



## Gather Vancouver | 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 Vancouver was held Thursday to Saturday, September 19-21, 2024 at the Westin Wall Centre near the Vancouver Airport.

Sixty (60) participants from Classes Pacific Northwest, British Columbia NorthWest, Alberta North, Grand Rapids North, Greater Los Angeles 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 expressed a range of disappointments, primarily centered on challenges with community and belonging, limited impact on their surrounding neighborhoods, struggles with growth and engagement, shortcomings in leadership and next-generation involvement, and a perceived lack of spiritual vitality or clear direction.

Through the facilitated process, participants shared the following disappointments:

## Lack of Community, Unity, and Inclusivity

- There is disappointment regarding the lack of unity not only within the CRC but also with other denominations.
- A significant concern is the absence of a safe place and greater inclusivity, particularly for LGBTQ+ individuals and various racial groups, with specific mentions of members of the LGBTQ+ community not feeling welcomed or able to fully use their gifts, and a general sense that some members do not feel like they belong.
- Some immigrant CRC congregations do not feel fully integrated into the broader CRCNA culture, this includes issues of trust and support, and struggle with multi-ethnicity, where some individuals come but then leave.
- There is a longing for deeper community that has not yet been found, with observations that people seem content to be alone and not seek out friendships.
- Disappointment also stems from the community taking longer than expected to enfold newcomers.
- Challenges exist in forming more intentional and deeper cross-cultural friendships, and in successfully merging ministries across different ethnic groups. There is also a struggle with retaining many families who have joined the church.
- A fundamental concern is the lack of trust and love among brothers and sisters ("Mas confianza y amor entre hermanos"), and that unconditional acceptance offered to some has not been extended to others by some within the congregation.

## Limited Outreach, Evangelism, and Community Impact

- Many hoped the church would have a greater impact in helping transform their neighborhoods and communities.
- There is a perceived ineffectiveness in bringing in more neighborhood people and in showing Jesus' love.
- The church has faced challenges in welcoming and integrating daycare families, visitors, and seekers into its life.
- There is a struggle with being truly "missional", getting people excited and understanding how to live out the mission of God.
- Disappointment is expressed over the church's failure to respond to a re-commitment to reaching the unchurched in its neighborhood, and the immigrant CRC church feeling it hasn't fully reached out to its surrounding community.
- Outreach efforts, such as a free-tutoring service for low-income families, have not taken off, and community outreach events like booths at summer festivals have not brought anyone to church.
- There's a desire for more evangelism to reach more souls for Christ.

## Stagnation in Growth, Engagement, and Participation

- Churches have not grown in attendance, and there is grief over others leaving the church and family members who have not returned.
- A lack of growth in attendance and participation in Sunday school and discipleship classes is noted.

- There is a disappointment that young adults and families who consider the church "their church" do not attend or attend sporadically.
- The church is struggling with retaining children and youth in the church and helping them develop a personal faith.
- There is a perceived lack of communal hunger and fervor to dig into Scripture outside of Sunday mornings.
- Disappointment also surrounds the difficulty in drawing people "on the fringes" into full fellowship.

## Challenges in Leadership and Next Generation Involvement

- There is a lack of confident leaders taking initiative and a lack of widespread movement of God in the hearts of young people (new council members, new leaders).
- A significant concern is the absence of a next generation of young people committed to their faith and to leadership and participation in the church, along with a general lack of next-generation leaders.
- Immigrant congregations still lack resources (human and financial) to foster and grow children and youth ministries.
- Churches are struggling to fill key pastoral positions
- There is a noted lack of children's ministry and not enough people to lead discipleship programs for young people.
- The absence of a children/youth program where kids can grow and belong and a vibrant young adults ministry are also sources of disappointment.
- There is concern about younger families drifting or sliding away from faith-based community work.

## Spiritual Vitality and Direction

- Some feel the church is missing the "fire" of the Holy Spirit or that stories of its presence are not being shared enough.
- The church has not found a new direction of ministry after COVID-19.
- There's a sense that the church has tried "somewhat" reluctantly to do outreach and church growth and has not been successful, with some questioning if the church has a "hypocritical history" or "small town ideals."

