



Christian
Reformed
Church

our journey 2020

FINAL REPORT

CHURCH AND COMMUNITY ▪ DISCIPLESHIP ▪ LEADERSHIP ▪ IDENTITY ▪ COLLABORATION

Our Journey 2020 launched in fall 2016 as a denomination-wide ministry plan with five desired futures that arose out of strategic listening sessions with CRCs across North America:

CHURCH AND COMMUNITY: *Congregations of the Christian Reformed Church participate with each other and with their local communities to discern where the Spirit is working and to bear witness to Christ's presence in a way that invites others to accept him and become part of his family.*

DISCIPLESHIP: *We are vibrant, grace-shaped communities engaged in lifelong discipleship with people of all generations, places of winsome welcome for our communities.*

LEADERSHIP: *Congregations and ministries of the Christian Reformed Church are places where clergy and lay leaders are developed, trained, and empowered to lead effectively in today's diverse and challenging contexts.*

IDENTITY: *Congregations and members of the Christian Reformed Church understand deeply, embrace fully, and express freely what it means to be a part of the Christian Reformed Church in North America.*

COLLABORATION: *Congregations and ministries of the Christian Reformed Church interact together in ways that are effective, efficient, responsive, cross-culturally competent, easily accessible, and sustainable.*

These five desired futures were communicated to churches and to CRCNA staff. Resources were created to help congregations pursue these objectives. Staff also developed a comprehensive set of counts for each of these five desired futures and faithfully reported on the activities they completed to try to bring about these changes. Through an annual survey of CRCNA members, progress was also tracked on how local congregations responded to these activities.

Four years later we wrapped up the plan in fall 2020. On the following pages we outline a few of the key changes we saw over these four years, as well as some learnings that we can use to improve our next ministry plan.



Church and Community

In the area of church and community, the CRCNA had a desire that congregations would participate with each other and with their local communities to discern where the Spirit is working and to bear witness to Christ's presence in a way that invites others to accept him and become part of his family. Within this desired future, we outlined two strategic foci:

1. **Congregations discover and discern how God is at work in their churches and communities, bringing renewal and transformation.**
2. **Ministry leaders, both ordained and lay, discover and discern how God is at work in their communities, resulting in the birth of new churches and discipling communities.**

There was good progress in this area overall.

- More than 120 congregations each year **participated in at least one assessment activity** such as Ridder, Community opportunity scan, Renewal Lab, Healthy Church, Mission Insights, etc.
- More than 40 congregations every quarter were **involved in learning communities** that designed experiments and developed plans and strategies to enhance ministry contextualization and renewal. The highest number of congregations participating at one time was 73 in the last quarter of the fourth year.
- 48 established churches participated in the **starting of new churches**, either as a partner or a parent church.
- **80 churches were added to the denomination** (planted or coming in as an established church) during this four-year period, although some have since closed.
- Potential **church planters were identified, assessed, and trained** each year.

Despite these positive steps, the denominational survey responses over the four years show that church planting and sharing our faith with others is not something that our members and congregations are doing much of. This will need to continue to be an area of emphasis for us.



Discipleship

In the area of discipleship we set a goal of becoming vibrant, grace-shaped communities engaged in lifelong discipleship with people of all generations, places of winsome welcome for our communities. There were five strategic foci to help us achieve this goal.

1. Our congregations develop and strengthen a faith-storytelling culture.
2. Our congregations are experienced as places where people of all generations find their spiritual homes and grow together in the likeness of Christ.
3. Our congregations discern and implement evangelism and discipleship practices and resources that best bless their ministries, based on their unique identities and context.
4. Our congregations engage children, youth, and young adults in the life of the church.
5. Our congregations are characterized by vibrant worship that engages people of all the ages.

Again, we saw good overall progress.

- Faith Formation Ministries prioritized **faith storytelling as a central component to healthy faith formation**. They developed a [faith storytelling toolkit](#), full of accessible resources for congregations, and they facilitated congregational and classis workshops related to storytelling. They also integrated storytelling practices into most of our other resources.
- Faith Formation Ministries **facilitated a wide range of cohort experiences with teams from over 60 congregations participating**. These emphasized the importance of intergenerational faith formation. Each cohort met from six months to a year in duration, and FFM staff resourced and coached participating teams after their cohort had finished.

