



GROWING *through* *Evangelism*

DISCUSSION GUIDE



A Ministry of the Christian Reformed Church

Resonate
GLOBAL MISSION

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INTRODUCTION

“Go into all the world. Preach
the good news to everyone.”

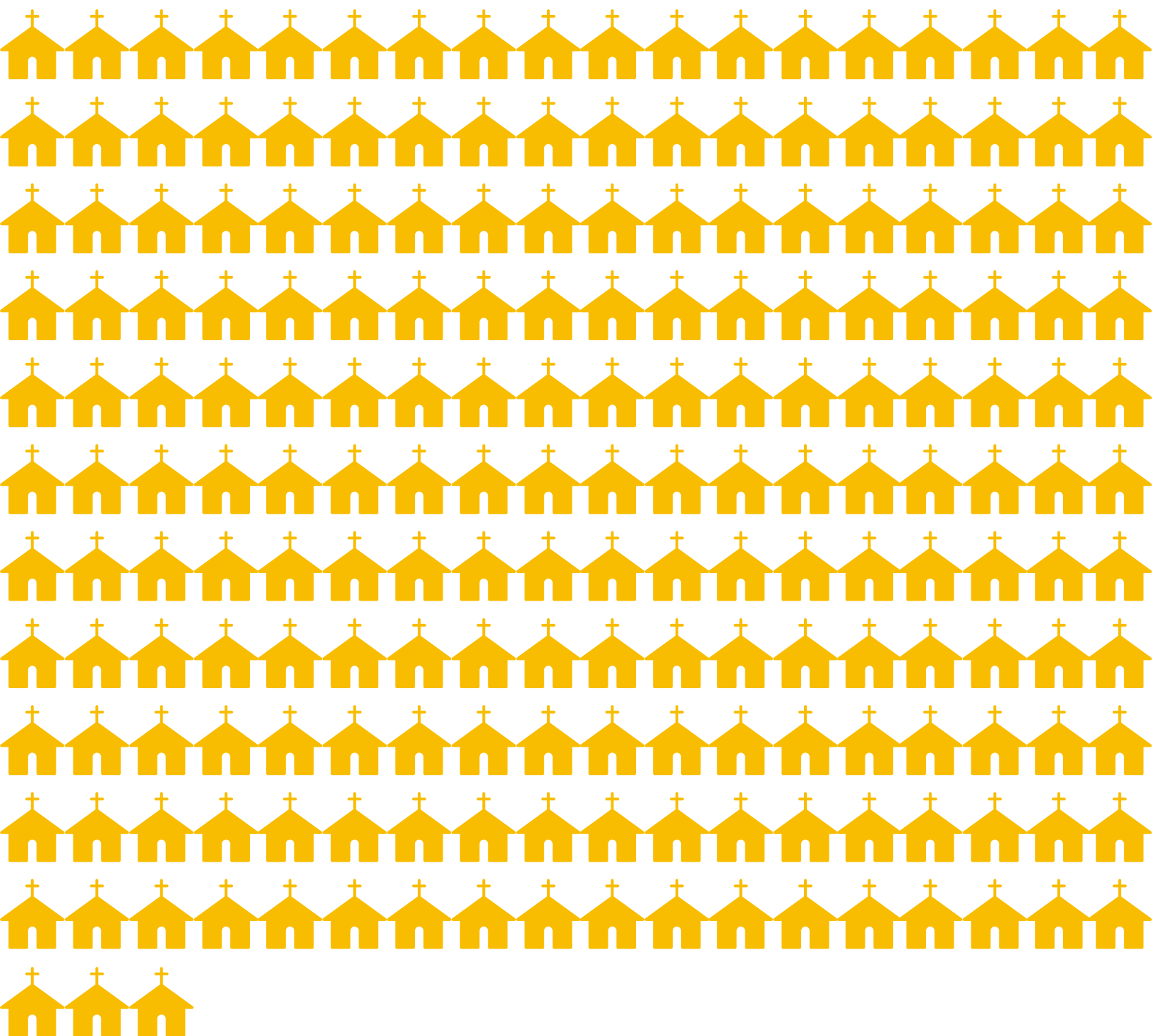
-Mark 16:15 (NRSV)

The call of the church from Jesus is to “Go into all the world and preach the Good News to everyone (Mark 16:15).” And yet, churches struggle with knowing how to live out this calling in today’s North American, post-Christian context. 20% of churches in the CRCNA reported growth through evangelism in the 2023 yearbook statistics. What do these churches know that could be helpful for the rest of us? What have they experienced that we should pay attention to?