## 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

Lord God, You are Sovereign and in control of all facets of my life, in charge of all, and the all-powerful leader. You are the owner of Your Church, and You can do all things without our help. Yet, Father, we confess our foolishness and our slowness to believe.

Forgive us for being the 'older son' in the parable, for falling into the trap of believing Your acceptance and approval of us is based on how "good" we are or how well we "perform". It has taken us a long time to believe You love us simply because we are Your child, that we are beloved by You, and that nothing can separate us from Your love. Help us in our unbelief to truly know and feel this deep within us.

We confess that during dark times, we were not sure whether Jesus was there or not. Sometimes, we feel that You are not with us when we work in the church, that You have not helped us to train to work in the best way for You, and we feel that our work is not worth it. Also, when we have problems, we forget that You are with us. We have been overwhelmed with loss, endings, and death all around us, confessing that we forget Jesus is Lord, Redeemer, King, and that He is in control! He is alive!

Lord, we have been very slow to listen, to believe, to obey, and to act despite the many opportunities You give us. We admit to self-doubt, and not seeing the things we desire does not mean You are not at work in the situation. We tend to think "nothing is going to change..." in matters of personal, corporate, and societal problems. We are slow to believe that You will and can do something to expand Your kingdom because this is Your ministry. We tend to trust and get overwhelmed by things we feel we can control but can't, often depending on our own understanding instead of bringing everything to You and seeking Your will.

Forgive us for our fear, our lack of trust, and our doubt. We have been anxious about things that are small in importance in Your kingdom. We have not trusted You to carry out Your vision for our lives without revealing it to us first. We have been guilty of believing the health and vibrancy of the church lies in our hands to change, forgetting that the Church belongs to Christ, that He is the Head, and that fruitfulness is Your responsibility. We forget that it is You that does the work, and that the work of changing the world is the Holy Spirit's to do and lead.

Help us to remember that You are always at work in hearts and lives, that Your ways are higher, and our thoughts are not Your thoughts. Give us the boldness to step out and take action more quickly, trusting that You will work through us. Help us to believe that You can do more than we can ask or imagine, and that You will provide all that we need—resources, tools, workers, money—to accomplish the Mission of Church!. May we truly grasp that You are powerful enough to change us, others, and the world.

We pray that You will help us to believe even when we do not see yet, that You make yourself known from generation to generation. May we fully understand that You have a purpose and plan for us beyond our limited expectations, and that You are the God who reaches for us, who pursues us and finds us, not afraid to find Your people on the fringes, on the sidelines, and draw them in, for there is a seat for everyone at Your table.

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 of God and the activity of the Holy Spirit within their churches:

### Evangelism and Discipleship: Growing Faith and Making New Believers

A strong emphasis is placed on individuals coming to faith, deepening their understanding of the Gospel, and intentionally discipling others. This occurs through diverse methods, often highlighting personal connection and consistent effort.

*Personal Connection as a Catalyst for Conversion:* Many accounts detail how one-on-one relationships, often built over extended periods, lead to individuals accepting Jesus. Examples include:

- A "good friend came over to play cards and announced that he had committed his life to Jesus the previous day. We had prayed for him for about 10 years and God used our community to bring him to Jesus."
- A man whose "wife had cancer and eventually died...At the funeral, he shared his peace and thanked me for that conversation many years ago" where the Gospel was shared despite initial skepticism.
- The "intentional focus on 'alongside relationships' - being present with other individuals in life" fostering deeper connection.

*The Power of Witness and Testimony:* Sharing personal experiences of faith and the work of the Holy Spirit is seen as highly effective. This is evident in:

- A woman "who met the Lord in our church and had her life completely changed."

- The 89-year-old newcomer "to declare his acceptance of the call from Jesus in his life," feeling "a weight lift off his shoulders like never before."
- The impactful "testimony time every Sunday where anyone can share how they've seen God at work."

*Structured Discipleship and Learning:* Formal and informal groups are crucial for spiritual growth and equipping believers to share their faith.

