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BY THE NUMBERS

From naming and renaming what eventually became the Christian Reformed Church in North America to the first publication dates of denominational periodicals, quite a number of memorable events in our denomination happened in February. Here are a few:

This Month in History

1859 Feb. 2 - The first official name is chosen for the new denomination: *Hollandsche Gereformeerde Kerk*.

1861 Feb. 6 - The second official name for the denomination is chosen: *Ware Hollandsche Gereformeerde Kerk*.

1868 Feb. 14 - The first issue of *De Wachter*, a denominational periodical, is published.

1887 Feb. 23 - LaGrave Avenue church (formerly Fourth church)—the denomination's first English-speaking church—is organized in Grand Rapids, Mich.

1915 Feb. 25 - The first issue of *The Banner*, the official denominational periodical, is published.

1950 Feb. 7 - Denominational mission work in China is officially terminated.

1954 Feb. 7 - The first CRCs in Quebec (Montreal) and in Nova Scotia (Belmont, now Truro) are organized.

Source: crcna.org/welcome/history/memorable-events



Cover: One man shares about his visit to Bunce Island, a former hub of the slave trade. Page 10

WHAT'S ONLINE

Looking for more? Here are just a few of the stories you'll find online at *TheBanner.org*. (Try typing the headlines into the search box.)

- » Church Worldwide: Producers Plan Release of Animated *Jesus* Film 46 Years After Original
- » Documentary review: *Take Care of Maya*
- » Book review: *Nothing Else but Miracles*
- » Movie review: *Wonka*

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BANNER

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Unarmed Truth

Scripture calls us to speak the truth in love (Eph. 4:15).

I believe this means speaking the truth not only with loving intent, but also in loving, kind, and gentle ways.



Shiao Chong is editor-in-chief of *The Banner*. He attends Fellowship Christian Reformed Church in Toronto, Ont.

Spanish and Korean translations of this editorial are available at TheBanner.org.

이 기사의 한글번역은 TheBanner.org/korean 에서 보실 수 있습니다.

Este artículo está disponible en español en TheBanner.org/spanish.

IN HIS 1964 Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech, Martin Luther King Jr. said, “I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word in reality. This is why right, temporarily defeated, is stronger than evil triumphant.” King was contrasting “unarmed truth” with military violence. But I wish to apply it to speech.

Scripture calls us to speak the truth in love (Eph. 4:15). I believe this means speaking the truth not only with loving intent, but also in loving, kind, and gentle ways. There is a current trend to speak the truth in harsh, even mocking ways. It is truth armed with verbal violence. For me, “unarmed truth” includes speaking the truth in nonviolent ways.

Whether it is because of my cultural upbringing or my experiences, I prefer gentler, kinder approaches, if possible, to bring change. I always feel that harsh words or tactics, even when in the service of good, not only can fail to bring the desired change but also cause further division. It is always easier to persuade friends than enemies. People tend to remember how you made them feel more than what you actually said. Therefore, even if what I say is correct, if I speak the truth harshly people are more likely to remember the hurt they felt than the truth of my position, and they’ll be more likely to reject my position than embrace it.

There is a current trend to call people out when they do wrong. Though groups of all political and cultural stripes do this, I’ll use anti-racist activism as an example. Some people these days are too quick to label someone a racist for certain public words, opinions, or actions without knowing the person. But what if we sought first to gently educate that person instead of condemning them? Unless their further actions prove ill intent, what if

we gave them the benefit of the doubt rather than assuming the worst?

This is not about what some will call privileging the “oppressor” over the “victim.” This is about the fruit of the Spirit, which include gentleness. This is about Christian behavior.

This does not mean passivity or submissive compliance to injustice or evil. King advocated and practiced nonviolent resistance in pursuit of racial justice. “Violence as a way of achieving racial justice is both impractical and immoral,” King said. “... Violence is impractical because it is a descending spiral ending in destruction for all. It is immoral because it seeks to humiliate the opponent rather than win his understanding; it seeks to annihilate rather than to convert. Violence is immoral because it thrives on hatred rather than love” (“The Quest for Peace and Justice,” Nobel Lecture, 1964).

I believe Christians should seek nonviolent ways, including nonviolent words, in pursuit of not only racial justice but also other causes.