As Resonate staff surveyed and interviewed these churches, we rejoiced in the stories we heard about how the Holy Spirit transformed hearts and lives through the faithful obedience of everyday Christians to share the Good News in word and deed. From rural settings to urban centers, from small churches to large ones, from east coast to west coast, from Canada to the USA, churches in the CRCNA are growing through evangelism. God is at work, and we pray that through these testimonies God will open more doors for more churches to experience this joy.

Serving with you,
Amy Schenkel
Congregational Gospel Witness Leader

201 churches reported that at least 1 person came to their church through evangelism.



PART 1

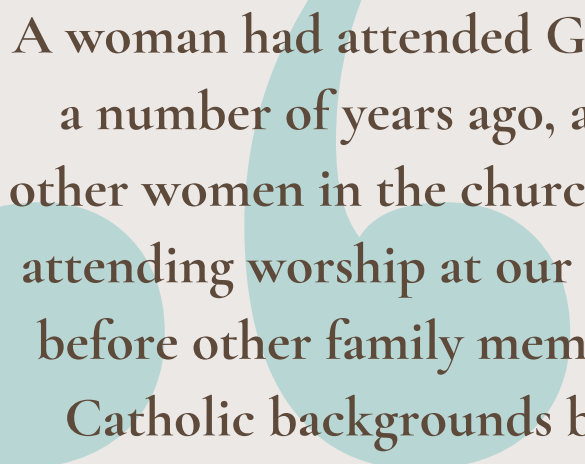
The Act of Evangelism

Developing Relationships Is Important

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.



A woman had attended Global Coffee Break at our church a number of years ago, and she built relationships with other women in the church. Eventually, her husband began attending worship at our church and he joined the church before other family members did. Both of them are from Catholic backgrounds but had not been part of a faith community for years.

—Joel VandeWerken, Fairlawn CRC

“Relationships and caring are more important than big programs.”

“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.”

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Which one of the statements from those interviewed resonates with you the most? Why?
- List the programs and events your church hosts. How are each one of these programs developing meaningful relationships between people in your church and guests from the community?



Relationships Are Developed Both Inside the Church—and Outside of the Church

Many 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!

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.

Alpha was mentioned
31 times.





After a revisioning process, our church decided that we would focus on connections outside of our church. The pastor had access to a factory where he had done some marketplace chaplaincy, and people from the church started going with him into the factory.

There are 17 languages spoken there, so they started an ESL program and many relationships were developed. The warehouse boss asked them to expand to another one of his companies and now 35-40 volunteers are involved in this.

—Toby Grupen
Providence CRC

“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.

“We found the Witness material to be 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."

When a woman from the church wanted to lead a Bible study, they encouraged her to host it in the community room in the housing complex where she lives and 12 people came! From that Bible study, 3 people gave their lives to Christ.

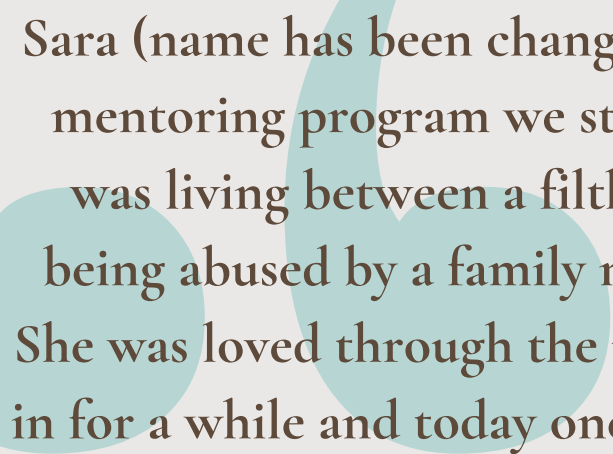
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Which one of the statements from those interviewed resonates with you the most? Why?
- What relationships do people in your church have with their neighbors, colleagues, community leaders? How is your church encouraging these connections, and encouraging your church members to see these as ways to share the love and good news of Jesus?



