



Gather San Diego | 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 San Diego was held Wednesday to Friday, January 29-31, 2025 at the Bayside Wyndham overlooking the harbor.

Sixty-eight (68) participants from classes California South, North Central Iowa, Northern Illinois, Toronto, and Thornapple Valley 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:

Church Growth and Membership

- Slow numerical growth and a general decline in membership are significant disappointments, with a lot of effort yielding slow results.
- There is a struggle with new members and recently baptized individuals not continuing to attend or fully integrating into church life after the pandemic.
- Churches are concerned about losing members, particularly young families, and find it challenging to grow beyond a certain small size.

Evangelism, Outreach, and Community Impact

- A major disappointment is the inability to effectively evangelize or reach the unchurched within their own communities, and efforts to do so often fall short of hopes.
- Churches lament not making a true impact or having influence in the life of the community, with community engagement often limited and not leading to significant evangelism or discipleship.
- Members often retain an insular focus and struggle to invite unchurched neighbors or feel comfortable bringing guests to church, partly because the preaching is not perceived as "seeker-friendly."
- There is a desire for stronger community outreach and a greater recognition of the church in the community that remains unfulfilled.

Congregation Involvement and Discipleship

- There is a pervasive disappointment regarding the lack of involvement and participation from congregation members, with a small group often bearing the "heavy lifting" of ministry.
- Hopes for extending discipleship to more members and seeing members grow in commitment, consistency, and their relationship with Christ have not been fully met.
- Congregations wish for more engagement in relationships beyond Sunday services and a greater willingness to be vulnerable and share or ask for help.
- Concerns are raised about members "going through the motions" or acting like "Sunday-only Christians," lacking a tangible passion for "living for Jesus" or consistent spiritual nourishment.

Leadership, Staffing, and Volunteers

- Churches face a very small leadership pool and struggle to develop leaders, particularly among specific ethnic groups or the younger generation.
- There is a shortage of young pastors, visiting elders, and leaders for specific ministries like children's, youth, and music.
- Friction, communication issues, and lack of unity among staff and leaders are noted disappointments, with hopes that growing staff would ease burdens often unmet.
- A significant concern is the hesitancy, unwillingness, or disinterest of the younger generation in serving in leadership roles.

Youth and Young Adult Engagement

- A consistent disappointment is the difficulty in engaging and retaining young people, college-age individuals, and young adults in the life of the church and ministry.
- Many churches lack or have insufficient active youth groups and young adult ministries, despite a desire for them.
- There is concern about the whereabouts of former vibrant youth group members and who will step up as future leaders, as older congregations struggle to attract younger families and mentor future leaders.

Finances and Resources

- Financial shortfalls are a recurring disappointment, with churches struggling to cover mortgages, sustain staff salaries, and facing general financial constraints. This is sometimes attributed to new members not understanding the need for financial support and inconsistent tithing.
- Some churches are disappointed by their inability to acquire or fund their own worship facilities or successfully complete large building campaigns.

Inclusion and Diversity

- Despite hopes of being welcoming, some churches find that members are not always welcoming (through glances, words, avoidance), leading to an impression that the doors are only open for "that group of people."
- There is disappointment that increased diversity has not been reflected racially and ethnically, and churches remain primarily Caucasian, struggling to move into "true cross-cultural experience."
- Churches have had limited success in retaining refugees and integrating second and third-generation English-speaking Hispanics into their congregations.
- One specific disappointment mentioned is the hope for more love and support for the LGBTQ+ community.

Digital Ministry and Technology

- Hopes for a robust digital ministry remain unmet, and the inconsistency and frustration with technology and audio-visual capabilities persist despite investments.

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

Our Heavenly Father,

We come before you, acknowledging our foolishness and slowness to believe. We confess that often, we do not want to live a different life, and we are slow to trust that humility is not weakness, but rather allowing you to lead and transform us. We have been prone to believe that we need to help Jesus along, thinking you can only do so much and then we need to finish it.

Forgive us for placing our hopes and expectations on what we want the church to be, to meet *our* needs and desires, instead of recognizing that the ministry is all about you, as you have revealed yourself. We often focus on human success and organizational achievements, measuring growth numerically and expecting it as evidence of your blessing or our good work. We mistakenly believe that our ideas of how you should form and grow your church are better than yours.

