

Fresh Expressions

CHURCH MULTIPLICATION TEAMS for the Christian Reformed Church in North America and the Reformed Church in America have signed a contract with an international ministry called Fresh Expressions to help them move forward toward a newly imagined North American church-planting initiative.

In this effort, existing churches will be encouraged to open themselves to help foster, support, and expand ministries that can take on various forms in the communities and neighborhoods in which they are located.

The connection with Fresh Expressions comes at a time when traditional churches are confronted by a range of problems. These issues run from what to do in terms of worship amid the COVID-19 crisis to an increasing skepticism in society about the role of the church to how to deal with dramatic drops in the number of young people joining as members, meaning that church membership is getting older and grayer.

“We are living in unusual times for churches in North America. It has been decades since congregations have faced the multiplicity of challenges they are facing today,” said Chris Backert, national director of Fresh Expressions US.

“Our new reality calls for a new kind of local church for a new kind of world, one that reorganizes around mission. Through this new partnership, we are excited to work with the CRC and the RCA to support congregations in making these shifts a reality.”

Shifting with the culture

With the tools, programs, and ministry ideas it offers, Fresh Expressions is an example of how the church is responding to shifts in today’s post-Christian culture

by embracing the deep historical roots of Christianity and at the same time celebrating a variety of new expressions, said Kevin Schutte, the CRCNA’s leader of mission-shaped congregations.

“I’m especially excited about this being a collaborative effort of the CRC and RCA,” said Schutte. “This is about unleashing a whole new generation of leaders to mobilize churches to bring the gospel to their neighborhoods and communities.”

Although the CRCNA and RCA are happy to be working with Fresh Expressions, each of the churches has other strategic connections that, in different ways, work to bring a new sense of purpose into the denomination.

But the formal connection to Fresh Expressions means being able to partner with a ministry that brings with it a wealth of resources, approaches and programs.

In a webinar late last month, the CRCNA and the RCA joined with Fresh Expressions to provide a look at the ways in which Fresh Expressions helps to bring a creative, forward-looking approach, relying on truths evident in the early church to bear on being the church in the 21st century.

Today, the CRC, RCA and Fresh Expressions are holding another webinar. Referred to as a Vision Day—The Changing Church in a Changing World, this webinar offers a deeper look at what the partnership between the CRC, RCA and Fresh Expressions can mean. Room is still open to sign up for the Vision Day.

A Fresh Promise

During the recent webinar, Tim Vink, a church multiplication leader for the RCA, said, “Fresh

Expressions promises to empower ordinary Christians in extraordinary ways,” and it aims to “spark a revival of church life in North America.”

Right now, said Vink, churches are struggling to determine how best to go forward in the COVID-19 crisis. They are thinking about how they will gather again.

Fresh Expressions can help with this. But another element is crucial — and that is the need to support and empower churches to move beyond the focus of gathering on Sunday and to pay more attention to sending people out into the world to share the gospel in all of the places where people find themselves.

“Fresh Expressions can help us think hard about what we can do now,” Vink said. A model of the early New Testament church is one part of this effort; in that era, disciples met people face to face and sought to bring the Christian message to them. “In the early church,” said Vink, “they went house to house and spread the gospel wherever they went.”

Combining the Old with the New

Randy Weener, the RCA’s church multiplication leader, said that a combination of the old with the new is needed to lift the church from where it is today to embracing fresh expressions of faith and worship.

“We need to be fishing in a different pond,” said Weener. “We have the potential to become a mature, incarnational expression of the church shaped by the gospel.”

This approach, said Weener, doesn’t shove aside the value that traditional churches can provide.

Instead, there is a fresh emphasis on using the DNA of a congregation’s life and to develop it over time to reach out and express itself in new ways, in new places with new people—and often these will be people who haven’t joined (or may never join) an established church for services on Sunday.

“We are talking about the opportunity to honor and work with established churches that have deep roots and to help them imagine what new branches will look like,” said Weener.

Examples of Fresh Expressions

Weener pointed out that some churches are already living out a newer form of ministry, setting down new roots in places that have not been visited by disciples of Christ. And in doing so, they find a multitude of people who are hungry for the truths that the gospel provides.

One example of this was featured in the webinar joined by some 100 church planters and other workers in late June.

The ministry is called Burritos and the Bible, an outreach of Wildwood (Fla.) United Methodist Church. Every Sunday night people gather for a Bible study group that meets at the local Moe’s Grill. It took many months for church members to establish relationships with people who ate at the grill and then—again over time—to start up a Bible study there.

Weener pointed out two up-and-running ministries that have already been touched by the Fresh Expressions movement—because, in themselves, they are fresh expressions.

More Examples

In one, Toby Gruppen has established a ministry called Life Quest, an RCA ministry that formed a worship community inside an auto-parts factory in Holland, Mich.

After serving for several years as a children’s ministry leader at First CRC in Zeeland, Mich., he connected with a Holland RCA congregation to plant a worship community inside the factory—an expression of how the church need not be confined to a church building.

“We walked with the employees and worked with the owners, who gave us permission and space to do church,” he said. Life Quest members at the factory included people from southwest Asia and from other places around the world. “Seventeen languages are spoken on the factory floor,” said Gruppen.

The idea of Life Quest, he added, “was to bring the church to where people naturally meet.” The aim is to connect with people in such places as fitness clubs

and tattoo parlors, as well as factories and eateries. Out of this can come a new approach to ministry: Go where the people are; don’t expect them to come to you, said Gruppen. Listen to them and learn from them, and don’t be quick to call them to join a church.

COVID-19, Gruppen added, changes the whole notion of what it has meant to be a church whose goal has been to establish flashy ministries that attract people for services.

Even if you have been a powerful, successful congregation, he predicted, that will likely change—

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and out of that can come fresh expressions of prayer and worship and gathering.

“We don’t know what will happen in the future, so we need to be flexible,”

he said. “The

heartbeat of being a fresh-expression church is to be disciplined and equipped to live out your faith where you live and work.”

Other fresh expressions include Benjamin’s Hope, an initiative in Holland to be church as a group of special-needs people; a pig farmer in Iowa who is looking to be the church to parents of a community soccer team; and some immigrant groups who are the church to each other.

Another ministry is called City Church. Led in Compton, Calif., by Pat Dirkse, this ministry has been in existence for about 10 years. Besides pastoring the church, Dirkse is also coordinator of discipleship for the RCA.

The worship community began in Dirkse’s garage. Twenty people were part of that. From the start, their focus was to be an integral part of the community. Along these lines, they banded together to pick up garbage in the area.

“We wanted to figure out tangible ways to love our neighbor,” he said. “From the community that met in the garage, we grew and expanded all over the area. We helped kids with their homework; we started a Spanish-speaking missional community; we ran a summer arts camp.”

Over the years, they have trained others—for example, a nurse, a scientist, and a financial counselor—to start worship communities where they work, he said.

Any of these—be it in Florida, Michigan, or California—are experiments in a new way of gathering a church. Mirroring the early New Testament way of gathering as a small community, these experiments are increasingly no longer experiments in helping to shape a church for the future.

At the core, they have the focus—in whatever context—of getting to know and then to do the will of God.

“Part of our role is to have the eyes to see and the ears to hear where the Holy Spirit is blowing and is already at work,” said Dirkse.

“We are trying to teach and inspire people to say yes to what the Holy Spirit is already doing. We want to equip people who want to go where God has already gone. We have certainly made loads of mistakes, but we are always stumbling toward Jesus to be with and to help other people.”

Written by Chris Meehan, CRC Communications