

The Impact of CAP at Rehoboth Christian Reformed Church, Bowmanville, ON
Presentation to Salem's Annual General Meeting
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It is good to be here and share with you the impact that Salem's Congregational Assistance Plan has had on our church community.

Our experience as church with Salem's CAP has been a good one, but also a surprising one in some ways.... It was initially a venture into the unknown, an idea on paper that looked good to some, but raised questions in others.

Our story with CAP started in the summer of 2005. I had just finished my term on the board of Diaconal Ministries Canada when I received an email from their Executive Director, Hans Kater, wondering if I knew of a church in the Quinte area who might be interested in partnering with Salem in one of 3 pilot projects they were hoping to launch. The Congregational Assistance Plan was one of those projects.

This plan tweaked my interest as I read about the prospect of free counseling for church members without first having to talk to the pastor or a deacon.

I was sure that the cost of counseling held many people in our church back from seeking help when they needed it, and that anonymity was also a huge factor for many. So I thought CAP might be something that Rehoboth might want to try.

I asked for more information from Salem, and Mark Vander Vennen then sent me a copy of the presentation made to Salem's board of directors in December 2004 about a possible Congregational Assistance Plan. This document must have convinced the board of Salem of the merit of this program. (I suspect that the authors and presenters Ken Van Wyk and Mark had something to with that as well). It certainly encouraged me to pursue it with our deacons.

When the CAP Project was first presented to our deacons, it received mixed reactions. . While this free and confidential assistance plan looked like a good thing, there was hesitation about the cost of it to the church budget. And that while we were already running short. There were also some doubts about people actually making use of CAP.

However, after further discussions and a meeting with Mark the deacons were ready to present a proposal to council to participate with Salem in a one year CAP pilot project and to have the cost covered by 2nd plate offerings. This was approved by council in November 2005 and by early February 2006 our first contract was signed. By the end of the first month 2 people of our church were already using CAP.

And after only 4 months the *need* for counseling services provided through CAP was well established. At that point the percentage of the congregation using this plan stood at 12% and by the end of the year it had increased to 17%. This far exceeded all expectations

and certainly the projected usage of only 5%.

We were of course quite interested in getting more details on how CAP had been used, besides the percentages.

It was therefore very helpful to receive statistical reports from Salem's office on a regular basis. These provided us with good information without revealing names. What we did glean from the reports were the following:

- the number of families & individuals who had sought counselling
- the number of sessions with couples, with individuals and with families
- the names of the counsellors and the number of people seen by them
- the type of issues people were struggling with.

These reports gave our pastor and council members a picture of the kind of issues our congregation was dealing with, so they would be aware of them on their visits and other times of interaction.

We also received some *direct* feedback from individuals, who had received counseling through CAP and voluntarily shared their experience. What we heard was always positive. There was appreciation for the plan being offered and even more for the services received. People were helped and felt encouraged.

Promotion of CAP and creating awareness in the congregation has of course been crucial. Salem's office has provided us with attractive and clear brochures for distribution in the church, and Mark has made himself available for meetings with council, and for information sessions with the congregation whenever it seemed helpful.

We also used the Sundays with the 2nd offering slated for Salem's CAP, to remind the congregation of the blessings of this plan - and to encourage them to use it when they felt unable to cope with a situation.

One of the real pluses we see in having CAP available for our church members is that people tend to seek help sooner, rather than later, when the problems may be more overwhelming. This often means that problems are resolved quicker and with fewer counselling sessions. The reports we have received from Salem seem to confirm this.

Another plus is that there is just one call to make to a number that is in large bold print in a prominent place in our weekly bulletin.

The great thing about partnering with Salem in this venture is that Salem takes care of all administrative details. All calls for help are made directly to Salem's office. Salem then connects the callers with a counsellor who can best address the particular issue that was identified. Salem also pays the counsellors and keeps detailed records.

Another area that Salem has taken care of is to find local counselors. Salem has

contracted with 7 well qualified, Christian counselors in the Bowmanville area who have made themselves available under CAP to assist members of our congregation..

At the end of our first pilot year we had certainly come to appreciate this program!

Would we consider a second year?

The high level of need and interest on the part of our church members made council very willing to explore the possibility of a 2nd year in the CAP pilot with Salem, even though the likely increase in cost was a concern.

Besides that, our pastor was relying very heavily on CAP. Rehoboth is a large church and our pastor does not have as much time to deal with the hurts in the congregation as he would like. He has repeatedly mentioned how thankful he is to have CAP, so he can encourage those who are hurting to seek help where it is easily available.

It was important for us at Rehoboth, (and I think also for Salem), to know if the requests for counseling during the 2nd year would continue at the same level or if they would diminish. We had no way of knowing.

In a meeting with Mark and a few deacons, a proposal for a new contract was drawn up, that seemed doable for both Salem and Rehoboth. But the cost to the church would indeed be higher.

At the end of our second pilot year it turned out that the percentage of the congregation that had used CAP was just as high as in the first year. This shows that the need is definitely there.

Rehoboth is currently in its third year with Salem's CAP project. We hope that this program will continue. We would find it very difficult to give it up. Our pastor continues to rely on its services and considers it an effective tool for ministry.

We want to thank Mark for his guidance and for his willingness to accommodate us when we had questions or when there was a special need. We also want to thank the board and other staff members who have made CAP and the other visionary pilots possible by your support and endorsement

The fruits of CAP are beginning to show in our congregation and we pray that our church's mental health and well-being may continue to improve, so we may be better equipped for serving our God. It is our hope that CAP may become a strong and sustainable program for Salem, so that many churches may experience its benefits.