It is true that Micah 6:8 calls us to “act justly” (or, in some translations, to “do justice”). But in the same breath it also calls us to “love mercy.” The Hebrew word translated as “mercy” is *hesed*. It has a wide range of meanings, including mercy, love, kindness, and even compassion. The King James Version of the Bible is fond of using “lovingkindness” for *hesed*.

God tells us to love mercy while acting justly. These are not two separate, exclusive items. Even as we fight for justice, we need to hold on to kindness and compassion. Unarmed truth and unconditional love, as King put it, belong together. **B**



REPLY ALL

To send letters to the editor, please see our guidelines at thebanner.org/letters.

Unity

The writer, in deep concern for the Christian Reformed Church to remain united for the sake of Christ's kingdom, asks the question: "What makes the seventh commandment rise above the rest of the commandments?" ("Will We Ever Learn What Unity Means?", May 2023). The answer is simple: the LGBTQ+ movement. Today this movement is demanding acceptance from society and the body of Christ. This movement's agenda has never been approved in any form in the Bible or in the holy catholic church throughout the centuries as behavior pleasing to God. This is why the seventh commandment has risen to the top. I would ask the writer to give us some good, biblical reasons why it shouldn't have risen to the top. Acceptance by the CRC demands some solid biblical grounds if we are to remain united. I and others, as the writer asks, are waiting for "a good answer."

» Carl R. Smits // Cedar Lake, Ind.

War in Israel

I read Rob Braun's good article ("War in Israel and the Words of Christ," Nov. 2023, online). I would suggest that he (and others) read two recent articles: "This War Did Not Start a Month Ago," by Dalia Hatuqa (*The New York Times*, Nov. 14, 2023), and "Two Truths and Countless Sorrows in Israel and Gaza," by Jim Wallis (*Sojourners*, October 12, 2023).

I am a retired missionary to Sierra Leone. I have lived and almost died in two civil wars in West Africa (Nigeria and Sierra Leone) in which more than a million people died. I have buried bodies, scraped pieces of people off the walls of their huts, and been under fire from both sides for many hours and all too often. I became a peacemaker or negotiator who met with both sides many times and traveled the Western world to speak to political leaders who had influence to help end the violence and make peace. It took 11 years for peace to come.

All wars are evil. No side ever wins, and the horrors suffered by innocent folks (mostly women and children) are unspeakable. Peace is only possible when love and justice push out hatred and injustice. The senseless cycle of violence and retribution in Palestine and Israel will not end until leadership in both countries lay down their weapons, most of which were provided by the United States.

» Paul Kortenhoven // Grand Rapids, Mich.

All Belongs to God

I was delighted to read this offering from Frank DeVries ("A Santa Christmas," Dec. 2023). Our distinctly Reformational worldview is so often missing from our discourse, and he nailed it perfectly. Yes, it all belongs to God. Also, kudos to ReFrame Ministries for its "Think Christian" and "no such thing as secular" viewpoints.

» Cal Langejans // Holland, Mich.

Graphic Story

Thanks much for the graphic short story about Elijah ("Expressing Faith in Jesus," Dec. 2023). Being (originally) from Chicago, I wondered, of course, who wrote it with the Tinley Park Convention Center figuring so prominently. It's wonderful.

» James Dekker // St. Catherines, Ont.

Peace

Thank you for your excellent editorial on the necessity of peace in God's world and Christ's church ("Peace," Dec. 2023). It was timely, concise, and simply right on the biblical mark. Blessed are the peacemakers. We need so many more of them.

» Paul Kortenhoven // Grand Rapids, Mich.

Greater Treasure

IN RECENT MONTHS I was caught up in a cycle of spending: cute boutique clothes, the latest trendy gadget on Temu or Shein, and Amazon's Cyber Monday deals. Like a donkey following a carrot, I was hooked on whatever flashy item was dangled before me. I knew that my spending was often out of hand and not honoring to God and that my time on social media was a detriment to my relationship with my Lord and Savior, yet I held on to the spoils of my obsessions.

As God is wont to do, he continued drawing me back to himself and pointing out my idolatry, and Scripture began to speak to my wayward soul.

Matthew 6:21 says, "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." If I'm honest, I know that my heart was wrapped up in material possessions and seeking approval from others. But God has begun to open up a truth in me: to please God, I have to forsake all others.


The truth is that we may say with our lips that we love the Lord and that he is our treasure, yet our hearts may be far from him. In such times, we need to heed Paul's warning in Philippians 2:12 to "work out [our] salvation with fear and trembling." Honoring God with our time and our money is not a work that will bring about salvation; it is, however, an indicator of a true believer, for "faith without deeds is useless" (James 2:20).