We are slow to believe that you are at work in the hearts and lives of our people, regardless of our reports or programs. We lament when your work is slow or hidden, forgetting that you are always moving and acting, even when it's not instant, shiny, or perfect. We have doubted ourselves and our relationship with you when we don't see immediate results, forgetting that your timing is better than ours.

We confess our pride, wanting our will to be done instead of your will. We have been surprisingly critical at times, needing to remind ourselves that you are sovereign and working through the church. We have been slow to believe in your love for us and the church, thinking it's attached to our performance, objectives, or efficiency. We foolishly expect members to sacrifice an hour a week to cry out to you, yet their motivation is often based on your sovereignty but not understanding, when you desire our participation with your plans.

Lord, we admit that we often think we can do things by ourselves in our ministry, ignoring that you are our strength. We have relied on our own efforts, trying to make things happen, and only stepping back to let you take over when we are at our wits' end. We've believed that our intentions were good and honorable, expecting them to be fruitful, yet it is the work of the Holy Spirit, not our church programs or activities, that builds your kingdom.

Help us to remember that it is your church and your work in it, not ours. We pray for the humility to trust and follow you. Guide us to focus on Jesus, the true center, and to understand that our faithfulness to your calling is far more important than human perfection or applause. May we learn patience and wait for your time and plan.

We pray for open hearts and joy, to acknowledge you and be in dialogue with you always. Remind us that resistance builds resilience, and your faithfulness comes first amidst brokenness. We surrender our disappointments and accept the call into the fellowship of your suffering, for your goodness is at work amidst it.

Finally, we rest in the truth that you are truly and ultimately faithful, and your plans for us are far beyond ours – they are truly good. you have always been faithful to our church, never letting us down, and supplying all our needs. We trust that you will provide the people needed to move our church forward and grow it according to your vision, not ours.

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:

Community Engagement and Outreach

A dominant theme is the church's proactive engagement with its local and surrounding communities, often meeting practical needs as a gateway to spiritual connection.

Addressing Practical Needs: Churches are actively involved in addressing tangible community needs. Examples include:

- *Food Security:* Deacons collecting "170 boxes of food" and "\$10,000" for a local Food Bank, collecting "\$15 to \$20,000 for the Gleaners ministry" (a place that collects vegetables for soup and sends packs overseas). The "Ruby's Pantry" ministry is highlighted for its volunteers' "work ethic to make it a well-oiled machine." A "community garden" is growing "800 lbs of food" each season to give away, and a "weekly pantry" is forming relationships, with "10 of our new leaders came from the need for food + God supplied Salvation and/or church home."
- *Homelessness Support:* Churches are housing "homeless people in a classroom and helped them become settled & get back on their feet - Earl, Tom, Tim." Another entry notes, "Homeless live in church for a time to get on their feet and over months have grown in faith." A "storage container" for homeless ministry items was secured through grants, and donations miraculously appeared: "God brought 30 containers donated by Costa."
- *Family and Social Services:* A "ministry 'care-portal'" connects churches with local counties to help families with "practical needs in order for families to stay together, and even reconcile back w/ their kids."
- *Community Events & Resources:* Churches are hosting diverse community events, such as a "Neighborhood Blockfest," "Bike Tune Up," "Friends Alive" with "crafts, games, food, etc.," and a monthly "Community Supper." The "Elmhurst Farmers Market" is now owned by a church, allowing them "to serve and reach not only the community of Elmhurst, but surrounding communities as well."

Targeted Outreach to Specific Demographics:

- *Youth:* Partnerships with "Youth for Christ + Life Wise" are reaching "youth in our community." "W.I.T.H. (Worship in the Heart)" and "G.R.O.W. (Gather 'Round on Wednesday)" are explicitly noted as partnerships with Youth for Christ. Sports programs like "Tuesday night sports program for kids" are drawing "underchurched, 'unchurched' children and youth." The shift from "Biblical ministry to volleyball" resulted in "43 kids + 6 of those youth asked for Bibles and 2 asked @ a relationship w/ Jesus." The "Java + Jesus night at the local coffee shop" draws "90 plus youth from the community."
- *Seniors:* Visiting "retirement homes to spend time with those who don't normally get visitors" is a regular activity. Three elderly people from "Carveth Village" are "attending regularly with transportation assistance from church volunteers," highlighting a mutual blessing: "All of us are blessed with this opportunity to serve and be served."
- *School Teachers:* "Bringing gourmet coffee to teachers" at local public schools has created positive relationships, with teachers remembering the gesture and the principal viewing the church "as a partner in the community."

