed' in the current culture." This suggests an openness to new forms of church life.

- *Renewed Hope for the Denomination:* Many expressed a "Renewed sense of hope for the Christian Reformed Church" and "[Gather] instilled in me a sense of community for the CRC in North America, and provided a sense of hope for the future of the CRC."
- *Validity and Essential Role of the Denomination:* The event "Reconfirmed that the denomination as a whole is a valid, essential, and life-giving expression of the Church -- by the power of the Holy Spirit."
- *Broader Perspective and Appreciation:* Participants gained "a much wider perspective of what's happening in His church" and "a broader look at the CRC through the people attending." There was also an appreciation for "how churches all over the denomination are creatively reaching their communities."
- *Moving Beyond Deficits:* A significant shift in mindset was noted: "[Gather] Moved the needle of my mindset to be less about the liabilities and deficits in my church and denomination and more about seeing where God is moving and acting in my church and the CRC. I leave encouraged and hopeful and even optimistic."

The Importance of Fellowship and Community

A powerful theme is the profound impact of relational connection, both within the CRC and the broader body of Christ.

- *Sense of Unity and Belonging:* Participants "Allowed me to meet other brothers and sisters from all over the CRC," "Made me feel united to... interested in... and encouraged by my brother and sisters at Table #3," and "Broadened and deepened relationships with my CRC family." The phrase "Met my spiritual family" succinctly captures this sentiment.
- *Churches Not Alone:* A recurring reassurance was that Gather "Reminded me that my congregation is not alone" and "Reminded me our church is not alone." The realization that there is "a huge community to draw on that somehow maintains a tight interconnectedness" brought comfort.
- *Encouragement Through Shared Stories:* Statements like, "[Gather] Is encouraging us through the stories and experiences of others, both personally and professionally" and "[Gather] Empowered me with God's influence through stories and discussions" highlight the power of shared testimonies.
- *Seeing the "Bigger Picture" of the Church:* The experience helped participants "to see what he was doing among his church," "see a bigger picture," and appreciate "His greater church...a great picture of the big church of Christ at work."
- *Intentional Relationship Building:* The event provided "meaningful discussions about joys, laments, and hopes for the Church and for advancing the gospel in the communities. I have made connections with others across North America but also met some folks across Ontario in ministry. Making and building relationships improves my sense of belonging in the CRC."

Personal and Ministry Implications

The experience had tangible impacts on individual faith, ministry outlook, and future actions.

- *Challenged to Active Participation:* Participants were "challenged to become a more active participant in His work" and "challenged and encouraged by discussion on new

ways to make an impact in my community and church. I will be more intentional in seeking God's direction going forward."

- *Renewed Vision and Direction:* Some received "a vision and direction" for their ministry.
- *Focus on Service and Obedience:* There was a strong reminder that "[so]much of serving him is in the form of serving others" and that "it is about the daily obedience and blessing of: Enjoying Jesus, Trusting and Obeying, using our gifts for His glory and the blessing of others, being faithful in the mundane, loving others well, showing up, praying scripture, and watching God do miracles."
- *Emphasis on Scripture:* Gather "Reminded me that All Scripture is about Him (Jesus). That I need to study and know scripture better."
- *Personal Reflection and Growth:* The event facilitated "time to reflect on the amazing things He is doing in our church and classis," and "multiple opportunities to examine my heart and motives in ministry."
- *Rest and Refreshment:* For many, the experience was a "respite in a busy season," providing "rest, refreshment."
- *Boldness in Evangelism:* One participant was "encouraged/challenged to boldly share the good news of salvation with those who need to hear."

Key Facts/Insights

The event facilitated connections across the CRCNA, including meeting "Navajo brothers & sisters." The study and discussion of Luke 24 led to a "deeper understanding." The experience provided a cross-section of God's work across CRC ministries in the US and Canada. The term "Christ-centered relationship" was used to describe the nature of the connections made.