The “Why” Is Key

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—it is about being obedient to God’s call to share the Good News regardless of the outcome.



Sara (name has been changed) came to our church through a mentoring program we started. She has brain damage and was living between a filthy home where she was possibly being abused by a family member and living on the streets. She was loved through the ups and downs. Someone took her in for a while and today one of the families in our church acts more like her parents. The gospel is shared through the process of life and sometimes in those darkest moments (like when she ran off with a guy to California), rather than giving up we love her and share with her the truth.

—Jeff Heerspink

F Street Neighborhood church

"The DNA of the church is such that it is there for the marginalized/those on the fringes...the practice '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."

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Which one of the statements from those interviewed resonates with you the most? Why?
- What would your church members say your “why” is? How central is the call of God to go out and to love and share the gospel? What outcomes are you measuring that reflect this?



Prayer Is Important

So, how do church leaders instill a 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.

“Pray” or “prayer” occurred
49 times in the data.



Our church went through a two-year vision process. We also had a fasting and prayer time every third Friday of the month. We encourage the congregation to fast on a weekly basis and they make space for prayer in the church.

—Pastor Gabriel Wang-Herrera
By Grace Alone church

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.”

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Which one of the statements from those interviewed resonates with you the most? Why?
- What does prayer look like in your church?
- In what ways are you inviting people to pray that God will open their hearts to love the lost?
- Where in your church gatherings, programs, events, and more can you incorporate prayer for mission?

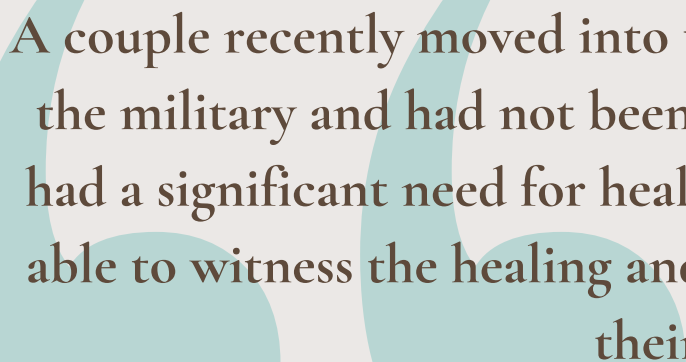


Moments of Crisis and Transition Are Significant

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.

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.



A couple recently moved into the area. They had both been in the military and had not been raised in the church, but they had a significant need for healing in their marriage. We were able to witness the healing and reconciling work of Christ in their life!

—Rev John Lee, Bethel CRC
Sioux Center Iowa

“The 67-year-old man got a cancer diagnosis. He came to our church during a series on delicate cultural issues.”

“[He had] so much inner trauma but never cried. But on this day, with a simple message of the gospel, and an invitation to accept the 'cure' and as they prayed together, he began to cry.”

