



Gather Niagara | 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 Niagara was held on Monday to Wednesday, November 18-20, 2024 at the Fallsview Embassy Suites overlooking the Niagara Falls.

Fifty-four (54) participants from classes Niagara, Quinte, Heartland, Muskegon, and Kalamazoo 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.

Congregation members have expressed a range of significant disappointments, struggles, and unmet hopes. These primary concerns can be broadly categorized into challenges related to growth and engagement, internal dynamics and leadership, community connection and outreach, spiritual depth and discipleship, and financial stability.

Through the facilitated process, participants shared the following disappointments:

Struggles with Growth and Engagement:

Lack of growth, especially among younger generations: There is disappointment over the loss of young families and children, with only two children often present in the congregation. Efforts to grow a youth program have not been successful. There are very few young adults and a

noticeable gap in generations, with college-aged students not attending events or services as hoped. The church's friendly presence has not attracted many younger families to regular involvement.

Low member retention and volunteer commitment: Some new members are "all in" initially but then leave. There's a lack of sustained commitment to outreach efforts. Many members are resistant to volunteering their time or stepping up to fill ministry needs. This also applies to participation in corporate prayer.

Unmet hopes for personal transformation: There was a hope for more stories of freedom from addiction, healing from trauma and mental health concerns, and fewer stories of overdose and suicide.

Internal Dynamics and Leadership Challenges:

Leadership and unity issues: Disappointment exists regarding a lack of biblical and confessional unity and literacy. Some hoped that focusing on Jesus would prevent conflict, but this has not been the case, and there are unresolved tensions over human sexuality discussions. There is a lack of high-trust environments, particularly between leaders and others.

Resistance to change and spiritual growth: There is a perceived hesitancy for many to "go deeper" beyond cultural Christianity to a more radical faith walk. Members are seen as resistant to changing, adjusting, or growing, often adhering to traditions because "we've always done it that way," which is seen as potentially inhibiting the work of the Holy Spirit. There's a disappointment that long-time believers are "stuck" or "restuck" in their spiritual growth.

Lack of spiritual depth in governance: Council meetings and office bearers are perceived as having a greater desire for business matters rather than spiritual matters.

Community Connection and Outreach:

Limited community engagement: The neighborhood around the church has not been effectively reached. Despite new homes springing up, there's little intentional effort to welcome new residents or make them aware of the church's presence. The congregation has not fully engaged in community outreach or relational evangelism.

Inward focus: The church is seen as still operating with an "attractional mindset," expecting people to come to them. There's a struggle to achieve a cultural shift from an inward to an outward focus.

Diversity challenges: The community is not as diverse as the surrounding neighborhood, and the church is described as "Too Vanilla" or "Too CRC" (referring to a lack of diversity). There is a noted struggle with capacity to truly welcome strangers, especially if it requires the church to change.

Discipleship and Spiritual Depth:

Discipleship challenges: Discipleship has been challenging to gain momentum, and the church admits it does not disciple well. There are no organized small groups or Bible studies, and prayer ministry has not grown as hoped.

Engagement in worship: There is a lack of full participation in worship. Worship is not as vibrant as some would like, and there is a lack of leadership in this area.

Faith commitment: Families are often not committing to their children's faith in the same way they commit to sports and other extracurricular activities.

Financial and Operational Strain:

Financial struggles: Ministry partnerships were terminated sooner than expected, and churches struggle to be self-supporting. Financial constraints limit churches' ability to fulfill their mission goals. Financial support is often stagnant.

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 humbly come before you, confessing our profound foolishness. We have often believed in our hearts that our own work, abilities, and efforts are what advance your Church and Kingdom, instead of recognizing that you alone own the church, its design, purpose, and material, all for your glory. Forgive us for our arrogance and pride, for thinking that we need to be the center or catalyst for what brings about the congregation's growth, health, or Kingdom impact. We confess our tendency to build for our own glory or reputation, forgetting that it is the Spirit that saves and attracts, and apart from Christ, we can do nothing.

Lord, we admit our slowness to believe. We have been slow to believe that Jesus truly brings freedom to the oppressed and good news to the poor, and that the Christian life includes suffering and even exile. We foolishly thought that if you were rejected and insulted, we would not suffer the same. We have been slow to believe that you are able to bring success regardless of our unbelief, even when there is so much opposition and no seeming way forward, and that you can work through difficult people and challenges despite our unbelief.

