



# CHURCH GROWTH THROUGH *Evangelism*

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## **Author's Preamble**

In a summer where denominational discussions and decisions have been heavy on my heart, the interviews I conducted were such a source of joy. They were the bright lights in my weeks. And then, as I read through all the survey responses and the data collected by Resonate's teams of Regional Mission Leaders and Local Mission Leaders, I was overcome with gratitude for the reminder that there are churches remaining faithful to God's call to be sent out with the Good News, and that God is working powerfully through them. Every story they shared is a life transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit. Praise the Lord!

## **Focus**

The goal of this research study was to learn from the churches who reported growth through evangelism in the 2023 yearbook data so that we can share key components with all of the CRCNA congregations.

## **Data**

There were 201 churches who reported that at least 1 person came to their church through evangelism (20% of CRC churches). We reached out to the top 10% of these churches (based on numerical growth) for interviews, as well as a few of the churches who had a significant amount of growth per congregant member. The remaining churches were sent a survey and asked to answer the same questions. We conducted 17 interviews and had 42 surveys returned, so we heard from 29% of these churches.

## **Validity**

The data that is reported to the yearbook is often not accurate. A few pastor responses to our survey request said that they don't know who in their church fills out the yearbook form and they don't know what growth they were referring to. In addition, in our conversations we learned that "Growth Through Evangelism" does not mean the same thing to every church. In some cases, it is limited to actual conversions and baptisms, while in other congregations they counted any new people from the community who became members of their church (even if they had been part of a faith community prior to this).

Therefore, this research cannot reliably report statistical data on growth through evangelism and future conversations should be had with the yearbook office to see if we can gather more accurate data in the future. However, the listening we did, both in surveys and interviews, gave us an opportunity to hear very important narratives about the evangelistic growth that is happening in our churches. Through these stories a number of common themes emerged that the CRCNA should pay attention to as we seek to grow in congregational gospel witness.

## Observations

The pastors who engaged in this conversation (through interview or survey) expressed their appreciation that Resonate took the time to listen to them. One pastor, at the conclusion of his interview, said he is usually asked by the denomination to be an ethnic voice in conversations, so he was so glad to have the opportunity to talk about mission, which is actually his true passion. Many of the pastors were surprised to hear that they are at the top of the list and used this as an opportunity to encourage their congregations.

The churches who reported growth through evangelism are rural, suburban, and urban; they are in every North American region; they are homogenous and multicultural; they are large and small; some are financially sustainable and others are wondering how to make up budget shortfalls. In short, there is not one demographic of church that was most likely to grow through evangelism.

Although there were a number of stories about octogenarians coming to faith(!), there were also a lot of stories about children, young adults, and young families coming or returning to faith. (The word "young" appeared 62 times in the data; the word "children" appeared 27 times). This is encouraging for an aging denomination, to know that God is transforming hearts and lives even in a generation that is generally less religious than previous generations.

## Part 1: What We Learned About the Act/How of Evangelism

The most recurring theme—in fact, in almost every single interview and survey response—was that evangelism happens through **developing relationships** (a form of "relation" appeared 74 times in the data). There were numerous statements about relationships such as:

- "Relationships and caring are more important than big programs." <sup>1</sup>
- "Evangelism is not information transmission, it is relational."
- "Evangelism is relational and incarnational."
- "It's all about relationships."
- "Programs aren't the answer. Individuals meeting individuals, the making of friendships, this is how it is done."
- "Personal connections to community are vital."
- "Continue to reiterate that evangelism and transformation happens one relationship at a time, through the power of prayer."
- "Those who came were through relational connections."

<sup>1</sup> The quotes in this paper might be from the survey responses or the notes from leaders conducting interviews. They may take some liberty in their wording, but seek to reflect the intention of each statement.

Many of these relationship-development opportunities happen **at the church buildings** through Alpha (mentioned 31 times), Global Coffee Break, Wednesday night dinners, meet-the-pastor lunches, new member lunches, etc. These "programs" all rely heavily on the relationships developed among the participants. Most of them also include food!

*REFLECT: Review the list of programs and events your church hosts. How are they developing meaningful relationships between people in your church and guests from the community?*

There was also a great emphasis on the relationships that are being developed **outside of the church building**. In fact, this is what made the programs and events hosted by the church successful in evangelism. Most often, when unchurched people came, they did so because they were invited by someone they had a relationship with. These churches who grew through evangelism had a clear vision and mission to "move mission to the center of the church," as one pastor stated.

