



## Gather Orlando| 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 Orlando was held Monday to Wednesday, January 13-15, 2025 at the Marriott Orlando Airport Lakeside.

Seventy-three (73) participants from Classes Southeast US, Ontario SW, Grand Rapids East, Red Mesa, and Chicago South came together to discern and celebrate how God is moving in our communities and churches.

## Description of the Event

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

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

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

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

## Disappointments and Unmet Expectations

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

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

Congregation members have experienced a wide range of primary disappointments, often related to growth, leadership, ministry effectiveness, finances, and internal church culture.

Through the facilitated process, participants shared the following disappointments:

### Membership and Growth Challenges:

- The hope for numerical growth has often not been met, with some congregations remaining small (e.g., less than 40 people despite long prayers), in a period of slow decline, or experiencing slow, single-digit growth rather than large increases.

- Many churches are facing a decline in numbers, with younger families leaving and membership dwindling, especially since COVID lockdowns, and former members not returning.
- There is a significant disappointment regarding the lack of young adults and young families within the church, and the fact that youth have grown up in faith but have left the church or are no longer active.
- Hopes for more ethnically/racially diverse churches (which better match their neighborhoods) have not been realized, and some ministries struggle to reach specific communities, such as the Hispanic community.

### Leadership and Staffing Issues:

- A significant disappointment is the inability to find and call a new pastor, with some churches being vacant for over a year or even five years, experiencing a string of pastors who seem to "come and go" prematurely.
- There's a struggle with members not stepping up to fulfill roles and duties that were formerly led by member volunteers, including church council, worship leading, and many other ministries and programs.
- Disappointment exists concerning the difficulty in developing spiritual leaders, especially male leaders, and a lack of plans or successful efforts to develop young leaders.
- Some express disappointment in existing leadership, citing a struggle to let go of history and tradition or a reluctance to take up the ministry of the church.

### Ministry and Program Effectiveness:

- Community outreach efforts were often shut down during COVID and were not always re-activated or did not show clear results, or result in church growth. There's also a disappointment that members don't think enough about outreach in general.
- There's considerable disappointment regarding youth ministries, which are often described as not robust enough, lacking leaders, not developing young leaders, or not being offered at all for various age groups. Children's ministry programs are also noted as "limping along."
- Hopes for a more vibrant prayer ministry or increased attendance at prayer meetings have not been met.
- Issues with worship include worship renewal not happening due to musicians' inability or unwillingness, and concerns about "bad preaching" some of the time.
- Attempts to meet the physical, mental, and emotional needs of members and the community are often limited by insufficient resources.
- Congregation members express disappointment that church engagement and attendance do not always lead to faith formation and discipleship.
- A lack of deep community and a relational atmosphere throughout the week is also a source of disappointment.

## Financial and Resource Constraints:

- Churches consistently face financial challenges, not meeting goals, with giving levels unable to sustain their structure or exceed the budget.
- There's a lack of resources to repair buildings or meet community needs, and hopes for a larger downtown footprint or more buildings have been hindered by spiking interest rates.
- A lack of a clear vision for the future of aging buildings sometimes proved frustrating as well.

## Internal Dynamics and Cultural Issues:

- Disappointment stems from the inability to accept differences within the denomination and live together despite them. Participants desire a less polarized way of navigating conflict.
- A feeling that the church is changing and responding to its context too slowly, "walking when we could/should be running," and a reluctance to embrace a future vision or let go of "past glory days" are noted.
- There is concern that some members are content to remain as they are, not desiring to grow in faith.
- Post-COVID, there's less volunteer engagement due to people feeling mentally and physically drained.
- The loss of "start-up" energy experienced in the past is also a disappointment.

## 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

Oh Lord,

We come before You acknowledging our foolishness and our slowness to believe. We confess that we have been rigid, failing to open our eyes to see You at work in ways we didn't expect. So often, we are too slow to believe everything, especially that Your timing is better than our own,

and that You are truly in control, the Potter to our clay. We have made room for doubt and fear, even when we know You listen and care. We confess that we have tended to doubt the effectiveness of our worship and teaching, and the ordinary ways You can shape lives.

Forgive us for trying to do Your work in our own strength, attempting the work of the Spirit with the power of the flesh. We have mistakenly thought that our efforts alone and our ministries could fulfill our mission, without involving You every step of the way. We sometimes forget that Jesus builds His church, and it is not dependent on our efforts, nor solely on programs we develop or put in place.