Forgive us for our spiritual blindness, for our tendency to measure success in earthly terms like numbers, rather than by your heavenly terms. We have been slow to accept that low numbers do not necessarily mean low impact in ministry. We confess that our plans are not necessarily your plans, and our goals may be used by you for other purposes than we had in mind. We struggle to believe that you are at work in the world and in our lives when it appears on the surface that you are not.

Help our unbelief, O God. Grant us your wisdom, for you have said that the sooner we accept our foolishness, the sooner you can give us your wisdom. Strengthen us to fully depend on you, knowing that your work does not depend on us or our actions. Remind us always that you are sovereign over all things, always working for our good and your glory to make us more like Christ, and that your ways are higher than our ways. May we trust your perfect timing and recognize that you are always there, working by your Spirit.

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:

Spiritual Transformation and Growth

A central theme across the narratives is individual and corporate spiritual growth, often spurred by direct experiences with God, faithful teaching, and the embracing of Christian community.

Conversions and Baptisms: Numerous accounts celebrate individuals coming to faith, often after significant personal struggles or a long period of seeking. This includes:

- A woman with a Buddhist background who started praying in the sanctuary and "decided to commit her life to Christ," learning the gospel through songs.
- Three adults from diverse backgrounds (Africa, Cuba, English) being baptized on a Sunday morning.
- A mother and daughter praying the "believer's prayer" over the phone.
- An Alpha participant, initially identifying as polyamorous, polytheist, or Chinese atheist, repenting and pursuing Jesus. One such individual stated, "I always knew there is a God, now I know his name is Jesus."
- An incarcerated person accepting Christ after a sermon, with a radical transformation in "character and behaviour."
- A woman, initially deemed "so far gone/broken to be redeemed by Jesus," being baptized.
- An 83-year-old woman making a profession of faith after two years of prayer and invitation.
- Two women in their 80s, who only attended church as children, were recently baptized.
- A young woman, raised "anti-religion," attending church for the first time and being baptized eight weeks later.
- A man freed from alcoholism after coming to faith through Alpha.
- A young woman giving her life to Jesus at a conference and preparing for baptism.

Deepening Faith and Discipleship: Beyond initial conversion, many accounts speak to a deepening of faith and ongoing discipleship within the congregation.

- "Hearing the Word of God on Sunday and having people affected by it in daily living and growing in connectedness with God. (It's not about the preacher, it's the word transforming lives)."
- Individuals who have been "mentored + disciplined now mentoring others."
- Increased "Bible study increasing" and "Christian disciplines" being embraced.
- A long-term member's spouse, initially hesitant, now regularly attending church and finding it "way more welcoming and loving now" after Alpha.
- A friend in Bible Study, initially lacking "Bible literacy," now "understanding so much more."
- "New meaningful connections with God" being found by long-time members through faith formation initiatives.

Restoration and Healing: God's work is also evident in restoring broken relationships and healing individuals.

- A "broken couple" found "healing + forgiveness" through the church's hospitality, with the husband coming to faith.
- Intensive counseling led to God restoring intimacy in "around 7 marriages."
- A deacon and his wife sharing the gospel and offering a home to a veteran on suicide watch, leading the veteran to ask "lots of Questions about the Father, heart of God."

Youth Engagement and Leadership Development

A striking and recurring theme is the vibrant involvement and leadership of young people, indicating a healthy future for the congregation.

Youth Leading Ministries: Young people are actively serving in critical roles.

- "Young people asking if they can serve."
- Youth "love leading Sunday school classes."
- The head cadet leader is 22 years old and the "cadet group THRIVES."
- "IT volunteers are all under 30 years old --> many in their teens."
- High school youth are "involved in leading worship TECH, singing, instruments."
- "Some younger children excited to be on praise teams are warmly welcomed even though they aren't perfect."
- "Young men & women stepping up to serve the church with enthusiasm & fresh perspective."
- "Using children and young adults as worship leaders - families impacted and participating on a deeper level. 'and a Little child will lead them.'"

Youth-Initiated Growth: Young people are actively seeking spiritual growth and fostering community among their peers.

- The youth have "requested to have Bible Study Sundays along w/ youth group."
- "Numeric & spiritual growth among youth in our community. From as little as 3 youth in our group some weeks to a peak of 50. Youth giving their lives to Christ, being freed from sin, growing in faith."
- "Students becoming leaders; with hearts fully after God and encouraging others on their path with God."

