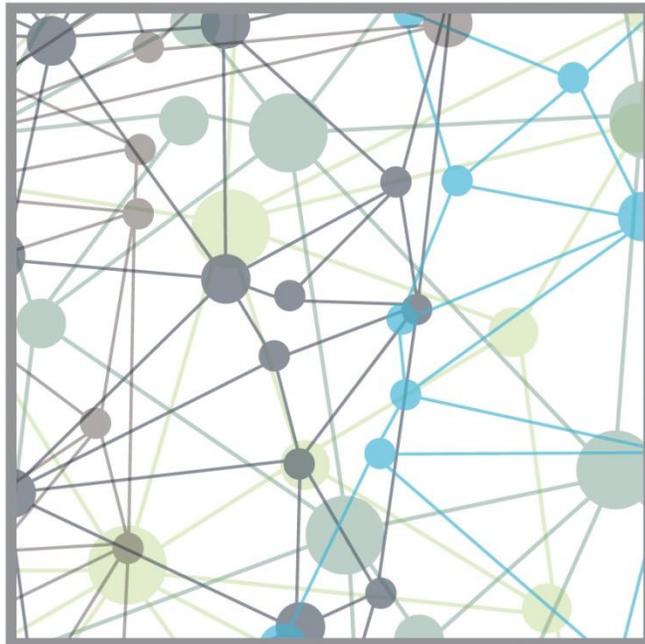


Connections Project Program Report

October 1, 2015 - June 30, 2017



Connections
P R O J E C T

Submitted by the Christian Reformed Church in North America

July 31, 2017

Objectives

The overall objective of the Connections Project is to create models of resourcing congregations in the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRCNA) at the regional/classical level. To accomplish this objective, our project proposal outlined six specific goals.

1. Develop and/or identify a **training program**—focusing on learning in community—for the regional resourcing teams that will enable them to effectively resource, and connect with, congregations.
2. Host **regional gatherings** where congregational teams gather for learning, connecting and the formation of cohorts.
3. Engage with cohorts and individual congregations to **meet resourcing needs**.
4. Create and foster **relationships** between congregations and resource catalyzer-consultants and coaches.
5. Resource congregations so that they experience **enhanced ministry**.
6. Intentionally **disseminate ongoing learning** with the goal of replicating the resourcing model in additional, and ultimately all, classes (middle judicatories).

During this reporting period we focused on goals one through four. By doing so we knew we could lay a strong foundation for accomplishing goals five and six in years two and three of the project.

Activities

What activities were undertaken and or accomplished in the past year?

- Fall of 2015 – Project Director Lis Van Harten began meeting with CRCNA Executive Director Steve Timmermans to develop plan for project roll out. Rev. Tim Shapiro, President of Indianapolis Center for Congregations (ICC), named Project Consultant.
- January 2016 – Derek Atkins started as Project Coordinator.
- January 2016 – Connections Advisory Team met for first time.
- Winter of 2016 – Derek and Lis traveled to 12 classis meetings to introduce project and invite participation.
- Spring of 2016 – Lis and Derek conducted interviews and hired ten regional staff—resource catalyzers and coaches.
- July 2016 – Project kicked off as Regional Team members started their work.
- July to September 2016 - Connections Project Team communicated and connected with people in their regions about project.
- August 2016 – First annual Connections Project Team training event in Grand Rapids, MI. Training included resource consulting training led by Tim Schapiro from ICC.
- Fall 2016 – Project’s first cohorts launched in ON.
- September 2016 – Ontario Team hosted *The Accessible Gospel* in Brantford, ON. Project’s first regional gathering.
- October 2016 – Southern California Team partnered with local mission leaders to host regional gathering, *Fan the Flame*, in Anaheim, CA.
- October 2016 – Connections Advisory Team met.
- October 2016 to June 2017 – Connections Project Team engaged in resource conversations, facilitated learning cohorts and offered resource coaching for congregations and their leaders.
- Winter 2017 – Cohorts launched in Southern California.
- January 2017 – Midwest Team hosted *The Distinctively Healthy Church* in Des Moines, IA.
- February 2017 – Project update given to CRCNA’s Board of Trustees.

- April 2017 – Connections Advisory Team met.
- May 2017 – Connections Project Team gathered in Grand Rapids for second team training event. Tim Shapiro presented.
- June 2017 – Three Connections Project Team members took on split regional roles with CRC's Faith Formation Ministries fulfilling commitment to Lilly Endowment Inc. to have 50% of three Connections' positions funded by denomination during 2017-18.