- FFM's regional structure allowed them to **respond with great flexibility to the needs and opportunities in particular congregations**. They found particular growth over the past couple of years through increased attention to specialized networks and Facebook groups, specifically with our [Youth Champions](#), [Children's Ministry Leaders](#), and [Dwell Curriculum Leaders](#). Additionally, they developed weekly faith formation tips for congregations to utilize in their bulletins, as well as toolkits, "10 ways" topics, and *Dwell at Home* resources. Moreover, the publications of [Everyday Family Faith](#) (in both English and Korean), [Dear Parent](#), and [God's Big Story](#) cards have provided much-needed resources for family/home-based faith formation.
- From *Dwell* curriculum and *Everyday Family Faith* to numerous guides on [children at the Lord's Supper](#) and [intergenerational ministry](#), FFM **placed a high value on developing children's ministry opportunities and resources**. This emphasis has also been accentuated and advanced through the addition of congregation-facing staff in terms of a [Dwell Curriculum Coordinator](#) and a [Children's Ministry Catalyzer](#).
- A Youth Champion network has representatives from over 30 classes, including every Canadian classis. The support for these Youth Champions include monthly calls, coaching from Ron deVries (FFM's youth ministry catalyzer), and an annual retreat. FFM also developed collaborative partnerships with the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada (Renegotiating Faith report), Therefore Go Ministries (formerly Youth Unlimited), Fuller Youth Institute (Growing Young and Growing With), and the RCA's Next Generation Engagement, which have enhanced the CRCNA's capacity to resource congregations for youth ministry throughout the denomination. FFM also **produced numerous resources focused on youth and emerging adults**, including a guide to hiring and staffing for youth ministry.
- Worship Ministries has worked to **support congregations in their learning and development in the area of vibrant worship**. They have developed resources (print, webinars, workshops) around worship and various age demographics, and their staff and endorsed coaches regularly engage congregations and individuals around related topics.

This is probably the desired future in which we had the most success over the past four years.

Denominational survey results also show a definite correlation between overall church health and churches that do well at incorporating storytelling and other faith-formative practices into their Sunday worship.



Leadership

Our third desired future sought for congregations and ministries of the Christian Reformed Church to be places where clergy and lay leaders are developed, trained, and empowered to lead effectively in today's diverse and challenging contexts. Four strategic foci were identified to help us achieve this objective.

1. Congregations and ministries discover, understand, and respond to leadership needs in ways that meet their local contexts.
2. Congregations and ministries are characterized by Spirit-filled leaders who have the skills to minister in their local contexts, both internal and external.
3. Congregations and ministries participate in leadership development efforts in mutually beneficial partnerships throughout the world.
4. Congregations and ministries create opportunities for women, racial-ethnic minorities, people with disabilities, and young adults to discover and develop their leadership gifts and callings.

A few highlights from the past four years include the following:

- 100 percent of seminary students from CRC backgrounds **were informed about the possibility of seeking financial support from their classis**. Follow-up has also been done with classes to learn what type of support was provided when requested. We have learned that this support comes to more than \$750,000 provided to over 100 individuals each year!
- **Increased emphasis was placed on programs to help develop and support leaders from nontraditional backgrounds into ordained ministry**. This included the Ecclesiastical Program for Ministerial Candidacy (EPMC), Korean Institute in Ministry (KIM), English Language Institute in Ministry (ELIM), and Spanish Language Institute in Ministry (SLIM) programs.

