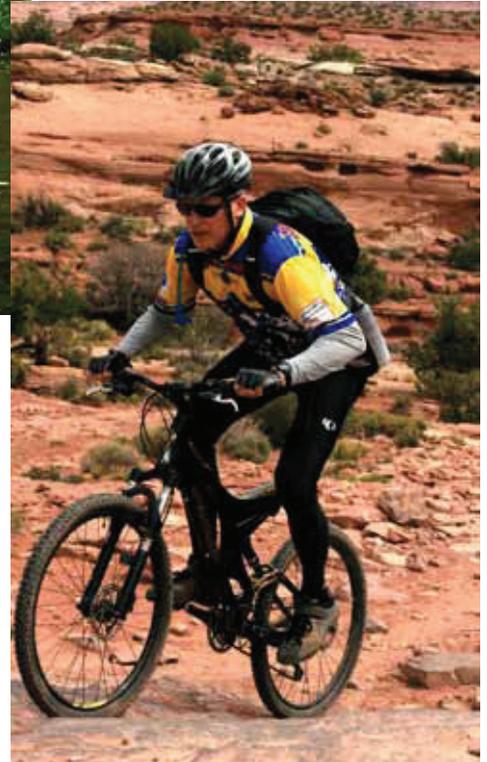




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# Finding **creative** ways of **renewal**

*by Lis Van Harten*



North American culture is such that we work too hard, and too much. While the resulting productivity is a good thing, it often leaves us spiritually, emotionally, physically, and mentally depleted. If we are going to survive—even thrive—in such a culture, we need to incorporate renewal into our lives. After all, even God took a day off from the work of creation. But how does one go about being renewed? It is strange that the question even needs to be considered. Is renewal best experienced with others or by oneself? It depends on how you are wired. What activities lead to renewal? Here is the truly great part. There is no one right answer. In fact, most people will have a number of answers.

Within the last decade or so there has been increasing participation in peer groups. Group members generally have at least one thing in common—which is often what brings them together. What they do as a group varies but one common outcome is renewal. Numerous pastoral leaders across the US and Canada have experienced the blessing of peer groups, and renewal. The Christian Reformed Church in North America's (CRCNA) peer group program gives pastors the freedom to design their group experience. Popular components include reading and discussing books, prayer, attending conferences or retreats, sharing ministry joys and challenges, and the breaking of bread. All of these can, and have, led to renewal.

The peer group members are finding renewal in a number of creative ways. A group from the Midwest met for several retreats at a monastery. One participant said, "The regular rest from ministry has helped me have a steady stamina for the weekly routines of being a pastor." Local pastors in British Columbia gathered in a pub to share life and ministry. Ken Boonstra, a pastor from Langley, BC, reported, "It was wonderfully refreshing and re-energizing to meet together." A New England group trekked through two feet of snow on snowshoes to get to the cabin where their retreat would be held. "The woods were quiet and still; nothing but snow, trees, the occasional trickle of water and my own breathing. That was a moment with God the creator," noted Bruce Dykstra, a pastor from Douglas, MA. Five pastors

from Colorado spent the day floating in a boat on a beautiful lake surrounded by mountains. Mark Quist from Grand Junction, CO at the time said, [I am] "emotionally, spiritually, and physically healthier because we meet regularly together in the format we do."

Much to the delight of some, renewal occurs in surprising, unintentional ways. Often the time spent getting to an event meant to refresh the participants results in significantly greater renewal than the event itself. And something as common as a lunch can be renewing. Bonny Mulder-Behnia, moderator of the *Advocate* committee for APCE and pastor from Bellflower, CA, recently said, "I feel like I just attended a week-long spiritual retreat in just a two-hour lunch."

Some groups specifically include play as part of their peer group plan. For others, it just happens. Some may wrestle with the idea of adults playing. "Play is often seen as the lowest of pleasures, a danger to the Christian life in that it leads to idleness, the unproductive use of time, vanity, and sinful activities."<sup>1</sup> Kevin Edlefsen, a pastor in Fond du Lac, WI, says, "Play, like Sabbath rest, is an acknowledgement that God is in control and I don't have to be." "Play rejuvenates my spirit and my body," says John Terpstra from Fort Collins, CO. "Times of play help me get out of my head and into the moment. They cleanse me of pressure, constant self-evaluation, and the worry of judgment. In many ways they remind me that ministry is about being rather than doing and in that way encourage me toward living by grace," said Jeff Brower of Waupun, WI.

The kind of play that pastors are engaging in with their peer groups is wide and varied. These include hiking, taking a boat tour, kayaking, attending a play, biking, crosscountry skiing, group retreats with spouses, watching baseball games, and rock climbing.

It is not just the peer group activities, intentionally planned or not, that contribute toward renewal. The simple act of people getting together to share life brings renewal. It could well be that this sharing of life has resulted in the greatest renewal for CRC pastors. Testimonies include such things as a renewed sense

of calling, energy to carry on, desire to stay in ministry when one foot was out the door, and spiritual refreshment. Getting together may not seem overly creative but when we reflect on the busyness of our lives, perhaps it is. How often is time taken to sit and talk and listen—really listen? To delight in the company of others? To share life, hopes, and dreams?

The way pastors and educators find and experience renewal is not so important. That we find and experience it is. Why not schedule an appointment time for renewal on a regular basis? Then explore the myriad of opportunities that God has waiting for you. ■

1 Hammond, Jaco J. *A Play-Full Life: Slowing Down and Seeking Peace*. Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2011, pg 205.



Lis Van Harten works with CRCNA pastors as they find renewal through peer groups. She is the director of the Sustaining Pastoral Excellence program—which she says is a labor of love.

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