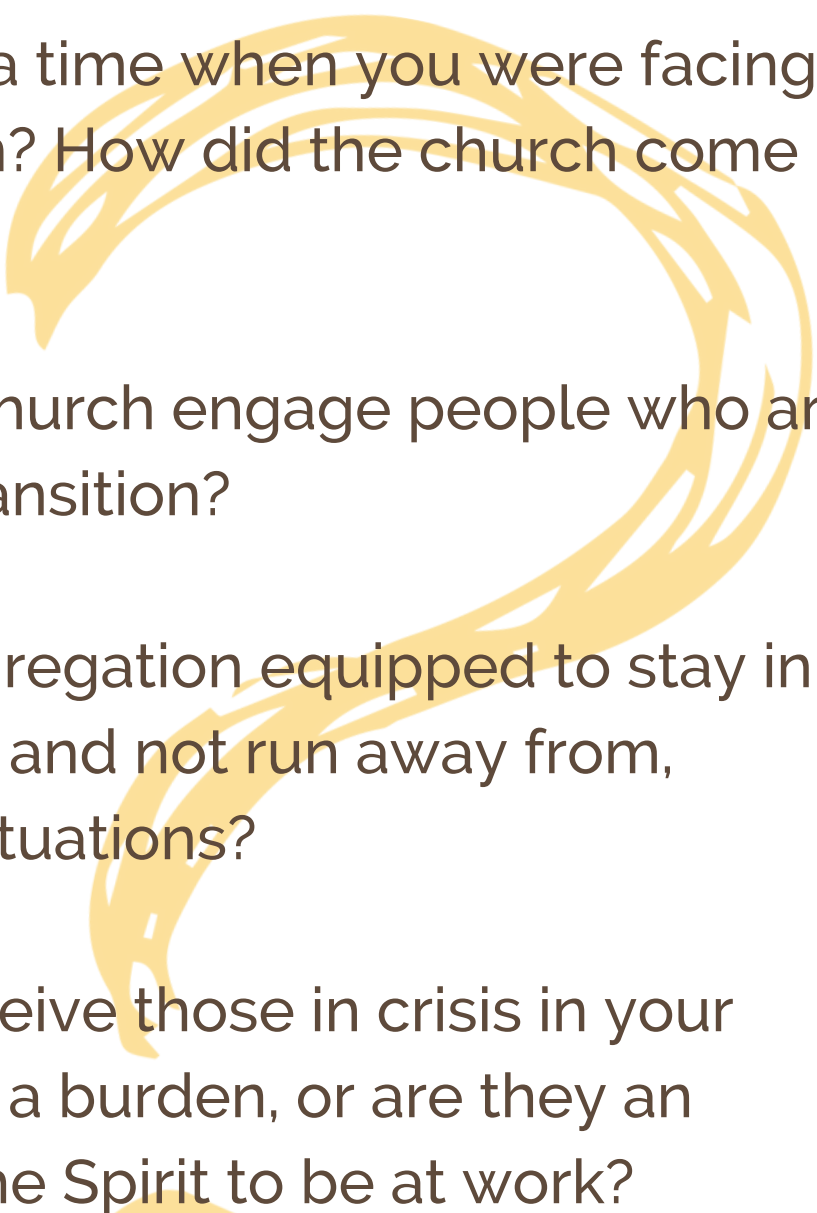
“They had been looking for God—something to hold them together and get their life back in order (after a number of years of some chaos and pain).”

“A young man yesterday came to talk. He just got out of prison...”

“One of our newest members was a struggling alcoholic, and then once she became sober, she began to prayerfully look for a church.”

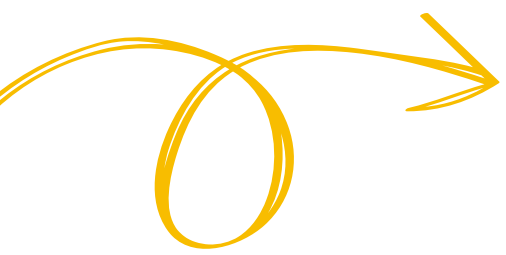
Other issues named include: marriage problems, funerals, job loss, loneliness, newcomers, and pain.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Which one of the statements from those interviewed resonates with you the most? Why?
 - Can you think of a time when you were facing a crisis or transition? How did the church come alongside you?
 - How does your church engage people who are facing crisis or transition?
 - How is your congregation equipped to stay in relationship with, and not run away from, people in crisis situations?
 - How do you perceive those in crisis in your church? Are they a burden, or are they an opportunity for the Spirit to be at work?
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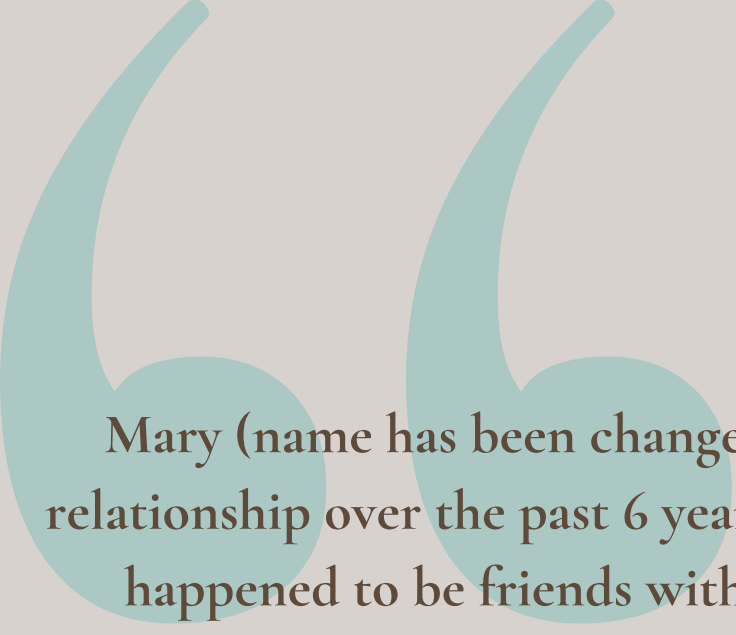
The Work of Evangelism Is a Long and Hard Process