- "Who is your one?" is a question one church repeatedly asks their members.
- "We don't host major events for outreach. It is more about how we are going out."
- A pastor of outreach described the focus of his role as "getting the church out of these four walls."
- A few churches have a Service Sunday when the church goes into the community to serve in place of their Sunday morning worship.
- When one woman from a church wanted to lead a Bible study, they encouraged her to host it in the community room in the housing complex where she lives—12 people came! From that Bible study, 3 people gave their lives to Christ.
- "Continue to promote the *Witness* material. We found it great and did a 10-part series of messages off it while our small groups followed the curriculum. The timing of this suggests it is related to our recent evangelistic growth. Beyond that I suggest doing whatever can be done to promote meaningful relationships between church members and the people with whom they regularly interact..."
- "We are very intentional as a church about being involved with the community, not only through community-oriented ministries, but also through our members being involved throughout the community outside the church as witnesses of the Kingdom. We are very clear in our teaching and preaching that volunteering for community organizations, serving on boards, participating in public and civic activities, public service, etc. are all ways to be the light of the Lord."

*REFLECT: What relationships do people in your church have with their neighbors, colleagues, community leaders? How is your church encouraging these connections, and*



## *encouraging them to see these as ways to share the love and good news of Jesus?*

One of the tensions I feel as I help churches think about mission is the calling of God to send the church out in contrast to the desire of churches to bring people into their faith community (especially for Sunday morning worship). What I heard in these conversations and read in the survey responses is that **knowing our "why"** is fundamental for addressing this tension.

The purpose for going out to share the love and good news of Jesus cannot have as its main purpose to grow the church. The "why" is deeper, as explained in different ways:

- "We are shifting our identify from being 'a church in X' to seeing our whole village and region as our parish where God has called us to do his restorative work of Shalom."
- "Rather than seeing people as 'us versus them' or categorizing people by ideology, we have to see people as lost needing to be found."
- "The DNA of the church is such that it is there for the marginalized/those on the fringes ... the practice of 'go.'"
- "Evangelism is about saving both the messenger and the listener through the gospel."
- "We do this in response to our love for God and what God has done for us."
- "This is why we exist: to expand the Kingdom. We uphold this vision every week."
- "If we really believe the mission of God is the primary driver of the church, we need to focus on this."

***REFLECT: What would your church members say your "why" is? How central is the call of God to go out to love and share the gospel? What outcomes are you measuring that reflect this?***

So how do church leaders instill this missional "why: in the congregation? How do they help anxious or apathetic congregations get to a place where the driving force behind their actions and their measures of success focus on the relationships they are developing and on how the Spirit is at work changing hearts and lives?

Through **prayer**, "I will give you a new heart—I will give you new and right desires—and put a new spirit within you. I will take out your stony hearts of sin and give you new hearts of love (Ez. 36:26 TLB). " One church went through a 2-year vision process that led them to be "sold out for God's work in this part of the city." This same church has a fasting and prayer time every third Friday of the month. They encourage the congregation to fast on a weekly basis and they make space for prayer in the church. "Pray" or "Prayer" occurred 49

times in the data, including statements such as:

- We struggle with evangelism if “we lack a heart of prayer saturation.”
- “We have a prayer wall for Alpha, where people put the names of those who should go to Alpha.”
- “The Holy Spirit is the main actor.”
- “This is a season of new fire, new energy. It stems from sitting in God’s presence.”
- “Prayer is super important. When it is harnessed to a means (like Alpha) there are results.”
- “We pray for those in the church and those God is inviting us to reach out and welcome. All glory be to God for the opportunities he gave us to welcome, enfold, and celebrate God’s salvation in Christ with them.”
- “One common denominator is that God was working in their hearts before we even met them.”

*REFLECT: How are you inviting people to pray that God will open their hearts to love the lost? What does praying for the lost look like in your church?*

In the specific stories that participants shared about people who became part of their faith community and chose to follow Jesus, it is striking how many of these people were in moments of **crisis and/or transition**. Divorce, cancer, marriage problems, childhood trauma, funerals, their life has been turned upside down, job loss, heartbroken, loneliness, chaos, pain, prison, abuse, newcomers, alcoholism, and housing issues are some of the situations they named. When these moments happen, and they have authentic and caring relationships with a Christian, then the church has an opportunity to love and serve them. Through this tangible experience of Christ’s love, their lives are changed.