- "Disciples making disciples making disciples. Small groups, community outreach, daily living."
- New sermon series like "The God Story" leading to "small groups forming around this book" and youth group discussions.
- The "gospel tool curriculum for discipleship" developed during COVID, described as "life-changing for me + our congregation deepening us in our understanding of the gospel but also helping/equipping us to share the gospel w/others."
- "Habitus" intentional trios committed to "daily & weekly faith formation practices."

*Youth and Children's Ministry as a Key Growth Area:* Several entries highlight the increasing engagement and faith development among younger generations.

- Young children "profess their faith in Jesus at a young age" and "desire to publicly declare what they believe."
- "The interest of our children + youth to participate in Sunday services. - reading scripture - leading worship - helping younger kids - welcoming."
- The thriving VBS program with "150 kids registered" and "42 kids with no church affiliation" demonstrates broad reach.
- "New youth leadership" and "young people seeing God's faithfulness" after a difficult transition.
- "God is moving people to develop and engage in youth ministry."

## Community Engagement and Outreach: Being a "Good Neighbor"

Churches are increasingly stepping outside their walls to serve and connect with their local communities, often transcending traditional outreach methods to build genuine relationships and address practical needs.

*Meeting Practical Needs and Building Relationships:* Churches are becoming visible and active forces in their neighborhoods through tangible acts of service.

- "The Garage," a renovated space now housing a food bank, inviting social workers to gather, and hiring a "community relations facilitator" to connect the church with community needs.
- Development of "community gardens as a place for connection and evangelism," inviting gardeners to worship and holding events in the gardens.
- "Food with Friends" program, going "door to door, invited folks, had soup + buns downstairs after church."
- Participation in "Church in the Park" services.

- "Community corner programs for youth from the neighborhood to play in the gym, cook, sew, + play board games. Planting seeds and waiting on the Lord for growth that God is at work in those mostly Muslim children."
- "Our community dinner," serving meals for 30 years, also an "important avenue for new people to get connected by serving together."
- "Safe parking to homeless people," who then join for church and men's breakfasts.
- "Providing backpacks + school supplies for school children, hosting AA, hosting community services organizations...community events, Christmas dinner, Canada Day celebration."
- The "Numbers 624" ministry teaches mathematics for the "underserved for free," drawing in "teens from neighbors."

*Intentional Hospitality and Inclusivity:* Churches are actively working to welcome and integrate diverse groups, demonstrating a "willingness to embrace all."

- The church that "was open and ready to receive...2 Muslims who came to our church, seeking to know more about 'the Jesus way.' The congregation loved and embraced them and introduced them to Jesus. Both of them were baptized by full immersion this past March!"
- Focus on becoming "a more intentional part of our community/neighborhood context," moving away from a "fix it" mentality to being "a loving presence that partners with the local community."
- "Bringing people from diverse backgrounds into our church in NW Washington"
- The "welcome and embrace of a large number of new Canadians into the congregations, very quickly expanding our diversity."
- "Bob + Karen followed the Holy Spirit's prompt to invite two new people to dinner after church...when one became homeless they picked him up for church...he invited others from the homeless shelter to come along and Bob + Karen invited them to dinner as well. Gradually, the congregation opened up to get to know them as people...and friends."

*Strategic Partnerships and Collaboration:* Churches are engaging with other organizations and churches to amplify their impact.

- "Sharing space, mission & fellowship" with Iglesia Misionera Renacer.
- Collaboration for "Church in the Park" and "combined church service with the church next door."
- "Building connections with, and serving at, a local elementary school."
- Engagement with "local emergency service as a chaplain."
- "Bringing churches together to begin a new ministry with the growing immigrant communities among us."

## Spiritual Renewal: God Working Within the Congregation

Beyond outward-facing efforts, there is a clear recognition of the work of the Holy Spirit in transforming individuals and the collective church body, often through prayer, spiritual disciplines, and openness to the Holy Spirit.



*Emphasis on Prayer and the Holy Spirit's Leading:* Prayer is foundational to many transformative experiences, both individual and corporate.