- Approximately one-half of **candidates for ministry are now graduates of seminaries other than Calvin Theological Seminary** (who then participate in the EPMC as a CRC orientation program in the candidacy journey). The EPMC brings a stream of “broader experiences and backgrounds” into the pastoral leadership cadre for the CRC and our future ministry. This is NOT to say that Calvin Seminary has failed to grow in diversity over the past decade — it surely has. A future challenge will be that of maintaining and developing a system for candidates and pastors that helps them and us understand and own and creatively express a Reformed identity.
- The CRCNA began **tracking the number of newly ordained ministers who have been connected with a mentor** with a goal of 100 percent participation (currently averaging 75%).
- Our chaplaincy ministry continues to represent a vibrant stream of ministry done in the name of the CRCNA through leaders we develop. Over the past four years, a growing number of diverse chaplains have been supported and fully trained with Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE). **They have completed the endorsement process** administered through Chaplaincy and Care and are connected with their local calling churches through a covenant of joint supervision and support.
- In Pastor Church Resources we are seeing how self-awareness for pastors is an important component to their overall health. During *Our Journey 2020* the Birkman assessment tool took on increasing importance, and **our current goal within PCR is that every pastor in the CRC receive a Birkman assessment**. We are well on the way toward reaching that goal, with more than 789 pastors having completed assessments.
- **A continuing education (CE) website for pastors was created**. While continuing education has always been a value, we are looking to increasingly support CE as an important component to ongoing formation in ministry for pastors. We are looking for ways to embed intentional, collaboratively chosen (with other church leadership) CE and growth opportunities, partly by encouraging a regular CE discussion related to an annual pastor evaluation.
- 77 regional pastors, including at least one in each classis, **provide support to pastors and classes and report back to the CRCNA**. We have increased support for these regional pastors and are using an annual reporting form to give them a better opportunity to reflect on their own ministry and give us a better idea of how to support them.
- **A Spiritual Vitality Toolkit for pastors was created** and has had more than 3,000 visits in English, 220 visits in Korean, and 75 visits in Spanish.
- An Evaluations Essentials Toolkit was created and sent to all churches **to help them do an annual evaluation of their congregational leaders**.

- A **strong network of diaconal leaders exists** that regularly brings together Diaconal Ministries Canada staff with nongovernment organizations in the U.S. that were once or still are Deacon Conferences. These leaders confirm that while the call of Synod 2015 was for a rather dramatic shift in the role and function of deacon, change at the local level is incremental and sporadic. Without leadership from pastors and councils, deacons generally continue to function in their traditional roles.
- Some churches are thinking through their diaconal work, seeing the importance of it, and putting creative ideas in place. Some other **churches are rethinking the council structure — using models of shared leadership, longer terms, mentoring, with deacons involved in all levels of leadership**, and are seeing progress.
- Resonate Global Mission has been partnering with CRC congregations to form their own missional leaders and engage them in the support of missional leader formation around the world. Tools like Timothy Leadership Training, Educational Care, Faith and Life, Go Local, Churches Learning Change, Alpha, etc. are all great processes that form missional leaders. **Many of the leaders that Resonate forms go on to become the church planters, missionaries, campus ministers, and community chaplains** of the next generation.
- Raise Up Global Ministries **equips global and North American leaders with inductive materials and training in how to lead inductively**. The programs equip leaders through training and coaching. The leaders include pastors, key congregational leaders (Timothy Leadership Training), small group leaders and participants (Global Coffee Break), and Christian educators (Educational Care).
- 34 campus ministries are **active on 40 campuses and are supported by 24 classes and 495 congregations**. Over 1,600 students are reached by these ministries.

These are all positive signs, and the tools and systems created will continue to support and encourage pastors, elders, deacons, missionaries, and other leaders as we move into the future. We also know that the COVID-19 pandemic has placed new stress on our pastors and leaders. The need for this type of work and support will continue.

We also note that there is a tendency in the church everywhere for a few leaders (pastors, key employees, and a few officebearers like deacons and elders) to become “ministry providers” for entire congregations. This kind of culture limits mission by removing the responsibility for it from other leaders in the congregation. However, when congregations mentor, form, and train more and more leaders, the Holy Spirit uses them to multiply the mission impact of the church many times over.

Identity

In the area of identity the CRCNA set a goal of having congregations and members understand deeply, embrace fully, and express freely what it means to be a part of the Christian Reformed Church in North America. We identified four strategic foci:

1. Congregations and ministries develop ways to broaden and deepen our understanding of our shared identity as the Christian Reformed Church in North America.
2. Congregations, ministries, and members of the Christian Reformed Church understand, embrace, and express our identity as part of Christ's church worldwide.
3. Congregations, ministries, and members understand, embrace, and express our identity as a diverse church gathered from "every nation, tribe, and language."
4. Congregations, ministries, and members respond to the call to "do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly" with God.