*REFLECT: Is your congregation equipped to stay in relationship with, and not run away from, people in crisis situations? Do we see those in crisis as a burden in our church, or an opportunity for the Spirit to be at work?*

In all of these incredible testimonies about how the Spirit has been at work changing hearts and lives of both people in congregations and people who are coming to faith, the majority of respondents also declared how **long and hard the work of evangelism through relationships is**. “Long” was mentioned 30 times in the data.

- “Evangelism is a slow process as many people are very skeptical of the church.”
- “In our setting, long-time relationships of members bears fruit. The emphasis here is on the time it takes for relationships to develop. The members who’ve come

through evangelism have been connected to our congregation for around ten years."

- "It is a mystery that points to the long, steady work of the Holy Spirit in people's lives."
- "It happens in God's time. Similar things were tried at a previous church and were less effective."
- "Evangelism takes work. We need to take the time to help people understand things that we often take for granted...It requires a commitment to be there for them, even when life gets messy."
- "It is a long process. Many of the people who joined had some connection to our church or our members for many years."
- "It is such a long, slow process. No 'one and done's.' We think about big revivals, but in our congregations these are 1-4 year relationships."
- "It is sloooooowwww...."

*REFLECT: What are the small "wins" your church is celebrating along the way? How are you staying motivated for the faithful work of "long obedience in the same direction?"*

## Part 2: What We Learned About the Congregational Context

One of the things we hoped to learn through this research is what the characteristics of a "church ready to participate in mission" are. What is likely true of churches that are ready for the next steps in local witness?

Words used to **describe congregations** who grew through evangelism were: warm, welcoming, safe, healthy, caring, open, hospitable, loving, embracing, humble, a place of healing, playful, and room for meaningful connection.

- "A family that prays and plays together stays together."
- "A vision to be a welcoming church to newcomers and the pastor has 'read his church the riot act' about how to welcome."
- After many different revitalization programs didn't work for a church, they refocused on hospitality. "The resistance has been the congregation didn't think it (mission) was their job. But with hospitality, every church member is part of a hospitality task."
- "In the new members class, people said they came and stayed because they felt welcome, or they met with another family who made them feel comfortable."
- "Being a place of acceptance is very important."
- One church's mission statement is "...a purposeful community that engages the world with the love of Jesus through the practice of Christian hospitality."

- A woman who experienced hardships “came one Sunday and was immediately embraced by many of the members of our congregation.” She eventually made Profession of Faith.
- “A common comment (from people who recently joined the church) has been that they have appreciated the community of the church.”
- “Our community is healthy and strong, and that attracts people to come and join us.”
- “It’s easier to invite folks to a church family that is loved, held dear, and overall considered to be very welcoming.”
- “I think the fact that our church welcomed her participation ‘without jumping through membership hoops first’ spoke very powerfully.”
- “A healthy church with at least one or two strong ministries is the best bet. It creates momentum, encourages people to invite, and offers a brand of faith that looks real.”
- “Hospitality when people visit is huge.”
- “The culture is also marked by a hospitality that those who are invited to worship and grow with us testify of regularly. By the grace of God, (we) are known as a welcoming, loving, embracing community.”

*REFLECT: What adjectives would you use to describe your congregation? How can you grow in hospitality? Are there “elephants in the room” that need to be addressed in order for your church to be healthy?*

In the interviews we conducted (with the top 10% of churches who grew through evangelism), the **pastor’s role** in evangelism was evident. In particular, many of these pastors were directly involved in evangelism as part of their job expectations and responsibilities. This modeled for the congregations both how central mission is to everything the church does and how to engage in building relationships with the unchurched.

- From a pastor who participates in 1:1 discipleship: “Cast the vision that we are all in this work of making disciples.”
- “The pastor is hardly in the office because he is invested in the community. He is in places where people wouldn’t expect him to be—on nonprofit leadership teams, the board of the local health department, etc.”
- (The pastor) “is a church planter by heart.”
- “Pastor X also connects often with the city mayor and other community leaders.”
- A pastor has full access to a local company in a warehouse where he and the church develop relationships and serve the staff.
- The pastor has a friend whose job has him walking neighborhoods, so the pastor invited himself along which led to meeting new people in different contexts.



- Some pastors have other jobs that give them access to people in the community.

*REFLECT: Is developing relationships outside of the church community part of your pastor's job description? How much time is your pastor expected to spend in the community?*

A **focus on the Word of God** is key for many of these churches, both in exegetical preaching and Bible study.

