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Stories of renewal energize my spirit and serve as great encouragement to others as well. One of the privileges afforded by Regional Ministry is the opportunity to hear such stories from so many of our churches and get to visit and see first hand how renewal is taking place in our Central Region churches. So let me take a moment to share some good news with the rest of you.

Talking with a lay leader from an ABCCR church last week, he told the story of renewal in his congregation. He is part of the church's evangelism committee and for the past several months this group of introverts (ironic, isn't it) has been focused on how they can lead the congregation into experiences of greater hospitality and welcome. They have had Bible studies and workshops, the pastor has preached about the importance of reaching out and inviting people...and they have been stretched. But something has happened. New faces are showing up in the sanctuary. Recently the church hosted a community cookout, advertised heavily and invited people who don't attend their church. My friend reported the event was a blast, and his calculation was that about 30% of those who came had never been to that church before. There is now such a climate of hospitality, love and welcome in that congregation that a new attendee recently commented, "This church is the best-kept secret in our town." Renewal is happening. Jesus is doing something in our midst. Let's not keep it a secret.

Another congregation recently filled their sanctuary with about 800 helium balloons to symbolize the people in their community being impacted by the ministries of the church. Balloons representing children and youth, individuals in recovery, people being reintegrated back into society, people learning a better way of life, people whose lives and homes are being put back together through Godly counseling, people who worship, people who serve....the list goes on. Something exciting is going on in that congregation as the Holy Spirit uses them to reach into the lives of those around to make an eternal difference.

I recently visited a congregation marking a significant anniversary celebration. The sense of joy and excitement that filled the sanctuary was palpable. Additional chairs were set up down the aisle, people were seated in the narthex and cry room and a live feed was set up in the basement for the overflow. I have hardly been in a more joy-filled worship service. But the better news is that this is becoming the norm and not just the exception. "We're bursting at the seams; but it's a good problem to have."

Another congregation which had recently called a new pastor, decided on a different approach in introducing their new pastor to the community. Instead of a formal installation service, they hosted a community cookout instead. The weather cooperated, and it seemed the whole town turned out. People could see there is something special going on at that church, and they need to check it out. Renewal! God's Spirit at work! A fresh movement in the hearts of God's people! These are things to celebrate.

Time and space won't allow me to tell some other stories of renewal I get to see and hear. But I want you to be encouraged by the fact that God is not finished with us yet. So many of our Central Region churches are moving into a new season of renewal and impact for Jesus Christ. And if God will do it with these, God will do it with you. What are the ways you see God at work in your midst? Share that good news. And be on the lookout for ways you can be a part of the work of renewal God seeks to do in you and your congregation.