Intentional Mentorship and Encouragement: The congregation is actively fostering this youth involvement.

- "The invitation to let 'young eagles fly.' Opening and encouraging new and younger members into leadership roles."
- "Overwhelming support of Christian education and discipleship for young people."
- "Engage youth participation on praise team (intentional times making space for them to practice & participate)."
- A grandmother discipling her college-age granddaughter to make profession of faith.

Community Outreach and Service

The congregation demonstrates a strong commitment to serving its local community, meeting tangible needs, and inviting others into the church family.

Addressing Tangible Needs: The church actively provides practical assistance to the community.

- "Gathering city leaders in our congregation... have made our community a place that meets people's needs and cares for the disadvantaged among us."
- "Kid's Hope ministry" for mentoring.

- Partnering with local community organizations to "multiply the reach and impact of benevolence and better serve the poor."
- The "Hope Repair Help Program" where church volunteers fix homes for community members.
- "Unity Meal and Food Bank" where volunteers become friends and experience the joy of helping others. "seeing the happy face of children that now have food to eat."
- "Soup for the Soul" (Dinner Church model) has grown from 8 to 40+ food-insecure people.

Providing for members: "God uses our financial resources" to support ministries, church plants, and building maintenance.

- "Manna Monday - Bi-monthly free supper before GEMS, Cadets, men's and women's Bible Studies."
- A summer camp "leaned in to accept students w/ disabilities who were not accepted elsewhere."
- "A constant weekly provision of food and resources to run the Foodbank at our church. Abundance coming through community partnership with schools, grocery stores, and local businesses."
- A rapid response to a domestic violence situation: "On Saturday, we installed a door for a woman whose husband had thrown her against their door and broke the frame. Sunday, she watched us online and 'checked-in.'"

Intentional Welcome and Integration: Newcomers, especially those from diverse backgrounds or in difficult circumstances, are actively welcomed.

- "New families coming every week."
- "Welcoming the poor, the needy, new immigrants, and international students. Developing relationships, giving time, and meeting tangible needs. Enfolding people into the worshiping community. Offering pastoral care."
- "Sending strangers and foreigners to our church and seeing them welcomed and cared for by church members."
- "My friend shared an amazing, heartfelt testimony and connected with a ton of CRC folks who he didn't know at all before that."
- "Welcoming a grieving widow who needed time & space to heal & be loved."
- "Neighborhood kids who wanted to see inside the church... after they were shown such hospitality, many started to come to church."
- A family attended a "free fun fair" and 6 months later, the mom was baptized.

Community Events and Partnerships: The church actively participates in and hosts community events.

- "Week-long sports camp in the summer" for 35-40 students.
- "Monthly prayer walks, block parties, celebrate birthdays."
- "Handing out candy & flyers recently at our county fair."
- "Dinner Church - a community dinner every other Friday where people from community cook together, eat together, and hear a Jesus story."
- "Second Sunday Social" for community building.
- "Trunk or Treat" events attracting "hundreds of kids and families."

- Partnerships with "multiple partner congregations, not because we sought them, but by HIS hand alone."
- "The local ministerial [team] and my church supporting 100% my role in the National Day of Prayer."
- "Growing our Farmer's Market thus expanding our outreach."
- "Helping our church discover the greatest needs in our community and giving us the gifts and resources to show the light of Jesus to these people."

Empowering Lay Leadership and Gifts

There's a strong emphasis on empowering members to utilize their spiritual gifts and assume leadership responsibilities, leading to a vibrant and volunteer-driven ministry.

Widespread Volunteerism: A deep pool of willing volunteers is a significant blessing.

- "Praise the Lord! Young people asking if they can serve."
- "The passion and desire for volunteers to volunteer. We have a waiting list of those who want to help with Food Bank, Community Meal."
- "The vast majority of our congregation stepping up to serve in ministry according to their gifts and abilities."
- "Capacity of members to volunteer in church ministries."
- "Encouragement of members to use their gifts and many enter leadership roles."

Developing New Leaders: The congregation is intentionally cultivating new leadership.