How did these activities advance specific project objectives?

All of the activities noted above were carried out with the intention of meeting the goals set forth in the proposal. Our two team training events were planned in cooperation with Tim Shapiro in order to enable our teams to effectively resource and connect with congregations. (Goal #1) Each of our regional teams hosted a regional gathering for congregational leaders to learn and connect with each other. (Goal #2) Our teams formed cohorts and engaged in resource conversations to address resourcing needs. In doing so they created and fostered relationships with congregations. (Goals #3 and 4) We hope all the activities helped lay the foundation for congregations to experience enhanced ministry. (Goal #5)

What activities proved most and least successful?

Most Successful

Our staff training program and the development of the team as a learning community has been a great success. It was evident by the end of the second training in May 2017 that the teams had the tools, postures and support needed to effectively resource congregations. They also showed they are hungry to continue to learn and to grow as a team.

Another success was the January 2017 regional gathering in Des Moines, IA. While the other two regional gatherings attracted similar numbers, the Des Moines event attracted church *teams* rather than individuals (75 people came representing 14 churches). Our original plan was that churches would send teams to the events. The IA event evaluations showed a real appreciation for the opportunity to gather, learn and connect. Some even expressed interest in having more frequent events in the future.

The cohorts launched in Southern California were another success. They connected several previously disconnected ethnic minority leaders who explored the topics of community engagement and church planting. One participant remarked that it was the first time he felt the denomination actually cared about him and his ministry.

Last but not least, we have been able to have meaningful engagements with more churches than we even imagined. We have had interactions with leaders in over 47% of the 274 churches in the three regions within the first year. Our goal at the end of the project is to have interacted with leaders in 60% of the churches, so we are already more than halfway to our three year goal. (We consider interactions to be conversations in person, by email or phone that are beyond introductions to the project.)

Least Successful

We have not seen the success we thought we would in cohorts emerging from regional events. The plan was that regional gatherings would be the primary source for cohort development but very few of our cohorts have actually come out of regional events. Instead, many cohorts began more organically through the Regional Team members' existing or emerging networks.

Another area we have not seen as much success as we hoped is in resource coaching—which is a new concept for our churches. Some of the team members are really excelling in this area and working with a lot of different leaders but others are not in any coaching relationships. We hope that as the project continues and relationships are strengthened, and resource coaching is understood, the many one-off conversations team members are having will turn into coaching opportunities.

How realistic were your timeline and expectations?

We got off to a slower start than we hoped. The original plan was to have the regional teams in place and the project ready to launch by May 1, 2016 but this was overly optimistic.

Another area where we were off was the feasibility of having the first regional gatherings occur in the fall of 2017. With the project launching mid-summer (when many congregational leaders are off-line, especially if they are in part-time or volunteer positions), there was not much time for our yet unknown project to gather the momentum needed to host Connections Project events. The Ontario Team had a unique opportunity when a locally run worship conference was cancelled somewhat last minute. The team joined with another CRC's ministry, Faith Formation Ministries, to develop a replacement event. If this opportunity had not occurred, they would have struggled to host a gathering in an already crowded fall event season. Sensing the same dynamics of an already too crowded event field in Los Angeles, the California Team decided to partner with an existing event. The Midwest Team hosted a Connections specific gathering which took place in January 2017—after they had time to build up some relational capital and brand recognition.

When it comes to expectations around general engagement with the project, we found our expectations were set too low. By the end of the first year, our teams had measurable engagements with far more churches than we imagined. The Ontario Team met the three year project goal of engaging with 60% of the congregations in their region within nine months of the project launch and the other two regions were over 50% of the way to the 60% goal.

Leaders and Partners

Who are the key leaders of this effort? How is their work progressing? In what ways are they changing, growing, or learning through their engagement with the project? Is leadership emerging in unforeseen places?

The implementation of the Connections Project is led by ten part-time regional resource coaches and resource catalyzers. These leaders are divided into three regional teams and serve a total of 274 congregations in 12 classes (middle judicatories)—each team serving four classes. Two teams are located in the U.S. (serving congregations in Southern California and the U.S. Upper Midwest) and one is located in Canada (serving congregations in the Eastern Greater Toronto area and Southeastern Ontario).