"On-Ramp" Ministries: Several churches intentionally create low-barrier entry points for the unchurched, offering services that meet felt needs without immediate spiritual demands, then gently inviting further engagement. One church explicitly states, "the community is not looking for Jesus but they are looking for affordable sports programs, food, family events. So we've changed and have added... with the goal of attaching people to Jesus through the church and its people."

Inter-Church Collaboration: Churches are partnering with other denominations and organizations for greater impact. Examples include the "AWANA program" with four other churches, which became a "youth outreach mission" and "still flourishes." There's also mention of "local churches coming together to serve the community. It's not about one individual church, it's about Jesus."

Spiritual Growth and Transformation

The narratives frequently emphasize personal and communal spiritual growth, conversion, and renewed faith, often attributed to the Holy Spirit's work.

Conversions and Professions of Faith: Numerous accounts detail individuals coming to faith, making professions, and being baptized.

- "10 students making a profession of faith in the fall! (+2 first time baptisms)"
- "Chris V. finding a Christian community... He asked for prayer for [he] is 35 days of being drug free. He now is a member and in love w/ Jesus."
- A "young single mom came to faith in Jesus thru Alpha program at our church. She was baptized in a river + made a profession of faith."
- AJ, who initially "didn't want anything to do with the church," professed faith and was baptized after years of his wife attending and consistent scriptural study with a church member.

- Kristian, who was "walking around the church parking lot," met the pastor, met twice a month for over a year, and was baptized by immersion.
- A Vietnamese Buddhist woman, Dao Mguymau, visited on Easter, was "warmly welcomed," discipled, and "a year later baptized - and continues to grow in her faith."
- Mr. Kim, a Korean guest, received Jesus after hearing the Gospel, felt "like he was a dried bone and the Holy Spirit let me listen to the gospel message and now I am alive!", and joined a church in Korea after recovering from cancer.

Deepening Faith and Discipleship:

- The "Young Adult Winter Retreat" sees "so many young adults desiring to grow in their relationship w/ Christ."
- A church council "engaged with the book 'growing young'," leading to an adult Sunday School class and integration into their strategic plan.
- A "Discipleship Journal" and app are being used by members for "daily questions + journaling space," with a young couple listening together.
- A multi-generational congregation is "engaging in not only our worship service encouraging all [...] in participation/but also in serving the community."
- The "God given talents of singing, praying, reading, preaching & serving. Fellowship beyond Sundays."

Healing and Miraculous Interventions:

- A wife's "deep hole on his toe" was filled "a month later" after prayer.
- "Healing of cancer in one of our members" is noted.
- A sister suffering from "tybromalyn" was "completely healed" after the church prayed for her.
- Amelia, 16, suffering from "depression + anxiety," is "now regulated, attending + participating in church and connecting w/ the other teens in church."
- Jack, a 6-year-old who underwent major brain surgery, is exceeding medical expectations and thriving.

Overcoming Adversity and Perseverance: A church describes itself as "weak financially" but experienced God's provision: "God is us financially."

- A pastor facing potential job loss due to financial struggles received a "sizeable amount of money" from a sister who passed away.
- An elderly lady who lost her husband and then her son tragically still "trusts that God is faithful," serving as a powerful testimony.
- Individuals with severe social anxiety and mental distress are returning to discipleship and church.
- Jacob, who left youth group questioning faith and involved in destructive behaviors, returned to faith and made a profession.
- A man who was "excommunicated and disfellowshipped from a church in another denomination" found "acceptance and love in the congregation" of a CRC church after a "wilderness" period.

Diversity and Inclusivity

The sources show a growing embrace of diversity within church communities, welcoming people from various backgrounds, traditions, and life circumstances.