- "A couple in their early 30s leaning into leadership within the church. They have started monthly prayer and the wife has been using her talent with children to teach the Sunday School."
- "New leaders from [...]. Level Alpha. Bible Study. Social media. Luke 10:2."
- "A revitalized council that works hard at their duties, works together as a team all with the same goals."
- "God has connected our church with multiple partner congregations, not because we sought them, but by HIS hand alone."
- An elder "led to lead the children's Christmas program."

Gift-Based Ministry: Individuals are using their unique talents for the benefit of the church and community.

- "Young people are passionate to use their Gifts for the Lord."
- "Enhanced worship experience through the many different talents/gifts of those people that are on the Praise/Worship Team, resulting in higher level of Praise/Worship to God - by congregation."
- "A small church filled with gifted and willing lay leaders and musicians."
- "My own personal growth... Using gifts, as have others, to build God's church and community."

God's Provision and Intervention

Many accounts explicitly attribute positive developments to God's direct provision, answering prayer, and guiding the congregation.

Answers to Prayer: Prayer is consistently highlighted as a catalyst for God's action.

- "Prayed for 2-3 years for God to grow our worship team and He supplied with abundance!"
- "The men's prayer group has been such a huge blessing and many answered prayers. The Lord is moving in an amazing way."
- "Revived interest in prayer and seeing answers within the life and core of the congregation."
- "We experience answers to prayer when a need is filled after congregational prayer has occurred over several weeks - prayer to fill a volunteer role needed in children's ministry."
- "City-wide prayer for the homeless. Within a month, the city council approves another shelter, approves tiny homes housing downtown, addiction centers comes to town."
- A pastor prayed for more children, and now "we have 3 rooms dedicated to that ministry and sometimes that is not enough."
- A church received a \$5000 check for a lawnmower fund, "in answer to prayer."

Divine Guidance and Timing: God's hand is seen in guiding decisions and providing resources at crucial moments.

- "God has led an average of 35-40 students in Gr. 3-8 to our week-long sports camp."
- "The coming of persons to fill the works after key members passed. Media + worship."
- "When our minister first came, he started profession of faith classes. The first year he had 4 different classes and had more new members than in the previous 5 years. We've really seen growth in the last 2 years."
- "Dunamis. Movement of God's Spirit."
- "Through a series of events, God opened doors to begin a ministry to single parents."
- "Providing us a building for our church through the generosity of the owner - the remedial expense from the generosity of members."
- "The operation of our Food Bank, Over and over again we have been blessed by generous donations - always just in time of a great need."

Transformation of Environment and Relationships: God's work extends to transforming the local community and fostering unexpected connections.

- The community transformed "from one of high crime, violence, and low housing values. To where crime is down, violence rare, and housing values have increased 5 to 7 times."
- "Mr. M and Mr. D did not trust/like each other... Mr. M was not a professing believer but Mr. D was. Now, Mr. M needed surgery and Mr. D accompanied him... they now share a pew at church. 'I want what you have!'"
- "Praying for someone's family (over their house...). Years later, neighbours of theirs connected the dots, Jesus came to church, bringing friends."
- The chief of police, not a churchgoer, called the church to ask them to "enfold a new officer into our church" because he believed it would be good for the family.

Worship and Experiential Faith

Worship is not just a ritual but a dynamic, joyful, and transforming experience for the congregation, especially involving young people.

Joyful and Participatory Worship: Worship is characterized by enthusiasm and active involvement.

- "When you experience by having the children blurt out their thoughts during worship and you watch their body language showing joy during worship."
- "Singing - full body, swelling, heart full."
- "Participatory Worship: most of our High School youth are involved in leading worship TECH, singing, instruments. Some younger children excited to be on praise teams are warmly welcomed."
- "Enthusiastic worship: especially Y. P. involvement."
- "Intergenerational worship participation. Engage youth participation on praise team."

Authentic Expression: Individuals feel safe and encouraged to be themselves in worship.

- Children are "joyous, confident and bold. They will volunteer in front of the entire congregation and perform alone... They aren't afraid to mess up - when one little girl was baptized she happily shared she was so happy to be back washed."

Intentionality and Vision

The congregation actively seeks God's will and intentionally plans for growth and impact, often through a "core group that is committed to one another and the vision of the ministry."

Strategic Planning and Repentance: The church is engaged in self-reflection and forward-thinking.

- "We spent a day as a council in repentance and prayer as we looked through our history of our church. A healing occurred within our members and God began to bring people to us."
- "Excellent participation by the congregation in various workshops for strategic [...] planning. Prayer was at the forefront."