The regional staff is led by the Project Coordinator Derek Atkins. Lis Van Harten is the Project Director. Both Derek and Lis are based in the CRCNA's offices in Grand Rapids, MI. The work of all involved in the project is progressing well—in fact, beyond expectations. The staff is become more comfortable with their roles and the tools they are employing to connect with and serve congregations. The Project Coordinator has overseen a successful project launch and is now working with the regional teams to ensure they are equipped to continue their early success.

Several of the Regional Team members are emerging as uniquely skilled in various aspects of the project. Joel DeBoer, the resource coach for our Iowa churches, is doing a lot of one-on-one resource coaching with pastors and really helping the project take a shape that fits the needs of the mainly rural churches and leaders he works with. Tomas Ivens, a Latino church planter in Los Angeles and a Connections resource coach, is showing great skill in putting together and facilitating cohort-style learning—especially with pastors and leaders from ethnic minority congregations in the Los Angeles area. Lesli Van Milligen, one of the resource coaches in the Ontario region, has found a way to combine her Connections Project role with her other part-time regional role with the CRC's Faith Formation Ministries to become a go-to source of support for congregations in the classes with which she works.

Who are your partners beyond your own institution? Describe how your partnership relationships are developing and working.

Since our project is focused on serving congregations in the CRCNA, we do not have any partners in this project.

We have, however, benefited greatly from our connection with Rev. Tim Shapiro and the Indianapolis Center for Congregations. They have been doing resourcing work for many years and their work, as well as the work of the other institutions in the Resourcing Congregations Network, has been a model for our resourcing efforts.

Grant Products

The Connections Project has not created or published any resources for public use.

How have the findings from this project been disseminated? Which dissemination strategies have proven the most effective?

Given the early stage of this project, we have not engaged in any large scale dissemination of the project's findings. We have presented some of our work to the denomination's Board of Trustees as well as our Advisory Team. Regular updates are given to the CRCNA's Executive Director, Steve Timmermans, and Director of Ministries and Administration, Colin Watson as well as the leadership of the CRC's Congregational Services Ministries.

Connections Project updates have also been featured in several CRC News stories, an article in *The Banner* (the CRC's denominational magazine), and posts on the CRC's Network blog site. (See appendix for copies of these documents.)

Impact

What differences is this project making for participants? How is it affecting your institution?

It still a little early for us to get a good feel about the difference the project is making for participants—congregational and classis leaders who have engaged in resourcing conversations, coaching, cohorts or events with members of the Connection Project regional teams. We have requested feedback but our response numbers were quite low. Next year we will set up a system that will get quarterly feedback and evaluations rather than yearend. Outside of regional event evaluations, we do not have many formal evaluations to use to form any conclusions.

Anecdotally, there is some real appreciation and momentum developing. Here are some of the quotes we have collected along the way.

- “Really appreciate Joel DeBoer, his willingness to listen and give advice for the team I'm leading at our church. I hope we can keep the conversation going and maybe expand it at some point.” (U.S. Midwest)
- “I am relatively new to ministry in this area, having worked here for just over a year, and having been ordained for just 6 months. Both Lesli and Marian have been incredible sources of support and information as I navigate a new ministry culture and position, and have been an amazing resource for the ministries of Ancaster CRC.” (Ontario)
- “We are still in the early stages of exploring ministry options and determining our course. So far the assistance from your team has been good guidance and we anticipate that future help will be needed and beneficial.” (Ontario)
- "The experiences are sparking externally focused, kingdom-oriented, people-developing ministries within CRC congregations in Southern California." (Southern California)
- The project is giving “motivación para continuar y aprendizaje para mejorar.” (Southern California)

In the U.S. Midwest, resource coach Joel DeBoer reports a real shift occurring since the project has launched, especially in the two classes he is working with. Joel thinks that as leaders have become more comfortable talking with him about opportunities and challenges, and as he has shared those stories and helped connect those leaders, a new openness to sharing and change has developed. One big change he sees, that is tied to our work, is the recent vote to allow women deacons and elders to come to classis meetings for the first time. We look forward to more stories like is coming out of the project in years two and three.

While changes at the participant level are just starting to emerge, perhaps the biggest impact so far has been at the denominational level. The Connections Project has brought several issues to the forefront in our internal conversations about serving churches. Several of these conversations have resulted in new initiatives and actions that will be rolling out over the next year.