In all of the incredible testimonies shared 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.





Mary (name has been changed) and I had a long-term relationship over the past 6 years. It was very sporadic. She happened to be friends with a lady that went to our church and was present when I went into that friend's home to pray over the home. I was also asked by Mary if I would consider marrying her and her husband. In addition, her husband's mother passed away and I did the funeral. After the funeral she and her husband began exploring faith and faith options. After having a dream from the Lord, she came to my office and gave her life to Christ. Since then she has been an evangelist in our community.

—Martin Spoelstra
Discovery Church

“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.' We think about big revivals, but in our congregations these are 1-4 year relationships."

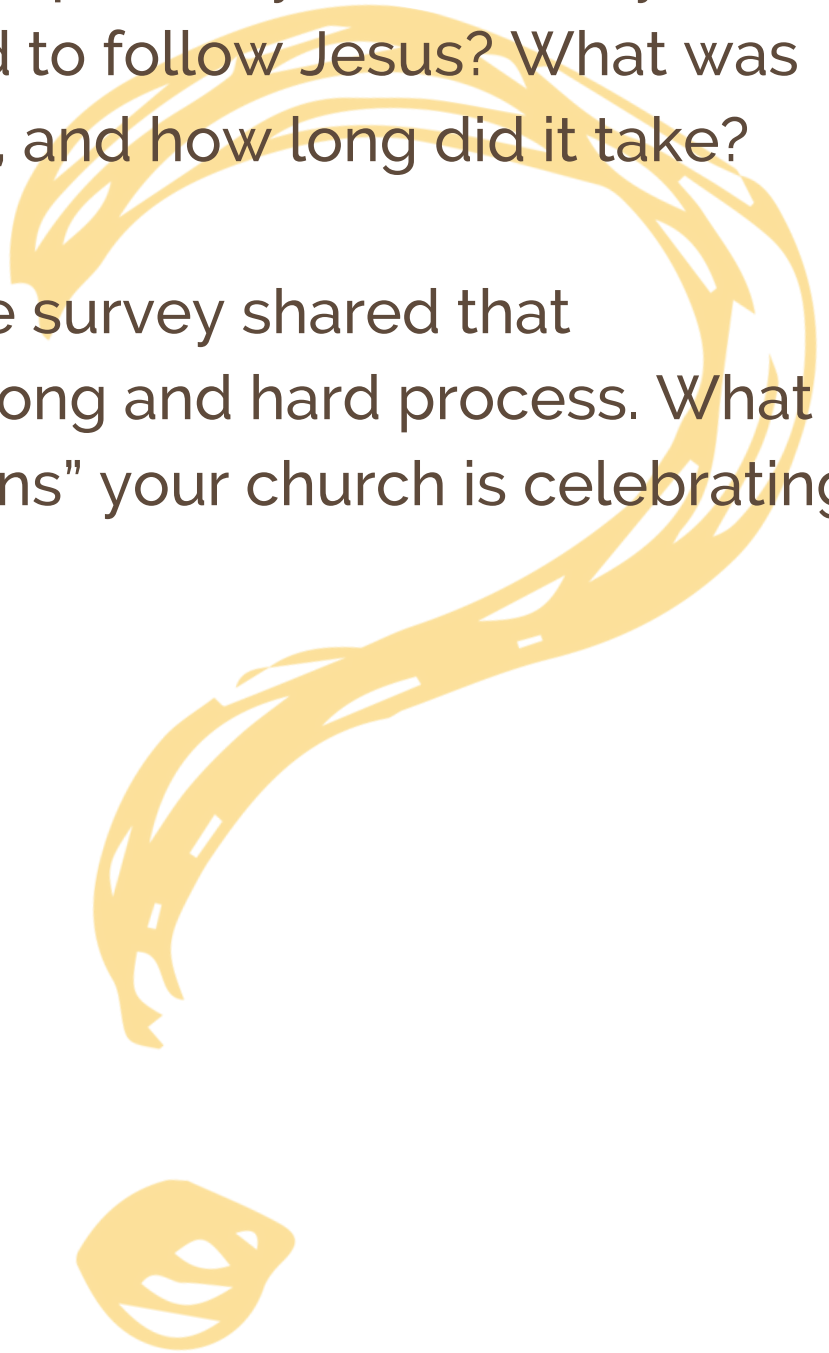
"It is slooooooowww...."