Embracing Challenges and Transitions: The church demonstrates resilience and adaptability, particularly in welcoming a new pastor.

- "A new (to us) pastor who brings joy, hope, and energy to an aging congregation."
- "Helping us reclaim how to worship during a transition in our worship department."
- "While not without its tensions the older and declining congregation is providing worship and ministry space to an independent church that fills the sanctuary to overflowing."

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.

Based on the transcribed cards, the CRC believes God is actively working in a multitude of interconnected ways, focusing on generations, worship, outreach, discipleship, and divine provision.

Here are some of the key ways God is believed to be working within the CRC:

Calling, Equipping, and Raising Up New Generations of Leaders:

God is faithful in calling children and youth to Himself and is empowering and equipping a generation of covenant young people. He is discipling these young people in service, faith, and leadership. There is a belief that God is raising up leaders for every generation and specifically raising up a generation of gifted and talented young leaders who are strong in faith and evangelism. God is also described as calling and equipping a new and next generation to use their gifts to lead His church, raising up new leaders from surprising sources, and raising up a younger generation to lead His church. This includes working through generation to generation mentorship.

Renewing and Inspiring Worship:

God is stirring His people in corporate worship that is centered on God's word, communicates the gospel, and bears witness to the fullness of life in Christ. He is renewing worship through the involvement of children and youth in leading worship. God is also strengthening His people through worship, transforming generations through hearing His word, and bringing excitement to participate in worship in diverse ways. This involves inspiring multi-generational, engaging, authentic worship.

Leading in Discipleship and Spiritual Growth:

God is teaching His people "the Jesus way" and is making disciples who are making disciples. He is leading people through His Word to personally accept Christ as Saviour and to grow in faith. God is also challenging people of all ages to discover new gifts and serve in new ways.

Calling to and Empowering for Community Engagement and Outreach:

God is calling His people to reach out into communities beyond their comfort zones to touch lives. He is using individuals to notice and care more for those outside the church walls and empowering His people to respond in contextually appropriate ways to organic opportunities that arise. The belief is that God is doing extraordinary things through ordinary means and using the "ordinary to do HIS extraordinary." God is sending the church to be the church and love their/our neighbors, changing His people and helping them embrace this. He is bringing people to faith through holistic community engagement and encouraging His people to love their neighbor by filling needs within the community and engaging people of all ages, ultimately drawing His people out into their community.

Providing, Answering Prayer, and Demonstrating His Sovereignty:

God is opening unexpected doors and bringing people to faith through His churches. He is showing up in the community through His people and responding to prayers for revival. God is actively providing many ways to meet needs, whether physical, spiritual, or through new programming. He is providing motivation through the consistent preaching of Christ, leading His people to witness God's provision in mundane and surprising ways. God is surprising His people and eagerly answering Kingdom Prayers. He is aligning the hearts of His people to seek His Kingdom and glory through prayer and responding to the prayers of His people, renewing their faith in His ability and power. God is also renewing His people through prayer, answering prayer to show His power to do the impossible, and to help unbelief by increasing faith. Finally, God is transforming lives through the Gospel in spite of expectations and demonstrating that the church still belongs to Him.

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 Omnipresence and Active Engagement:

- God is constantly working, both visibly and behind the scenes: "Reminder/confirmation that God is at work behind the scenes as well as visibly. God is working through us + our churches and/or despite us."
- God's activity extends beyond individual congregations: "Showed me all of the wonderful things He is doing in other CRC churches in the U.S. and Canada." and "God is on the move everywhere."
- Ordinary people are instruments of extraordinary work: "God is using the ordinary to do extraordinary." and "God is blessing the CRC in powerful ways through ordinary people."
- God's faithfulness is a consistent thread: "Reminder of God's faithfulness and seeing how God is moving in similar ways throughout His church." and "Has shown [me] his faithfulness to His people + churches."

Renewal and Transformation within the CRC:

- A call for "Semper Reformanda" (Always Reforming): The text highlights a desire for the CRC to evolve and become more aligned with its core purpose: "Revealed that the CRC needs more Semper Reformanda."
- A vision of the Church as a vibrant, welcoming community: "Gave me a hope that the CRC might move more toward the Church it is meant to be - a place of fellowship, imagination, encouragement; a place to experience God at work and to give testimony."