We have been slow to recognize that You are always at work, always speaking to us, and that we must listen. Just because we don't see outward or physical evidence of Your work, it doesn't mean You are not doing a big thing. We've been caught in tunnel-vision, focusing on "me, myself and I", and allowing our assumptions to overshadow Your will. We confess that we have sometimes clung to the way we first imagined the church should be, rather than trusting Your unfolding plan. We've been too quick to compare ourselves with other churches, instead of embracing who You've called us to be.

Help us to remember that You are bigger and mightier than our neediness, able to redirect us even when we are not trusting You. Remind us that every disappointment is not a sign that the rest of the church isn't spiritual enough, and that sometimes things don't turn out as we thought, yet are still part of Your plan. Open our eyes to see Your presence and power, even in smallness and slowness. May we trust that You are building Your church, not by human wisdom or experience, but by Your very presence. May we believe that You can and do profoundly and radically transform people.

In Your precious name, we pray.

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 Discipleship

A foundational theme across participants is the profound spiritual transformation of individuals and the emphasis on robust discipleship. This is evidenced by:

*Conversion and Professions of Faith:* Numerous accounts highlight individuals coming to faith, making professions of faith, and being baptized. This includes "half of our young people's group doing professions of faith this past year," "4 people do a profession of faith, Sept. 22, 2024," and "not one, but two (!) college students whom God has ministered to... preparing for baptism." The story of the former prostitute who became a church leader after a miraculous awakening vividly illustrates this: "But, suddenly, she woke up and said, 'I saw Jesus, I went to the tunnel and saw the light.' She came after that to church and said to me that when she was in [the] coma she remembered my words about Jesus. Long story short she is one of the leaders of the Church after 5 years."

*Deepening Faith and Spiritual Growth:* Beyond initial conversions, there's a strong focus on members growing in their faith. This includes "a growing emphasis & opportunities in discipleship, going deeper in inner healing prayer, spiritual disciplines," and individuals "rediscovering love for God's Word." One retired Pentecostal pastor "has become an active member, grown convinced of Reformed doctrine, and now says that he has grown more in faith in the two years he has been with our congregation than he did in all his years as a pastor prior to."

*Transformative Preaching and Teaching:* The "transformative power of the preaching of the Word" is a recurring motif. A powerful example is "Young women who left church came back on a Sunday to hear the story of Naomi in Ruth, returning to her home even though she was bitter, hoping against hope for God to act. She found herself in Naomi's story and her closed heart was opened." Others noted that the pastors teaching had been particularly effective with members of their family and community.

*Disciple Multiplication and Leadership Development:* Several churches are actively cultivating new leaders. One church is "an incubator for those pursuing ordained ministry," having "trained and sent a missionary to Okinawa" and currently having "2 in seminary, plus 2 more we are encouraging to consider seminary." The success of programs like 222 Discipleship" and 222 Leadership Seminary with 26 students underscores this commitment.

## Welcoming, Inclusive, and Diverse Communities

Churches are intentionally fostering environments of belonging and celebrating diversity, leading to significant demographic shifts:

*Radical Welcome and Hospitality:* A profound sense of welcome is evident, characterized by "A welcoming heart. A warm 'welcome home.' You are: welcome, worthy, loved." This extends to

opening doors to diverse groups, such as "Hospitality to SWAC," a program for high school dropouts, which "has opened them up to hearing the gospel of God's love." The Alpha program example, where a visibly gender non-conforming individual was welcomed, powerfully conveys the message: "this is church -- everyone is welcome. There's room for Matty -- and there's room for us."

*Increasing Diversity:* A striking transformation is the shift from mono-cultural to multi-cultural congregations. One church grew "from a mono-cultural, mono-generational church of 50 to a multi-cultural, multi-language, multi-generational, multi-site church of over 1300 members." Another notes, "As a church that has been historically very Dutch/white we've welcomed non-white members in increasing numbers and have seen non-white office bearers become ordained." The presence of "14 countries represented in our church" and an "11-yr-old from Cameroon who plays drums every Sunday" vividly illustrate this embrace of diversity.

*Intergenerational Engagement:* Churches are successfully integrating all age groups. "The older generation has opened 'their' church to children, babies, the crying, the distractions... with joy!" Children are not just present but "worshipping, leading, and growing in their faith," with an "11 year old [leading] prayer of the people, sings, and reads the Bible."

## Active Outreach and Community Engagement

Churches are deeply embedded in their communities, actively addressing needs and sharing the Gospel through practical service:

*Addressing Hunger and Poverty:* Numerous initiatives focus on food insecurity. Examples include a "weekly food pantry," "delivering a week's worth of food," and a "school lunch program started with \$200 to make 24 lunches per day" that now provides "105 lunches per day for kids at six different schools," totaling "approx. 21,000 lunches" in 2024. The story of the frequent visitor to a church garden who was then encouraged to take as much as she needed, showcases radical generosity and its transformative impact.