- The need for a new regional team approach using dispersed staff has resulted in the formation of the Resourcing Congregations Functional Team launched in July 2017 with a cross-department staff retreat led by George Bullard.
- The need for an easily accessible database of CRC resources has resulted in the creation of a “One-Click” searchable resource database that will make it easier for congregations and regional staff to search for and access resources for ministry.
- The current lack of clear pathways for resource support over the phone has resulted in the formation of a team to explore re-tooling the CRC’s Faith Alive Christian Resources Customer Service Team to be a Congregational Resource Services Team that will provide customer service and resource support via a “One Call” toll-free support line.
- The need for the CRC to begin to sustain some of the cost of Connections Project regional teams and to begin to embed the Connections Project into the CRC’s exiting regional structure has resulted in three Connections Project regional team members taking on dual, cross-ministry roles as regional catalyzers/coaches for both the Connections Project and Faith Formation Ministries.

How have you defined success for this effort, in the short term? In the long term?

Per the goals mentioned on page one, we hoped that in year one of the project we would have:

- developed and/or identified a staff training program.

Reflection

What have you learned of significance about the main themes or issues of this project?

- Most congregations need help maneuvering the maze of resources that are available. With a plethora of resources available to them from the denomination and beyond they value a local, trusted voice to guide them through the discovery process.
- In many cases, connections between congregations are just as, if not more, valuable as the connection to a book, video or article resource.
- Rural churches and churches in outlying areas are looking for more opportunities to get together with other churches to learn and network. Those in more densely populated urban or suburban areas, where resources and events are more accessible, are not as excited about new gathering opportunities.
- Ethnic minority leaders and congregations can feel overlooked by denominational projects. Having resource coaches and catalyzers who intentionally connect with these folks is a real need as our denomination grows more diverse.
- Our previous approach to regional ministry has led to confusion not only for our congregations, but within the system of CRC ministries and agencies itself. Many regional staff have functioned as independent contractors and have not been encouraged to cooperate with other regional resources and staff.
- Working with classical leaders provides a sort of fast-track into conversations and resourcing possibilities with congregations in the classis.

What are your key challenges and what do they mean?

We have identified several key challenges that we will need to be working on over the next two years of the project. Some of these have already been mentioned.

1. Regional staff communication and collaboration

As our project launched, it quickly became clear, both from our team's experience and what they were hearing in the field, that while many of the ministries and agencies of the CRC have regional staff and regional initiatives, they tended to function more like independent contractors reporting only to their own agency or ministry. This approach has led to confusion among congregational leaders who are often unsure about who is working with, and for, whom and who they should turn to for support.

Our agencies and ministries must do a better job of collaborating in the denominational offices and their dispersed staff must begin to see themselves as part of a larger regional team of CRC employees in place to serve the congregations. A re-visioning of regional staffing models and roles will begin in the summer of 2017.

2. Trust issues

One thing we did not anticipate was the deep lack of trust of denominational projects. Particularly in the rural Midwest we found many leaders eyed our resourcing efforts with some suspicion and were weary of an underlying agenda being advanced via the project. Two of our team members in the Midwest have been involved in local ministry within the region for years and even they noticed some of their peers holding things at arm's length when they announced they were on the denominational payroll and part of a new denominational project.

Our regional team members need to put more effort into relationship building and living into the listening postures of the project. The Connections Project represents a new approach when it comes to denominational support systems. We have to do the patient work of listening, show how it is different and let the positive stories spread in order to overcome some of the suspicion we are encountering.

3. Lack of single-source resource database

As our teams began their work they were searching multiple locations just to find what CRC produced congregational resources were available. Many of the rich resources the denomination has produced over the years, or news of new resources and learning opportunities, lay buried on the webpages of the individual CRC ministries and agencies.

We must find a way to make our resources more accessible, not only for the Connections Project resource teams, but for the leaders in our congregations who turn to the denomination for resource support. In response to this, the creation of a “One Click” searchable database for congregational resources is now underway.

4. Korean congregations

Two of the classes involved in the Connections Project in Southern California are made up exclusively of Korean-speaking congregations. Historically, these congregations and their leaders have not engaged in many denominational projects and initiatives—with the exception of our Sustaining Pastoral Excellence program. Because of cultural and generational differences things like seeking assistance, being coached, and even sharing about opportunities and challenges are not the norms. We found working with Korean leaders, especially first generation leaders, to be challenging in many ways.