A few key highlights:

- **The denominational survey has affirmed for us year after year that our local churches and members understand what it means to be "Reformed."** The survey shows that the top five terms associated with "what Christian Reformed means to me" are "Christ-centered," "Scripture-centered," "Faith formation for all ages," "Every square inch belongs to Christ," and "Worship-filled." The least popular terms are "uniform," "liberal," "mainstream," "outdated," and "closed community." These results remain remarkably consistent from year to year.
- To assist with an overall sense of identity, brand standards and an editorial style guide were created. These have been shared with all CRCNA ministries, and an **emphasis has been placed on consistent, coordinated, and quality communications from all corners of the denomination.**
- One of the successes has been the **development of workshops at synod that provide room for pointed conversation and support for real ministry issues at the local level.**

- **A new system for congregations to be made aware of and to order materials for “special Sundays” was created.** This allows congregations to see materials much earlier than in the past and to order six months of materials at a time. As a result, orders for such materials have increased greatly. We have also minimized waste by eliminating automatic shipping of materials that weren’t wanted, and we have reduced printing and shipping costs.
- Another large area of emphasis has been the development and execution of the *Canadian National Gathering* and the binational *Inspire* events in 2017 and 2019. **These gatherings allowed for fellowship and learning across our two countries, and for the creation of unity around our shared identity and ministries.** The gatherings have also provided data that has helped us to ascertain direction for *Our Journey 2025*.
- **The CRCNA began tracking congregational ethnicity** (e.g., monoethnic, emerging multiethnic, etc.) as part of its annual *Yearbook* survey in 2016. Over the four years of *Our Journey 2020*, we have seen growth in the number of churches that self-identify as an ethnicity other than anglo.
- **Various resources and training opportunities were made available to congregations that are not yet or are emerging as multiethnic churches** to further their journey toward greater diversity.
- **Six groups of CRCNA congregations were identified and provided with support. These include Black and Reformed, the Consejo Latino, Korean CRCs, South East Asian Pacific Islander (SEAPI), East Meets West (Chinese), and Native America/Indigenous.** Engagement with these six groups is continuing. We are heartened by the level of engagement and the results being achieved by each group as it engages with churches and leaders. Plans are under way to include all six groups at a preconference event for *Inspire 2021*.
- **Congregations identified and set goals to address local/national/global justice issues** — discerning unique steps they could take to make an impact from their own communities.
- **Congregations worked to find tangible ways to honor the image of God in each person, particularly those who are marginalized, and to value inclusion in the life of their congregation.** After the four-year period of *Our Journey 2020*, 50 additional congregations (663 total) now offer signing and/or aids for people with visual/hearing impairments. Over 400 churches across North America have designated members of their congregation to serve as disability advocates, to better engage all members. Last year over 200 people in Arizona, Minnesota, Michigan, and Iowa participated in training events on engaging in ministry with people who have disabilities.

- Over the past five years congregations have grown in awareness of the critical dynamic of the abuse of power, which is the key dynamic operating in situations of abuse, whether that abuse is emotional, physical, or sexual. Increasing sensitivity to the abuse of power resulted in a report to Synod 2019, which decided to instruct the Council of Delegates or the executive director of the CRCNA to develop a code of conduct, review current abuse policies, develop practices for monitoring and recordkeeping, and develop training on abuse of power and a resource toolkit. In addition to these mandates, the ongoing work of Safe Church Ministry continues to grow and develop. **Currently over 74 percent of CRCs have a safe church/abuse prevention policy. In addition, 38 classes have, or are in the process of developing, a safe church team.** Many have also appointed a safe church coordinator for the classis, and a growing number of these are paid an annual stipend by the classis.
- **Congregations partnered in their mercy/outreach/missions efforts** to ensure they are doing “ministry with” people who are marginalized.
- **Congregations engaged in active citizenship and advocacy** that encourages them and their leaders to be accountable for developing and implementing just policies.

Overall, we feel that positive steps were made in this area over the past four years. At the same time, as we look at specific measures of congregations utilizing the tools and resources provided by our justice ministries, we note that the number of participating congregations is not as high as we would like. For those who did embrace this part of their call, we heard great stories about changes of heart and perspective. We also saw beautiful examples of inclusivity, diversity, and racial reconciliation. We hope to see ongoing growth in these areas in the future.