*Meeting Practical Needs:* Beyond food, churches are engaged in "car repair + donation ministry," providing "clothing for local needs," and offering "wage opportunity for shelter, clothes & food" to the unhoused. The "Blanket making ministry" provides "extra comfort" and has led recipients to "feel the presence of God with them."

*Partnerships and Collaboration:* Churches are actively collaborating with other organizations and congregations to amplify their impact. This includes "partnering with our community with garden plots on our grounds," and "doing outreach events together."

*Evangelism Through Service and Presence:* Community engagement often serves as a pathway to evangelism. The "Town of Bethlehem" project, the "Fall Fest" invitation leading to a family's conversion, and the homeless individual who began helping with church renovations and eventually was baptized illustrate this. The prison ministry and monthly chapel service at a mental health hospital also demonstrate this outward focus.



## Vibrant Worship and Fellowship

Participants emphasize a renewed sense of purpose and joy in congregational life:

*Meaningful Worship:* There's a desire for "meaningful and convicting worship" and a return to "the true worship of God," moving beyond routine to revival. The experience of "God's presence 'when our congregations are doing communion'" highlights the spiritual significance of true worship.

*Community Building and Fellowship:* Churches are intentionally fostering deeper connections among members. This includes "congregation members inviting others into their homes for times of fellowship," connecting in small groups and the relaunch of a "mid-week women's Bible Study." The "Mix'd" small group dedicated to learning about different cultures exemplifies intentional community building around diversity.

*Healing and Prayer:* Churches are actively engaged in prayer for healing, both physical and mental. Accounts mention "Heal the sick through answered prayers," "Bringing my mom + brother out of the hospital," and "Healing mental illness." The elder who prayed for someone's pain to go away, resulting in its disappearance, is a powerful testimony to this.

*Resilience and Faithfulness:* Several churches demonstrate remarkable resilience, "Even through having no pastor for 20+ years, our church is still worshipping and in the same sanctuary for 114 years." One church, despite financial and numerical decreases, affirms, "God is restoring his congregation" through both finances and stronger relationships with him." This highlights a posture of "Full dependence on God, high trust in God and in each other."

## Empowering Gifts and Leadership

A recurring theme is the intentional identification, cultivation, and deployment of individual gifts and the emergence of new leaders:

*Utilizing Member Gifts:* Churches are empowering members to serve, noting "The cultivating of the gifts or talents of our community" and "The level of people using their gift to do ministry." This ranges from graphic design to leadership, with examples like "An 11 year old leads prayer of the people, sings, and reads the Bible" and a "single mother + her aunt" becoming worship leaders.

*Emergence of New Leaders:* The Spirit is "convicting and equipping members of the congregation to step into leadership." This is seen in the couple "stepping into significant leadership roles" after realizing they didn't want to see the church die, and the individual who became a leader of three "VP3-Journey" groups that "changed their lives." The story of Phillip, who transformed from being "mute, hiding behind the church doors to a person who speaks his opinions and serves as a church deacon," exemplifies this growth in leadership.



*Youth Leadership Development:* There is a strong emphasis on raising up young leaders. The new youth director is "identifying candidates for future service in ecclesiastical office." "God has raised up some young leaders in my church that have stepped up and engaged more than ever," even starting "a youth ministry led by other youth."

## Signs of Growth and Revival

Participants collectively paint a picture of churches experiencing tangible growth and a sense of divine activity:

*Numerical Growth:* Many churches report increasing numbers, with phrases like "The church is growing," "Jesus is bringing new families," and a church growing from "50 to a multicultural... over 1300 members." The increase in "40 --> 150 members" for another congregation is also highlighted.

*Returning Members and Prodigal Children:* A sign of renewal is "Former church members returning the past few weeks to Sunday service" and "Prodigal children returning to church."

*Financial Provision:* Despite challenges, there's evidence of God's provision, such as "God is restoring his congregation and finances" and a church "reaching the budget on a consistent basis." The story of 57 cents multiplying into "several thousand dollars" is a testament to miraculous provision.

*Church Planting and Leadership Development:* The "church plant movement - 23 daughter churches in the last 15 years" demonstrates a significant outward expansion and impact beyond the local congregation. Participants also expressed appreciation for the work of the "Center for Church Renewal" in leadership development and church renewal.

*Divine Intervention and Answered Prayers:* The conviction that "God is at work" is pervasive, with many accounts of "answered prayers" and instances where "God had certainly performed miracles." The story of the cancer patient given 3-6 months to live, who lived 3 years and witnessed to others before his death, leading to their baptisms, is a profound example of God's timing and purpose.