We need to find ways to adapt the project, even the very posture and idea of resourcing, to fit the culture of the Korean-speaking churches in Southern California. Ron Chu, the resource coach to the Korean churches, has been taking a slow but steady approach to rolling out the project with these churches. It will be interesting to see how things develop as he lays the relational foundation for his resourcing work during the rest of the project.

How can your work be strengthened?

There are already several things in place going into year two that will strengthen our work. The regional team conversations, the “One Click” and “One Call” projects, and the sharing of three Connections team members with Faith Formation Ministries should all result in a stronger project. In addition, our staff grew dramatically in terms of working together as a team—both regionally and across the project. Our work will only get stronger as those teams continue to develop.

What lessons might be worth sharing with others?

At this point, we do not have many lessons ready to share. We have some ideas and trends we are keeping an eye on (see bullet points under the first question in the “Reflections” section on page seven) and will hopefully have some lessons ready to share at the end of year two.

Next Steps

What activities are planned for the coming year and in what timeframe?

Year Two of the Connections Project will look similar to year one in that we will continue to host regional gatherings and support congregations through resourcing conversations, coaching and cohorts. We hope to see increased engagement both in terms of numbers and depth.

The regional gatherings are being planned based on feedback from year one.

- California. This fall the team will again partner with the *Fan the Flame* event. They are also hoping to plan a learning event in the winter where the leaders involved in the year one cohorts on community engagement and church planting share their experiences and learnings with other leaders from the region.
- U.S. Midwest. The team will be returning to Des Moines to host a regional gathering for the Iowa churches in January. Because the region covers such a large geographic area they are also hoping to host two or three mini gatherings aimed at churches in locations that typically do not have access to larger learning events. Hopefully this will help engage the congregations north of the Twin Cities, in the areas to the south of the Twin Cities and in rural Wisconsin.
- Ontario. The team is focusing on putting together a regional gathering aimed at engaging churches on the outskirts of the region—especially those in the rural areas of eastern Ontario. In the past, every fall Diaconal Ministries of Canada (DMC) put on large resourcing event for churches from across Ontario. This year they are taking a year off to retool the event. We did not want to make it appear that the Connections Project was trying to take advantage of DMC's year off by creating a competing event to the longstanding traditional event they have hosted.

Beyond the regional gatherings, Connections Project teams will be focusing on engaging churches in cohort learning experiences large and small. We received some help with designing cohort experiences from Tim Shapiro at our May 2017 staff training and are hoping to involve more churches by kicking off new cohorts this fall.

What steps are being taken to sustain this effort when the grant ends?

There has already been some advancement when it comes to sustainability options. The grant stipulates that the CRC take on part of the salaries of the Connections Project team members in years two and three in an effort to embed and sustain our congregational resourcing work. In year two, Faith Formation Ministries will pick up half of two of our team members' salaries as they perform split Connections/Faith Formation roles. Another one of our team members will be fully funded by Faith Formation Ministries and work on embedding her Connections Project resourcing into her role as the Faith Formation regional catalyzer.

Evaluation

What steps are being taken to evaluate the project? Specifically:

a) What kinds of data are you gathering to find out if you are succeeding?

There are two main ways we are gathering data to help evaluate the project.

- Tracking interactions: Team members record the details of each resourcing interaction he/she has with congregational and classical leaders. In year two, the CRC will provide funds to allow each Connections Project regional team member to have his/her own login to the denominational database to record interactions in real-time. From these records we can gather the raw information and statistics to help us shape the project and report on our efforts.
- Evaluations: In year one after each regional gathering and at the end of the year, we asked those with whom we have engaged to complete an evaluation of our work. In year two we will do evaluations after each regional gathering and quarterly with those whom we interact with in cohorts, conversations and coaching. We hope this will get us a better response rate going forward.

b) How will you use what you learn to improve the project?

We use the statistics to measure our progress toward project goals as well as track trends in our interactions (topics, types of interactions, etc.). The regional teams will discuss the feedback received from those they engage with and use it to adjust or focus their work as the project moves forward.

c) How will you share what you learn with others?

Our dissemination plans will begin in earnest in the coming year. As we begin to work on them we will continue to look for opportunities to share what we are learning with others. We regularly share about our work with the leaders of the CRC's Congregational Services Group. Our work will significantly inform the larger regional team development work of the Resourcing Congregations Functional Team. In February 2017, our work was shared with the strategic planning committee of the CRC's Board of Trustees. We will continue look for opportunities to share stories of our work on the CRC's Network site, *The Banner* (our denominational magazine), and via CRC News stories.