- "24 hours of prayer following a Maundy Thursday service where we had Spiritual Disciplines of engagement through Stations of the Cross."
- "Sunday worship services at my church are ALIVE. The Holy Spirit leads + guides the service + we've been growing in cooperation. Members gather before the service to pray. There are intercessors during the service and the leadership team (pastors) are subject to the leading + guiding of the Spirit during the service."
- "People coming together in prayer. Hearts united as we pray for one another or intercede for others. Hearts/minds opening to the work of the Holy Spirit."
- "More prayer requests have been answered: healing, reconciliation with the Lord and family."

*Healing and Deliverance Ministry:* There is a growing openness to and experience of spiritual and emotional healing.

- "Our church has a healing prayer ministry. We believe in the spiritual realm + in freedom + healing in Christ...those who have gone for prayer have experienced freedom from lies, demons, shame + have found life + joy + truth in Christ."
- "Deep emotional healing for someone who experienced extreme abuse by the occult...now walk free from fear because of the work of inner healing prayer ministry Jesus began at our church."

*Leadership Development and Adaptability:* Churches are actively raising new leaders, adapting to challenges, and demonstrating a willingness to change.

- "Deacon --> stuck in ways - strong views --> letting go --> letting Spirit change him --> open to new ideas --> open to being vulnerable --> championing new ministry ventures + ideas --> totally different person."
- "Developing and raising up new leaders (young & old) to serve in ministries."
- The "seamless transition" to a new pastor, hired from within the church.
- The story of Riverside CRC becoming North End Chapel, a "replant" that "celebrated our one-year anniversary, along with 6 new families."
- A ministry leader transitioning to a "more team-oriented approach that will be healthier for the ministry culture."

*Resilience and Growth Amidst Challenges:* Churches are finding ways to not only survive but thrive through difficult circumstances, particularly the COVID-19 pandemic.

- "We were all devastated when we got the news that my wife had a form of cancer...I was overwhelmed and grateful for the show of support. Many stories were shared. God's plan was hard to see but we trusted him."
- "Rise Up Church being a vibrant and growing new church plant against some major obstacles. The church plant started January 2020. After 9 Sundays, the pandemic closed the doors." Despite this, they are "still strong and moving forward."
- "After COVID, church numbers dwindled. When restrictions lifted, our church grew, thrived. Numbers grew, more members. Our online/media presence reached past our local area & reached thousands."

- The shift to online sermons during COVID became "a tool for new people to 'check us out.' People have come - and stayed - moved by the Spirit to 'belong' to something meaningful."
- One church gave space to Latino and Congolese congregations after "our efforts were frustrated" in trying to maintain pre-pandemic structures, and "when we let go, God opened doors!"

*Reconciliation and Unity:* The Holy Spirit is seen working to restore broken relationships and foster unity amidst differences.

- "A broken relationship was put back together...only by the grace of God" after a young man "cussed out the pastor."
- "A unity of the church when it has many differences that could + have divided the community in the past."
- "What unifies us is far bigger & far more than what might divide us. Maintaining unity."

## Unexpected and Providential Encounters: God's Sovereign Hand

Many accounts highlight instances where God's timing and intervention are clearly seen, often through seemingly coincidental or difficult situations.

*Divine Appointments:* Encounters that feel divinely orchestrated.

- The young adult who "ignored me persistently" for months but then "gets placed at the same job site as me. He now talks and engages with me."
- "A newcomer" couple who "gave the exact amount [of] money with saying that the Holy Spirit told me to give this money to you" to support missionaries.
- "This meeting was not my plan. I didn't know what God prepared for me..."

*God Working Through Difficulty:* Challenges and crises often become opportunities for God's presence and provision to be evident.

- "The time of the darkest hour of our church," leading to the "Numbers 624" ministry.
- The story of the church needing to move from its rented building, giving away furniture, and then "another church saw us giving things away + asked if we would come mentor their pastor about kingdom ministries. Our church now has a bigger home in my neighborhood."
- The church supported a family whose son suffered from mental health issues, homelessness, and death in custody: "It was a very hard time, when God showed up."
- A 15-year-old boy's death leading to his Christian parents publicly forgiving the driver and establishing a \$50,000+ scholarship fund.

*Bold Faith and Obedience:* Individuals demonstrating remarkable trust in God, with powerful outcomes.