Ethnic and Cultural Diversity:

- "4 Chinese international students who are making Brookside their home. Plus several Korean families."
- Franklin, a "Pentecostal-Baptist African-American and in a wheel-chair," has "found a home with us."
- An influx of "people from other traditions (not CRC) such as an ordained pastor – Church of God, and ordained pastor from a Bible church... Calvary Chapel, Roman Catholic."
- "A Christian couple from Iran" invited other Iranians, resulting in "well over 200 new members" being welcomed and baptized.
- "Dav & Chloe - 2 Vietnamese sisters who came to our church as Buddhists wanting to convert."
- The hosting of an "emerging Ukrainian service every Sunday called 'Bible Church Ukraine'" due to the war.
- A "collaboration with a Hispanic minister which then grew that church into a multi-national church."
- "Muslim-background students curious to know more about Jesus."
- The "Burmese-American soon-to-be church planter's heart is for discipleship of 1st generation English-speaking immigrant youth," leading to English-language youth services in Chin churches.
- Welcoming the "Other": A "lady who was a new member works as an at-home health care provider, invited and brought 3 of her clients to our church potluck."
- An "outcaste" young man who was "very suspect" has become "a wonderful asset to the church."
- A man with "no connections to anyone else" who used to leave early, was consistently welcomed, and a group of men began sitting with him, leading to him joining the church and being supported through the loss of his son.
- The church is "showing steadfast love to immigrants and refugees, stabilizing relationships, and earning the right to share the Gospel. We are willing to make long-term investments."

Intergenerational Engagement:

- "Multi-generational congregation engaging in not only our worship service encouraging all [...] in participation/but also in serving the community."
- "People of all ages serving in many different roles in Sunday morning worship. From slideshow building, musical gifts, to tech and welcoming."
- "There are almost always children leading their parents to church and Jesus." After VBS, "kids want to return to Sunday morning CPkids and parents can't say no."
- Betty, an elderly lady with a "long history of ministry to children," restarted the Sunday School program, which has grown significantly.
- "One generation sharing their faith with their parents who then came to faith and joined the church."

Internal Church Health and Development

Beyond external outreach, the sources also point to internal spiritual vitality, leadership development, and structural adaptations within the churches.

Leadership and Governance:

- "God provided the perfect person to lead our global/local mission efforts, Mark, a strategic consultant who was a missionary kid and missionary himself."
- The hiring of a "F/T Pastor" and "2 commissioned pastors" in recent years.
- A church council "engaged with the book 'growing young'," demonstrating a commitment to strategic planning and growth.
- Leaders are described as "listening to the spirit and volunteering to serve young + old alike."
- The council's ability to "work through differences" is seen as "a huge blessing."
- The emphasis on "discerning God's voice" and "praying and listening until we hear God's leading."

Congregational Fellowship and Care:

- "Our church loves to eat together," facilitating "relationships and new friendships" through "community dinners in homes."
- A "new quarterly luncheon" is helping seniors feel "more connected and valued."
- "Blessed to be a blessing" involves members sharing their "faith" & "Jesus" story, building community and inspiring others.
- The church rallying around a family whose 3-year-old was diagnosed with leukemia.
- Supporting a woman whose therapy dog required an expensive vet visit, demonstrating practical care: "we paid the vet amount."

Stewardship and Resources:

- A "generous benevolent fund utilized" by deacons "sharing these gifts throughout the year and finish the year w/ the money fund empty."
- A small congregation willing to spend "\$7,000 dollars for new decorative chairs" after 17 years of no improvements, showing a willingness to invest in the church.
- Acquiring a "parsonage next door to the church" due to high housing costs, with most funds raised through donations.
- The Chin Church of GR seeking their own building, with the "CRC Loan Fund... quick to offer guidance and a pre-approval loan."
- A Christian school's facility being "given to a Hispanic church" after a period of "extreme strife."
- The "Community Garden" producing "800 lbs of food each growing season," demonstrating effective resource utilization.

Spiritual Disciplines:

- The sermon series and devotional on "Love to Pray" significantly impacted an older lady whose "prayer life was really non-existent before this time."
- "A weekly prayer group mtg (student-initiated + representing many different denominations + campus ministries) praying for the campus + growing together."

- A "drive thru prayer" event where people received on-the-spot prayer for their requests.
- Listening circles for concerns about HSR.

Divine Providence and God's Faithfulness

Underlying many stories is a deep conviction that God is actively at work, providing, guiding, and orchestrating events, even in unexpected ways.