Martin knew Mary
for 6 years before
she decided to
follow Christ.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Which one of the statements from above resonates with you. Why?
- Can you think of a person you know in your life who has decided to follow Jesus? What was that process like, and how long did it take?
- Leaders from the survey shared that evangelism is a long and hard process. What are the small “wins” your church is celebrating along the way?



PART 2

Congregational Context

It's Not Necessarily about How Big Your Church Is Or How Much Money You Have

The characteristics of a faith community are more important than tangible resources. 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.



WARM



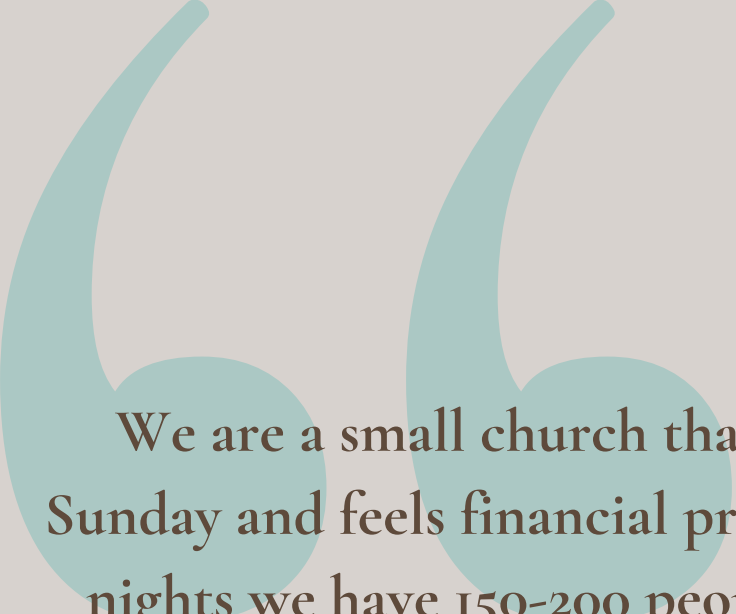
WELCOMING



SAFE



HEALTHY



We are a small church that worships about 80 on Sunday and feels financial pressure. But on Wednesday nights we have 150-200 people from the community join us for dinner and youth programs.

Bill and Sue, members of our church, live in a trailer park and they develop and maintain relationships with their neighbors. They invite people many times until they finally come.

Two weeks ago, one of these neighbors, an 82-year-old man, made profession of faith.

—John Huyser
Fruitport CRC

“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.”

“Hospitality when people visit is huge.”

"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."

"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."

CARING

OPEN

LOVING

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

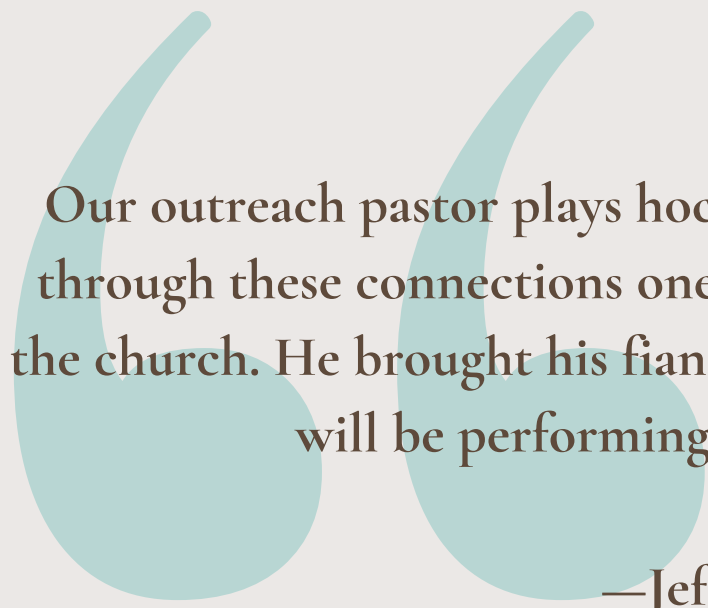
- Which one of the statements from above resonates with you and why?
- Find a white board or big poster board and make a list—what adjectives would you use to describe your congregation?
- How could your church grow in hospitality?
- What “elephants” in the room, if any, does your church need to address in order for your church to be healthy?