- Individual and communal transformation: "Began a work in me - giving me a new heart and a new spirit within me." and "God is still moving in our midst, bringing people to the Lord, transforming lives, bringing healing into people's lives."
- Renewed hope for the CRC's future: "Renewed Hope for the Church." and "Renewed my hope for the CRC, and reminded me that God is faithfully at work."

The Power of Fellowship, Community, and Shared Stories:

- Deep appreciation for fellowship and connection: "Sweet fellowship" and "I was blessed by the fellowship and conversations with Christ followers from many areas."
- Learning and encouragement through shared experiences: "Helped remove the narrow blinders which have been restricting my vision & ability to understand Gather! ... by listening to the stories of others at our table." and "Encouraged and renewed my heart by hearing stories of unmet expectations... and then hearing how God is moving and working across the different communities."
- Unity in diversity: "Confirmed that God is indeed doing a new thing! In the midst of diversity there is unity in the Spirit. We have much we can learn from one another."
- The importance of seeing the broader community: "Showed His community is bigger than our small village." and "I felt the love for the church. Great news about diversity within congregations."

Challenges and Areas for Growth:

- Skepticism as a barrier to God's work: "Has opened my eyes to my skepticism and the skepticism of others around me. Too often we seek to define the ways God may work."
- Internal struggles within the CRC: "I was inspired by what God is doing + how many people were being transformed but at the same time warned that the Church (CRC) which is the vehicle for much of what we heard is being pulled apart." and "Sometimes negative things in our churches and denominations overshadow the good."
- Need for improved leadership and inclusion: "Spoke to me on what we need to do better or change at our Church. Get more people involved and make them feel like part of the Church or even more welcome. Also to take a look at current leadership and how we can improve on that."
- Concerns about disaffiliation: "At the same time, I am struck by who is NOT here - churches facing disaffiliation or discipline. Do we miss them? Will we miss them?"

Emphasis on Core Christian Practices:

- The centrality of prayer: "How important prayer and youth were in most people's churches. Without active prayer + youth your church will not prosper." and "Prayer is being practiced by those who seek Him."
- Outreach and connection: "Instilled within me the desire to continue following the path of Outreach --> to continue to connect with other people in Christ-like fashion and showcase the love of Jesus."
- Youth engagement: Highlighted alongside prayer as crucial for church prosperity.
- Serving others: "The importance of prayer and serving others emerged as a key part of our discussions."
- Anchoring in Scripture and Christ: "Brought me to his Word, centered on Christ, to show me it corrects expectations, transforms lives, and changes the World." and "regular,

faithful proclamation of that basic truth that 'Jesus loves us' that we hear each week in the church."

Personal Transformation and Empowerment:

- Renewed personal vision and purpose: "Has refreshed me and led me to embrace the changes He is bringing in my life." and "HE is calling me to devote myself fully to work for Him. He has made me stronger in my belief."
- Trust in the Holy Spirit: "I just need to continue to listen to the Spirit." and "Challenged expectations, encouraged deeper trust in the work of the Spirit."
- Empowerment for ministry: "Is empowering + equipping the next generation." and "Opened my eyes to the organic opportunities for outreach and discipleship... It's time to stop over-programming everything and to equip each other to be the church."

Most Important Ideas/Facts:

God's undeniable and diverse activity is the primary source of hope for the CRC. This conviction underpins nearly every positive sentiment expressed.

- The CRC is undergoing a process of renewal ("Semper Reformanda") that is both challenging and hopeful. There's a strong desire for the church to become more aligned with its spiritual purpose and to address internal issues.
- Community, fellowship, and shared stories are vital for encouragement, learning, and fostering unity within the denomination.
- Core Christian practices like prayer, outreach, and youth engagement are recognized as essential for the health and prosperity of local congregations.
- There is a strong sense of personal spiritual growth and empowerment experienced by individuals, leading them to deeper trust in God and a renewed commitment to His work.
- Despite acknowledged internal struggles and challenges (e.g., skepticism, divisions, leadership issues), there is an overwhelming sense of optimism that God's work will prevail and bring renewal.

In conclusion, these testimonies paint a picture of a denomination grappling with challenges but overwhelmingly encouraged by the palpable presence and transformative work of God among its diverse congregations and members. The emphasis is on active faith, communal support, and a forward-looking hope for the CRC's future.