God's Provision:

- "When we don't have place for small group Bible study. God opened door."
- The church's financial struggles overcome by relying on God.
- "God provided the perfect person to lead our global/local mission efforts, Mark."
- The "30 containers donated by Costa" for the homeless ministry.
- "God 'giving' us property" in an "impossible real estate market."
- An "immigration lawyer + my husband is a paralegal" walking by during a pantry cleanup and offering to help.

God's Orchestration and Timing:

- The story of Jose and Rosy, who left the church but returned years later, with a church family providing them a home: "God was working all along."
- The story of the man whose son suddenly died, and he realized "God knew he would need a community to help him through the loss of his son."
- The complex, multi-generational story of Tiffany, Lexi, and Molly, leading to a Greek Life Bible study, where "God has moved through generations of students to make this possible!"
- The story of a woman involved in a fight, fleeing, finding faith, marrying a seminary student, and that husband becoming a youth pastor, is an example of intricate divine leading.

God's Presence in the "Little Things":

- "He is there in the little things!" is a direct quote regarding the provision of storage containers.

Unwavering Trust:

- The elderly lady who lost her husband and son maintains her faith: "she still trusts that God is faithful."

In conclusion, the provided sources paint a vibrant picture of churches deeply rooted in their communities, actively serving practical needs, fostering spiritual growth across generations and diverse backgrounds, and witnessing God's faithfulness in both grand and subtle ways. The emphasis is on tangible acts of love and service as expressions of faith, leading to profound transformation in individual lives and communities.

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.

Transforming Lives and Drawing People to Himself:

God is transforming lives through prayer and deepening relationships. He is drawing people to Christ through the church, and sometimes even in spite of its members. This includes drawing people to Himself through organic, authentic, intentional, and long-term relationships, as well as through intimate one-on-one relationships. God is also calling people to faith, leading and bringing people to His church, and bringing home the lost. Jesus is specifically noted as opening people's eyes. God is also waiting for people to change their hearts and lives and is radically pruning to produce kingdom fruit.

Presence, Faithfulness, and Sovereignty:

God is present in suffering and with those who are suffering. He is faithfully present in seasons of wilderness and is infinitely faithful to and through His people. God is described as actively with us and never far away. He is faithful in the easy times and the hard, and is recognized as being great. The document emphasizes that God IS.

Engaging and Impacting Communities:

God is using the community of the church to reach the broader community. He is using churches to engage their communities everyday of the week and is caring for the vulnerable through hospitality. God is also reaching the community and families through children. He is using simple acts of service to bless His world and opening eyes to creative opportunities to serve. Furthermore, God is calling churches to partner with other churches and organizations to bless their communities and is creating community within churches that draws people to Christ.

Empowering and Raising Up Leaders, Especially Youth:

God is raising up leaders in surprising ways. He is calling the next generation to own their faith and is raising up youth into leadership. God is using, equipping, and calling youth to lead the way, and is moving in and through young people. He is also working in the lives of children to build the church. God is noted for choosing the weak and the foolish to shame the strong and the wise, and for doing extraordinary things through ordinary means and people. He is blessing our going.

Working Through Prayer and Relationships:

God is transforming lives through prayer, showing the power of prayer, and working creatively as people pray. He is amazingly answering prayers and wants believers to rely on prayer and scripture to see through everything. God reveals Himself through personal relationships and is drawing people to Himself through organic, authentic, intentional, and long-term relationships, as well as through intimate one-on-one relationships. God is also surprising people by bringing unexpected individuals together.

Healing and Provision:

God is healing broken people and heals through the local church. He is also providing in unexpected ways.

Guidance and Blessing Obedience:

God is inviting believers to change their perspective. He is blessing that which is obedient to His will and continues to call people into the Kingdom He has always been building. God is using customized creativity for communicating connection in context. He is also doing BIG things in small places.

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 Active and Ongoing Work (Renewal & Presence): A pervasive theme is the realization that God *is* actively at work, often in unexpected and ordinary ways. Participants consistently report a renewed sense of God's power and presence, both in their personal lives and in the broader church.

- "God is renewing his church. God is renewing his church. God is renewing his church."
- "Showed up that is renewing, restoring, and redeeming all things already."
- "Reminded me that He has been at work... Our plea should not be renewal but to give us the eyes to see His work!"
- "God is at work in my context as well as all others."