The Pastor Plays a Role

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.



Our outreach pastor plays hockey in a community league, and through these connections one of the players came to Alpha at the church. He brought his fiancée and they met Jesus! The pastor will be performing their wedding soon.

—Jeff Klein

Pastor of Outreach
Elmhurst CRC

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.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Which one of the statements from above resonates with you and why?
- How is developing relationships outside of the church community part of your pastor's job description?
- How much time do you expect your pastor to spend in the community?



There's a Focus on the Word of God

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

One of our church members testifies that when he first came to our church, Pastor Nam's message changed his life through the power of God's Word. The church also offered a variety of Bible studies that helped him learn more about God.

—Tae Seok Choi
Orange County Korean CRC



“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.”

“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.”

(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.”

“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.”

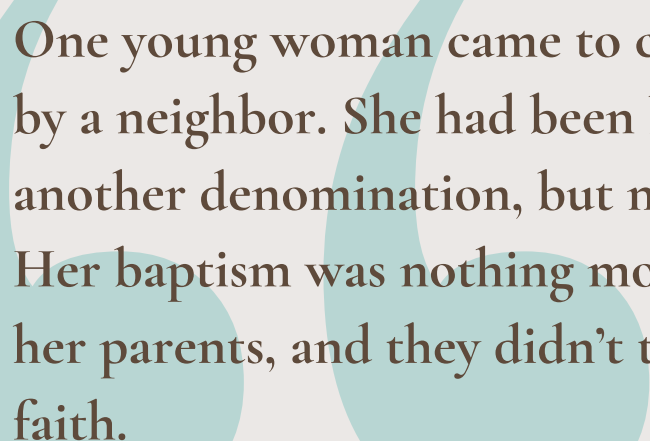
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Which one of the statements from above resonates with you the most? Why?
- How are the people attending your church getting into God's Word?
- What assumptions do you make when you preach, teach, or talk with someone that might prevent people who are new to the gospel from understanding?



The Postures and Practices of Church Members Are Just as Important as What the Pastor Does

Churches that grew through evangelism embraced the role of every person in the church, and didn't just leave it to the church staff.



One young woman came to church, after being invited by a neighbor. She had been baptized as an infant, in another denomination, but not raised in the church. Her baptism was nothing more than a tradition for her parents, and they didn't teach her anything about faith.

Years later, after a failed, abusive marriage, her neighbor suggested that she might find some answers to her questions in church.

She came one Sunday and was immediately embraced by many of the members of the congregation. That first service led to others, and before she realized it, she was involved in several activities here, including our Friendship Group.

She participated in two seasons of pastor's classes. She had many conversations with members of the church. It took some time, but eventually, through the leading of the Holy Spirit and the efforts of the congregation, she was able to let go of her godless worldview, respond to the call of Jesus Christ, and take her place as a member of our church by making public Profession of Faith.

—Ralph Wigboldus
Maranatha CRC



“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).