In conclusion, participants reveal a dynamic landscape of church renewal, driven by deep spiritual transformation, hospitality and welcome, active community engagement, vibrant worship, empowered leadership, and tangible signs of growth, all underpinned by a profound sense of God's active presence and faithfulness.

## 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:

### Spiritual Growth and Revitalization:

God is showing up in surprising ways and moving in power. He is faithfully shaping us through our pain and our struggles, and revitalizing His church through the pruning process. God is also revitalizing through worship and teaching us to pray, leading individuals towards spiritual maturity through spiritual disciplines. He is creating a hunger for His Word and strengthening His people through the ordinary means of grace. God is also described as being still in the building.

### Evangelism and Discipleship:

God is building His church through evangelism and discipleship, making disciples, and calling us back to the simplicity of discipleship. He is bringing in people to the local church where they can be discipled and become disciples. God is actively drawing people to faith and creating faith in people's hearts and adding them to His Kingdom. He is using both ordinary means like preaching, sacraments, and prayer and specific channels such as preaching, family programs, prayer, and schools to bring people to Himself. God is also asking us to put ourselves out there and share the Gospel and grow our hearts for relational evangelism.

### Leadership Development and Generational Faith:

God is raising up a new generation of leaders and building relationships between ministry leaders. He is working in the next generation and through all generations to build faith.

### Community and Relationships:

God is building connections in congregations for a stronger community and is growing authentic communities for the sake of blessing the world. He works through relationships and is surprising us through the goodness of unexpected relationships with people on the margins. God is also encouraging churches to give of our time, talent, and treasure to work with community partners and creating an awareness to partner with local churches and community organizations.

### Diversity and Inclusivity:

God is calling people from every tribe and nation and is growing diversity within our churches. He is expanding the horizon towards embracing people of all nations and teaching us how to embrace and enfold new people. God is also sustaining and preserving His multigenerational and multi-ethnic church and loosening the priority of our cultural identities for the sake of His Kingdom.

### Provision and Generosity:

God is bigger than our fears about scarcity and is providing for our financial needs. He is faithful in providing resources and continuing to financially bless the CRC, using the church to be a

blessing to others. God is providing resources to His church through the generosity of peoples' time, talent, and treasure. He is also using hospitality to make His people generous.

### Caring for the Vulnerable:

God is reaching the "least of these" and caring for the poor through the church living as the church. He is providing for physical needs in our communities through the church and chasing the ones He loves.

### Miraculous and Ordinary Work:

God is doing the impossible and exercising His mighty power through ordinary means. He uses us, ordinary people, and still changes lives. God is working through churches who work together and is working in the prayers of His people, bringing restoration and hope. He is also still speaking through His word.

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 most prominent and consistently reiterated theme is the active and undeniable presence of God at work within individual lives, local churches, and the broader denomination (CRC). This presence is described as surprising, encouraging, and transformative. Closely intertwined with this is the profound appreciation for the diversity of the Body of Christ and the CRC, encompassing different expressions of faith, geographical locations, church sizes, and the people themselves.

- "Surprised me with what he's doing and whom he is doing it with. Overwhelmed me with an abundance of stories of his presence and work."
- "Reminded me of the beauty and diversity of the Body of Christ; and the magnitude and grace of His providence at work in and through us."
- "Made me realize how large the CRC is...how many different ways and processes [there are], ...I have hope for the future of the church."
- "Showed me how He is working through the church in very diverse places and circumstances, using everyday, ordinary people, producing extraordinary results."
- "Gave me a better idea of the make-up and diversity of the CRC, and some of its [...] wins or strengths and struggles."
- "God allowed us to get a greater sense of and respect for the diversity of culture and opinion in our denomination."

- "Opened my eyes to how the Spirit of God is moving in beautifully contextual ways across the denomination."

Many respondents highlight deeply personal encounters with God and significant shifts in their faith journey:

- *Freedom from Addiction*: One powerful testimony details a complete transformation: "I became impacted by KAVOD about 3 years ago... I came in struggling with DRUG Addiction. For the last 2 years I have been free from drugs, baptized, born again, minister in another women's shelter."
- *Reignited Passion and Purpose*: Numerous entries speak to a renewed zeal for ministry and personal involvement: "Reignited a passion for the local church, reminded me of His faithfulness, and renewed an urgency within me to be actively looking for what role I can play in His story at my church." "Restored by cooling embers to a full-force fire to do his will for my church."
- *Overcoming Gloom and Finding Hope*: A palpable sense of relief and renewed optimism is evident: "Coming here, I had a weight of gloom for our church and denomination. After being here, I have felt encouraged and know there is Hope! God is still working! The weight has been lifted!"
- *Confidence in God's Ability*: "Grew my confidence in His ability to act and work and move in our churches and through the CRC."
- *Guidance and Direction*: Many felt a clear sense of divine direction for their lives and ministries: "Confirmed direction of our church and classis and my role in it. God revealed to me the tasks I need to accomplish and the direction I need to take."