- KP, the welder, who resigned rather than work on Sunday, and his boss then granted him Sundays off, seeing it as "an act of obedience, trust, and faith!"

In summary, the sources paint a picture of God actively working through various channels:

- *Relational Evangelism and Discipleship*: Personal connections are paramount for conversion and spiritual growth.
- *Holistic Community Engagement*: Churches are increasingly serving their neighborhoods in practical ways, building bridges, and fostering genuine relationships.
- *Internal Renewal and Spiritual Empowerment*: The Holy Spirit is central to transforming individuals, leadership, and the corporate life of the church through prayer, healing, and adaptability.
- *Divine Providence*: God's hand is seen in unexpected encounters and through challenging circumstances, demonstrating His faithfulness and sovereign plan.

## We Believe God is...

Based on the stories provided, there is a strong belief that God, through the Holy Spirit, 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 that God is working within the CRC:

### Impacting Communities and Outreach:

The Holy Spirit is powerfully at work, helping us impact our communities with Christ's love. This involves God opening our eyes to the needs of our communities, turning our eyes out and hearts toward our neighbors, and prompting us to ask, "who is our neighbour?". God is also sending us out and moving His people to bring the Good News to our neighbours. Furthermore, God is using His Church to create places and spaces for others to hear His Good News and experience His love and make us a blessing.

### Fostering Diversity, Inclusivity, and Unity:

God is actively growing diversity of community and faith expression and gathering a people of all nations. God is seen as gathering, welcoming all the nations into His Revelation 7 church and bringing together every tribe and tongue. He is also uniting His people, by teaching us to enfold, embrace, and care for each other and making us one. A vital part of this work is God fostering belonging.

### Building Community and Relationships:

God is building relationships and inviting us to be communities of hospitality and care. The belief is that God is giving us a taste of His Kingdom Community and building community through His people. He is also faithfully supporting His body to become a true community, and inviting us into the beautiful mess of covenant relationship. God is also growing people to be more like him through investing in one another.

## Nurturing Generations and Developing Leadership:

God is faithful to all generations and is reminding us we have a history and a story to share between generations. He is bringing up the new/next generation, calling youth to be leaders in the church, and using our youth now. God is also connecting generations and continuing his work from generation to generation, revealing Himself to the next generations. In terms of leadership, God is providing and equipping leaders to serve His church, raising up Godly leaders in our church, and calling and forming leaders. This includes God leading us to make disciples (Great Commission) and coming alongside through mentoring. God is also raising up leaders in unexpected ways, and is always leading us by creating disciples who lead and leaders who disciple.

## Transforming Lives and Revitalizing the Church:

God is using the ordinary to do the extraordinary and is shaking things up. He is reviving the church in unexpected ways, touching lives, and changing us. A core belief is that through the Holy Spirit, God is transforming lives as people come together to study the Word, drawing us deeper into his life and light, and turning bad into good. God is always transforming and growing his Church, and transforming people's faith through relationship and discipleship. He is in the business of changing hearts and souls and our entire being through the work of the Holy Spirit and His word. He is also transforming and refining His disciples, and is actively revitalizing and changing lives. This transformation also involves God deepening our love for and commitment to God.

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 theme is the affirmation of God's continuous and diverse work within individual lives, local churches, and the broader CRCNA denomination. This is articulated in various ways:

- "I saw His faithfulness. I saw His care + Love. I saw His plans. I saw His greatness."
- "Reminded me that it is all about Him."
- "Showed me how he has and continues to work in amazing and mysterious ways. He is working in every church, and he is the focal point of our church."
- "I confirmed that God is at work even when I couldn't notice it."
- "God reminded me that yes, He has always been working, and still is..."

- "Taught me again that God is at work (never stops working!)"

This pervasive sense of God's active involvement serves as a powerful source of encouragement and hope, counteracting anxieties about the future of the church.