Expanded View of the Church and God's Kingdom: Many testimonies highlight a broadened understanding of the church beyond individual congregations or denominations. Participants

gained a sense of the diversity and unity within the church (specifically the CRCNA), and a greater appreciation for God's work across various contexts.

- "Expanded my view of the 'church' to help me see His work through a variety of churches throughout the world. God is bigger than my church building, my city, our denomination, our understanding, our boundaries."
- "Opened my eyes to see how diverse the CRC is and how both large + small churches are always seeking God's Will + direction for their congregation."
- "Reminded me of all the diverse people, places, gifts, contexts, capacities, and voices within this denomination."
- "Showed me that, in general, the CRC is being what the church should be."

Encouragement, Hope, and Perseverance: The event served as a significant source of encouragement, particularly for those feeling frustrated, disillusioned, or isolated in their ministry. There's a strong emphasis on renewed hope for the future of the church and individual ministries.

- "I walk with hope."
- "He has given me some hope for the road ahead."
- "I need to meet Jesus & get back on the way back to Jerusalem to live in hope and as a part of the mission of God."
- "Encouraged me to persevere. In prayer, encouragement, discipleship."
- "Gave me great hope for what is happening in the ministries. He's on the move and I'm excited to be a part of it."

The Power of Story and Shared Experience: Hearing stories of God's work in diverse contexts was a profound aspect of the "Gather" experience. These narratives fostered connection, understanding, and a tangible sense of God's grace and love.

- "Allowed me to hear stories of God's grace and love in local context. These were wonderful and exciting. They were hopeful and encouraging."
- "Lifted stories of unexpected God encounters, the set up for the surprise."
- "I heard some great stories about different ministries and what they are doing."
- "Showed me our common expectations (met and unmet) with detailed stories of ordinary works of faith by ordinary people in ordinary time."

Personal Transformation and Re-centering on Christ: Many participants described personal shifts in perspective, a deepening of faith, and a renewed commitment to prayer and mission. The Emmaus story (Luke 24) was a powerful framework for this internal transformation.

- "Transformed my perspective on His work and mission - both in my church and beyond."
- "Enlightened me through the study of the Emmaus story and I was able to place myself inside the story."
- "Made me look at Luke 24 w/ a broader mind..."
- "Increased my desire to see Jesus Christ honored more. To see Him high & lifted up - explicitly + in prayer. To repent at my blindness + self-centeredness. To pray more - and more riskily. To do less lamenting, and more repenting. To be gratefully living by the gospel."

Key Insights and Impacts

- *God works through "Ordinary Means"*: A recurring discovery was that God uses "ordinary ways & ordinary people to do extraordinary things." This includes the regular ministries of the church and the faithful actions of its members, often in "little things, not flashy, rather ordinary, but beautiful."
- *Unity in Diversity and Shared Struggles*: The event highlighted the beauty of the CRCNA's diversity (ethnicity, ages, contexts) while simultaneously revealing that churches, regardless of size, face similar challenges. This fosters a sense of being "in it together, [living?] it out together."
- *Importance of Listening and Open-mindedness*: Several testimonies emphasized the value of listening to different perspectives and seeing nuance in those with differing philosophical views. This fostered understanding and a sense that "every opinion... has value."
- *Shift from Lament to Repentance and Action*: For some, the experience shifted their focus from dwelling on problems ("lamenting") to a renewed sense of personal and corporate responsibility ("repenting") and engagement in God's mission.
- *Beyond Membership Numbers*: There was a conviction among some to "quit equating growth with membership numbers," suggesting a recalibration of what constitutes success in ministry.
- *The Church as a "Body" and a "Family"*: The creation of "new family in Christ" and the experience of being "entirely surrounded by people devoted to doing God's work" underscored the communal and relational aspect of the church.
- *Re-affirmation of Ministry's Importance*: For those feeling discouraged, the event provided confirmation that "what we are doing does matter and encouraged me to keep going."

Conclusion

Gather was a deeply impactful and transformative experience for attendees. The testimonies consistently point to a renewed sense of hope, a broadened understanding of God's work in the church, and a personal re-engagement with their faith and ministry. The emphasis on shared stories, the presence of God in ordinary moments, and the diverse yet unified nature of the church were central to these positive outcomes.