Collaboration

The fifth desired future identified by *Our Journey 2020* was collaboration. With regard to this goal the CRCNA aspired for congregations and ministries of the Christian Reformed Church to interact together in ways that are effective, efficient, responsive, cross-culturally competent, easily accessible, and sustainable. There were two strategic foci:

1. That congregations and ministries of the Christian Reformed Church develop new ways of working together at all levels — local, regional, national, and binational — that are effective, efficient, responsive, clear, and sustainable.
2. That the Christian Reformed Church develop new ways of connecting congregations with the denominational services they need, as well as increased opportunities to participate in mission outreach, in a way that generates greater efficiency, accessibility, cross-cultural competence, clarity, and sustainability.

A few key highlights:

- **The Connections Project started with help from a grant by the Lilly Endowment Inc. This project focused on working with 12 classes for a three-year period.** During 2019-2020, this pilot project was expanded through a second Lilly-funded initiative known as “Connections II.” This project developed a foundation and framework for working with all 49 classes for the five-year duration of the project, with the goal that this foundation and framework become part of the permanent denominational structure beyond the project’s lifespan. A new Connections team was in place by March 1, 2020, and it has begun to do its work with all 49 classes.
- **During the past four years, we have demonstrated an increasing commitment to the health of classis as key for the health of local congregations.** We have increased strategic support for classis functionaries, via increased targeted communication and new opportunities for learning and connection with one another. More than half of the classes (38 of 49) have also engaged in a renewal effort of some kind, from small tweaks to their organizational structure to full reconfigurations (for six classes) of the classis as a whole.

- **The denominational ministry offices formerly known as Specialized Ministries were renamed Congregational Services to reflect their posture of existing to serve local congregations.** CRCNA materials (including CRC brochures) were recast to reflect the five-fold calling of the CRCNA, and these callings became more ingrained in the CRCNA organizational culture.
- **A One Click/One Call system was created, and customer service representatives were trained to provide one point of contact for anyone with a ministry question, and a quick way to find answers to those questions.**
- **The [Digital Library](#) launched to provide all CRC members with free access to hundreds of Faith Alive titles.**
- **The ministry-share system was reimagined to provide greater ownership at the local church level.** Instead of relying on a fixed, per-member amount set by synod each year, ministry shares will now rely on congregational pledges. Ministry budgets will be created on the basis of what has been pledged. The hope is that congregations will feel a renewed sense of collaboration with each other as they pledge and work together to fund ministry.

Again, we believe that great progress was made over the four-year period to help our CRCNA ministries grow in collaboration and to foster greater unity across our congregations and members.



Some Key Learnings

As we now step into the new ministry plan, *Our Journey 2025*, we carry with us these takeaways from *Our Journey 2020*.

- 1. The plan needs to be owned and understood by local congregations as something that applies to them.** It cannot simply be a tool to guide CRCNA ministry activities.
- 2. To create such ownership, we need to allow churches to see the value of working in certain areas alongside other congregations that are doing the same things.** This will require creating discernment tools to help congregations identify where they are and what they might need to address. It will also require allowing each congregation to adapt the goals to their local context.
- 3. There was confusion about how the five desired futures of *Our Journey 2020* fit with or flowed from what is sometimes called the “five callings” of the CRCNA.** This needs to be better explained and understood, especially for staff. The “five callings” are more clearly described as our **five ministry priorities** — the overarching components describing our Reformed identity. They are Faith Formation, Servant Leadership, Global Mission, Mercy and Justice, and Gospel Proclamation and Worship — and collectively they make up Our Calling (see, for example, the *Agenda for Synod 2020*, p. 46). These ministry priorities continue no matter what ministry plan we are addressing. The ministry plan “milestones” in *Our Journey 2025* are very specific and concrete to the current five-year period.
- 4. *Our Journey 2020* sometimes felt irrelevant to CRCNA staff and was somewhat tangential to their everyday work.** We need to find new ways to make *Our Journey 2025* a more regular part of staff communication so that they never lose sight of our combined efforts in these areas. Monthly town halls and regular reports in the staff intranet site will help with this.
- 5. The reporting for *Our Journey 2020* was complex and time consuming. It involved a lot of counts of various activities but didn’t provide much feedback about how these counts were affecting local congregations or our denomination as a whole.** For *Our Journey 2025*, we would like a simplified system of measurement that includes stories of impact and a mechanism for regular updates to staff and CRCNA members.



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