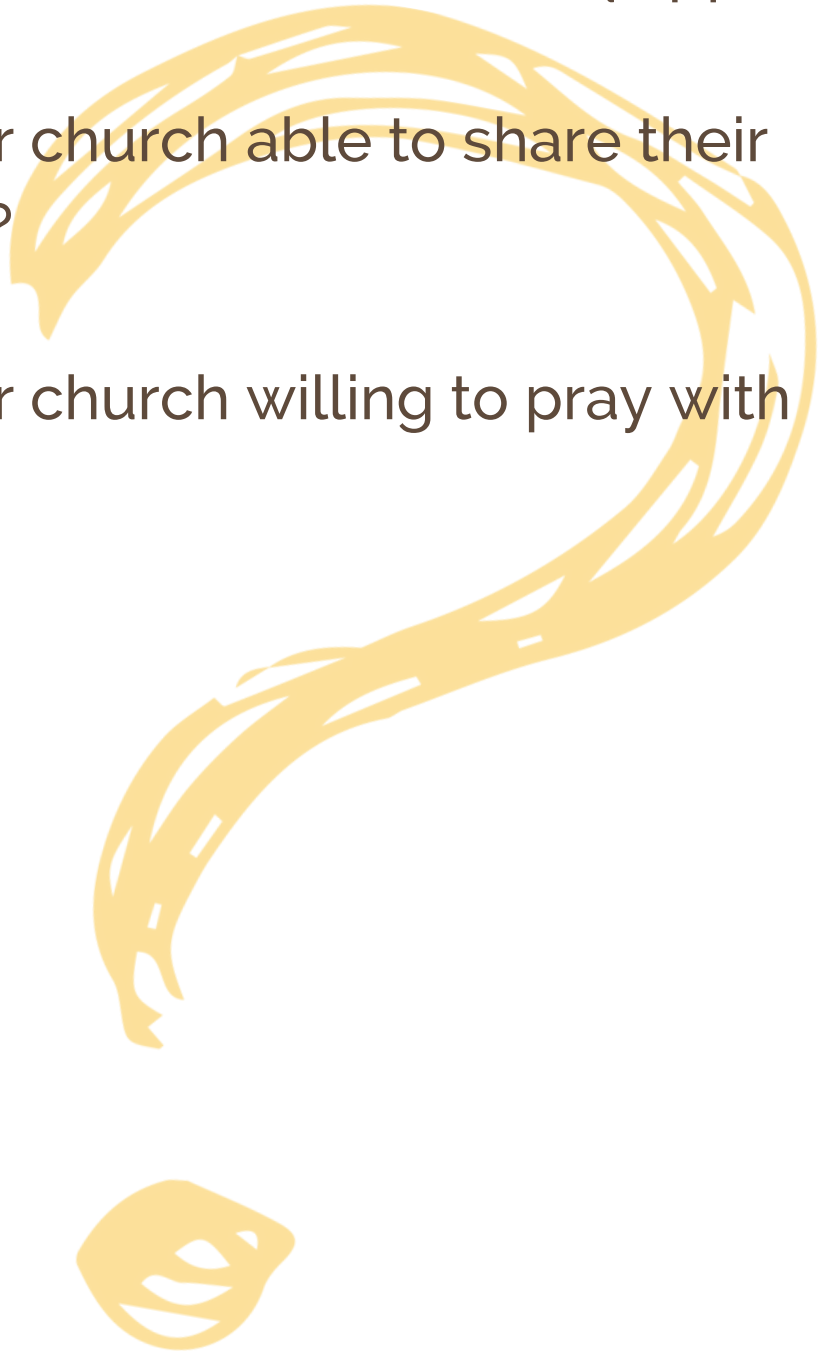
“We have named the false gods of comfort, pleasure, and self that we have to deal with before we can truly live the missional lifestyle.”

“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.”

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Which one of the statements from above resonates with you the most? Why?
- Where does your church need to be equipped?
- Are people in your church able to share their own story of faith?
- Are people in your church willing to pray with people?



They Had Intentional Plans to Integrate Newcomers

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

Our church focuses on a culture of hospitality and puts a strong emphasis on layering outreach events that form multiple touchpoints with people. One couple with two kids recently came to our Family Festival. The mom was a believer, but the dad was not. After the festival, the outdoor worship was their next step with our church. This environment was a comfortable place for them. They kept attending after that, the husband connected with the pastor and through these steps came to faith in Christ.

—Rev. Fred DeJong
Crown Point CRC

“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.”

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Which one of the statements from above resonates with you the most? Why?
- Make a list of the entry points in your community.
- What is your intentional plan for connecting with newcomers? Who will follow up, and how?



PART 3

Resources & Programs

Throughout the responses, pastors named ministries and programs that may be of interest.

Listed in no particular order, and some were mentioned 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