Gather profoundly impacted participants through fellowship, open dialogue, and mutual encouragement.

- *Companionship and Meaningful Conversations*: "So God has given opportunity for companionship, meaningful conversations, processing grief + disappointment, friendship, and sharing stories that encourage."
- *Building Connections*: "Grew connections and relationships with brothers and sisters in Christ and partners in ministry who I now believe want to come alongside me and our church to see us faithfully follow God." "Connected me with so many wonderful believers -- his body is alive in New Mexico, Florida, Michigan, Illinois, and Ontario."
- *Authentic Sharing and Support*: "Allowed me to be part of a group where we could authentically share our joys and more importantly our pains and to have them blanketed in prayer."
- *Learning from Others*: "Our group discussions were great! Respectful, thoughtful and we learned from each other." "I have learned about others. I have received information about resources available."
- *Sense of Belonging*: "Introduced me to people in my denomination and made me feel like I belong here."
- *The Body of Christ in Action*: "Showed me again the power of being one body [where we] 'suffer with those who suffer and rejoice with those who rejoice.' The stories, the struggles, the experiences in personal level and ministry answered in my life."

Several entries directly reference scripture and core Christian tenets, providing a theological underpinning for their experiences.

- *"Feed My Sheep"*: Jesus' command to Peter is a recurring motif for discipleship and evangelism: "The call is clear 'Feed my sheep' if we really love Jesus."
- *Not Alone*: The reminder to Elijah that he was not alone resonates with participants: "As God reminded Elijah, I am not alone. God is still with us. God is still in the room."
- *The Body of Christ (Revelation 7:9)*: The vision of "all tribes, tongues, nations & peoples" reinforces the theme of diversity.
- *Suffering as Part of the Path to Glory*: A profound reflection on the nature of discipleship: "Reminded me that when Christ calls us to follow him, he invites us to death, suffering, sorrows because they lead us to glory! This is what the disciples were slow to believe: suffering is part of the path to glory!"
- *Faith Over Sight*: "Reconfirmed to me that he is still at work regardless of what things look like. For we walk by Faith not by sight."
- *Zeal for God's House (Psalm 69:9)*: "Placed this Scripture verse more deeply on my heart: Psalm 69:9. 'For zeal for your house consumes me.'"

While overwhelmingly positive, some entries reveal challenges and personal growth in confronting limitations.

- *Challenged to Dream Bigger*: "Challenged me to dream bigger, to hope for more in the ministry He has given me." "The dream that died was 'King of Israel', the dream that rose was 'King of the Universe.' Think big."
- *Overcoming Negative Focus*: Participants were encouraged to shift their perspective from problems to blessings: "Encouraged me to think on the good things that are happening, rather than the things that may be a struggle." "God encouraged me to spend much more time looking for the things to celebrate in my church rather than on the negative."
- *Recognizing Blind Spots*: "Revealed more of my weaknesses and inadequacies. My myopic view of this Christian world has blinded me to the suffering of others and the overall goals of denominational efforts."
- *God's Plan vs. Our Plan*: "God is working in the church and in the community even if one does not see it or perceive it. We do not see it because it does not go according to our plan. We have to follow His plan."
- *Small Churches and Satisfaction*: One observation notes: "I have observed the majority of the Churches are small but they are satisfied with what they have." (This could be a challenge if growth is a denominational goal, or a positive observation about contentment).

## Key Takeaways and Implications

- *God's Unceasing Work*: Participants emphatically confirm that God is continuously active, "on the move, all the time, all over the place, doing exactly what He wants to do," regardless of perceived obstacles or size of ministry.
- *Value of Denominational Gatherings*: These events serve as vital platforms for encouragement, connection, and gaining a broader appreciation for the CRC's diverse ministries and people.

- *Importance of Relationships in Evangelism:* "Reminded me/confirmed that people come to a saving faith through relationships, not new/fancy/contrived programming."
- *Sanctification of the Church:* There's a strong sense that God is actively "sanctifying His church," working through ordinary people to achieve extraordinary results.
- *Focus on the Positive:* A recurring encouragement is to actively seek and celebrate God's work rather than dwelling on challenges.