The text identifies several specific ways in which God is perceived to be working:

#### In Individual Lives:

- Healing and Renewal: "Talked to me and healed my heart," "Refreshed my soul. Encouraged my heart."
- Guidance and Trust: "Challenged me to trust God through the process...", "Encouraged me to trust the place God has placed me, the gifts He has given me."
- Perspective Shift: "Taught me to focus less on me and more on Him as the driver in our church," "Showed me more of his perspective."
- Personal Faith Deepening: "Renewed my heart to tell the story that Jesus is alive today!!", "Reminded me of the importance of prayer in all aspects of my life and that of the church."
- Overcoming Fear: "Yo estoy Feliz Porque Dios me ha quitado el temor de estar rodeada de todas personas de diferentes culturas blancas, morenas, asiáticos, hispanos, todos muy lindos adorando un solo Dios." (I am happy because God has taken away the fear of being surrounded by all people from different cultures: white, brown, Asian, Hispanic, all very beautiful, worshiping only God.)

#### Within Local Churches:

- Inspiration for Growth: "The Holy Spirit is charging our church to 'Grow Deep and Wide' in 2024-2025 church season. Grow Deep in loving God. Grow wide in Loving our neighbor."
- Creative Ministry: "He is doing many creative things in others."
- Leadership Development: "Revealed to me that he is raising up young people + empowering them to lead in His church."
- Outreach and Community Engagement: "I am encouraged by the increase in activity by us as we reach out to our community."
- Addressing Challenges: Recognition of "common struggles" and "shrinking churches," but also "thriving churches, gifted leaders + passionate people who are gifted at and want to solve problems."

#### Across the CRCNA:

- Enhanced Unity and Connection: "Provided an opportunity to make connections across the denomination," "Brought deeper connection between CRC churches/individuals. Brought unity through worship + conversation."
- Shared Experience and Encouragement: "Provided great fellowship with others from our denomination -- near + Far -- that allowed me to see the common struggles + joys/successes we have."
- Broadened Vision: "Opened my eyes to the greater CRC family," "Showed me how big His story is by showing me what He is doing in other CRC churches. Broadening my vision of the church and his plan."

- Hope for the Future: "I renewed my hope about the future of the CRCNA and the mission we have in his body!" and "Has given me hope that better days may be ahead."
- Diversity and Inclusion: "Reminded us of the diversity of the Church," and "Showed me how He is working through different cultures, circumstances and even difficulties to build His church."

The importance of fellowship, shared stories, and communal worship is repeatedly highlighted:

- "Moved through individuals to share their stories + provide insight + encouragement to others as to how god is working in their lives and walking alongside them."
- "Has shown up for me in the faces of others in this room."
- "Encouraged us through the work He is doing at other churches."
- "Connected me with brothers & sisters who love God and His mission."
- "Provided opportunities for rich safe conversations that dig deep -- explore where + how God is at work..."

These interactions led to a sense of not being alone in challenges and a renewed appreciation for the broader "family of our Church."

While overwhelmingly positive, the responses also acknowledge the reality of challenges, questions, and even grief within the faith journey:

- "Reminded me of the place that questions, discouragement, and suffering are part of following Jesus."
- "I can sit in lament and let it fuel change all while trusting that god has always and is still at work."
- "Helped me to see I am not alone in my concerns with shrinking churches."
- "Showed me most churches struggle with the tension to not conform to the world."

However, these challenges are generally presented within the larger context of God's faithfulness giving us the ability to work through difficulties.

The reflections also contain implicit and explicit calls to action and a renewed commitment to discipleship:

- "Created a renewed desire to serve my local church."
- "Motivated us to pause and seek and listen for 'His' leading (Burning Hearts)."
- "Encouraged me to step out in faith, specifically in our prayer ministry at OCRC."
- "Motivates me to do more outreach."
- "God's Word will not return to Him void, as He will accomplish His plan whether we recognize Him or not!" This suggests a responsibility to participate in God's ongoing work.

These testimonies reveal a deeply encouraging and hope-filled perspective on the state of the CRCNA. The dominant message is that God is actively at work, faithfully guiding and empowering individuals and churches, fostering unity across the denomination, and providing a clear path forward for mission and ministry, even amidst challenges. The experiences shared emphasize the transformative power of communal reflection, shared stories, and a renewed focus on God's sovereignty and purpose.