- After Sunday worship, congregants from each small group gather to discuss the Word of God shared during the service and reflect on their lives throughout the week."
- "In the service, the preacher spends a great deal of time and energy, trying very hard to bear witness to the essence of the Gospel."
- His preaching style is going through books of the Bible; they like expository preaching." Their small group curriculum follows the Sunday morning sermons.
- "It seems we need to invite people into a distinctly spiritual community, as opposed to just a community."
- "(We are) firmly founded on Reformed, Biblical teaching."
- "Q&A 2 reminds us of the greatest need for all people. If someone is to come to know the comfort of belonging to Jesus Christ, we have to begin by teaching them how great their sin and misery are. Only then can we begin to teach them how they can be set free."
- "Parents of adult children appreciate the apologetic focus in preaching because their adult children get something to think and talk about when they do come to church with their parents again."
- "Clear presentation of the gospel."
- "The Spirit of God through the Word of God lived out through the people of God."
- "By the grace of God, the Spirit among us has created a culture in which the Word of God is central, not only from the pulpit but also in our classrooms and numerous discipleship Bible studies."

*REFLECT: How are the people who attend your church getting into God's Word? What assumptions are you making when you preach that prevent people who are new to the gospel from understanding?*

Just as important as what the pastor does and says are **the postures and practices of the members of the church**. Churches that grew through evangelism embraced the role of every person in the church, and didn't just leave it to the church staff. Already mentioned

is the importance of congregants building relationships with people who do not attend church and the characteristics of these congregations. The participants also named things that congregations should be able to do:

- "The most effective evangelism happened through people telling honest and compelling stories about what God has done in their lives."
- "Sharing the gospel starts with your own personal transformation story. In other words, sharing with non-churched people who you were before and after you met Christ is very simple."
- "Most evangelistic growth has come from new members inviting their friends."
- "Meet people where they are at in a compassionate, servant-hearted posture and walk with them patiently and faithfully."
- "Make space in your life for new connections."
- "The church (members) spend way more time in their workplaces than in the church building..." (so they need to be equipped to share the gospel in those places.)
- "We have named the false gods of comfort, pleasure, and self that we have to deal with before we can truly live the missional lifestyle."
- "About 24 people in our church are comfortable praying with someone. Most of them are Global Coffee Break participants." Praying with them, not just for them, is so important.
- "The whole church is involved. Not just the outreach team."

*REFLECT: What equipping does your church need? Are people able to share their own story of faith? Or pray with people?*

Finally, a number of pastors noted their **intentional plans** to integrate newcomers so that they would find community and feel welcome.

- "Anyone who fills out a form at the food pantry receives a follow up call, asking how they can pray for them."
- "Follow up texts get more responses than follow up calls."
- "X and her family came through a Kids Hope Connection. The Kids Hope director invited her to church. They started joining our Wednesday night meals and programs as well."
- "We have worked at having on-ramps for people to keep the conversations going after (Christmas and Easter) services."
- "The unchurched are invited after they hear our stories to come learn more about Jesus by attending service, joining a small group in person or through Zoom, or join one of the weekly Bible studies."

*REFLECT: What is your intentional plan for connecting with newcomers? Who will follow up, and how? What are entry points into your community?*

## **Resources**

Throughout the responses, there were practical ministry ideas and programs named that may be of interest. These are listed in no particular order—and many of these were named more than once:

- Alpha
- 24/7 National Prayer Conferences
- Holy Spirit Conferences hosted by Bridgetown Church (Portland, Oregon)
- GEMS
- Celebrate Recovery
- “Newcomers” lunches
- 222 Discipleship
- Practicing the Way
- Live Streamed Services
- Kids Hope
- 321 Course
- Christianity Explored
- BLESS
- Profession of Faith classes
- Mentoring program
- InterVarsity partnership
- Global Coffee Break
- Organic Outreach
- Witness
- Special Needs Ministry
- Grief Share
- Thriving Congregations Esperanza (there is also a CRCNA Thriving Congregations—this is not the same program)
- 7 steps for freedom in Christ
- Spiritual retreats
- Prepare and Enrich Marriage Counseling
- Real Food Can Connect Us
- English as a Second Language
- 3DM
- Children's summer day camps
- Hand to Hand

- Family Promise
- Food Trucks
- Q place 9 arts of spiritual conversation
- Billy Graham Center for Evangelism

## **Gratitude**

Thank you so much to the Resonate Regional Mission Leaders and Local Mission Leaders who helped me conduct these interviews. I've heard that these were just as encouraging for you as they were for me! And, thank you to the interview and survey participants. We trust that your testimonies of how God is at work will strengthen and encourage the church. 🙏