I began to realize the extent of my sin before God, and I had a choice: to remain in my sin and tightly clutch the spoils of disobedience, or to forsake all that I had for a greater treasure.

I held on to the spoils of my obsessions.

God's grace often leads me to prostrate myself before him, and I soon began to confess that I was, as Jeremiah puts it, digging "broken cisterns that cannot hold water" (Jer. 2:13).

In the days since, God has softened my hardened heart and renewed a right spirit within me. He has, once again, become the treasure I seek, the living water that satisfies.

As Jesus himself in parable said, "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field" (Matt. 13:44). Child of God, for the joy of knowing and treasuring Christ, repent of your sin of idolatry. And may the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). 



Sindy Fields is a high school teacher and community college professor of English. She resides in Pennington Gap, Va., with her husband, Freddie, and their children. She attends the First Baptist Church of Pennington Gap, where she teaches Sunday school and helps lead the youth group.

As I Was Saying

Find the latest posts from our award-winning blog online at TheBanner.org.

- » What Native American Heritage Month Means to New Immigrants Like Me
- » Why I'm Still a Member of the Christian Reformed Church
- » Your Inconvenient Safe Church Policy Helps Spread the Gospel
- » Blessed to Receive: Christ's Perfect Power in a Bowl of Soup
- » On Wings Like ...?



A Journey to Chains of the Past

By Daniel Friesen

One day, when all our people were gone out to their works as usual, and only I and my dear sister were left to mind the house, two men and a woman got over our walls and in a moment seized us both, and, without giving us time to cry out, or make resistance, they stopped our mouths, and ran off with us into the nearest wood. Here they tied our hands, and continued to carry us as far as they could, till night came on, when we reached a small house where the robbers halted for refreshment, and spent the night. We were then unbound, but were unable to take any food; and, being quite overpowered by fatigue and grief, our only relief was some sleep.

—Olaudah Equiano,
kidnapped by slavers at age 8
(*A Journey in Chains*,
Library of Congress)

After what could be a months-long march to the sea, abducted Africans were kept in coastal fortresses until slave ships arrived. One of those fortresses is on Bunce Island, Sierra Leone.

For the past several years, I have frequently traveled to Sierra Leone in my capacity as a consultant with World Renew. The purpose of my travels is to connect with World Renew's partner group, Christian Extension Services, which has been involved in exemplary community development work for many years. I had heard about Bunce Island, but I had not ventured there because my time in Sierra Leone was usually quite full with village visits and staff meetings. But on one recent trip, my friend and guide Milton Marah accompanied me to Bunce Island, a hub of West African slave trade from 1670 to 1808.

Bunce Island is a bit of land about five km square (not quite two square miles) situated where the Sierra Leone River runs westward into Tagrin Bay and then the Atlantic Ocean. Its

crumbling jails and staging grounds are now a UNESCO World Heritage Site, an artifact of the slave trade that enriched so many nations and raped Africa in the process. I'm one of those who has benefited indirectly from such injustice, so this pilgrimage to Bunce was a painful experience.

From the airport town of Lungi, Milton and I traveled to Pepel, a town along the bay leading to the Atlantic. There we inquired about visiting Bunce Island, visible in the distance. A village leader emerged and told us we were among the few people, mostly African-Americans, who visit the island—only about a dozen per month. We paid for the trip and got into the boat home-crafted from local timbers about eight meters long and equipped with an outboard motor.

The young men taking us to the island responded to a few questions about what it was like to live as fishermen; then we settled into silence. After a 20-minute ride over mostly calm water, we arrived and disembarked on the island's dock. Only a plaque and eerie silence greeted us as we stepped onto Bunce Island. No one lives on

this lush island despite the recently built guard house that's been mostly unoccupied since its construction, our guides told us.

We followed the only path onto the island and encountered a few more plaques describing the island's history. Stiff, stilted language attempted to portray an inhumanity that defies description.

The path then led up a hill to a crumbling fort with large and small chambers and open areas where the slaves were assembled when slave buyers arrived to select their cargo. Our guides were respectful and quietly spoke to us what they knew of the place, at the same time wondering at how people could sell people and at their own people's involvement as accomplices to the European and American kidnappers.

One of the plaques stated that ships from various countries trafficked more than 30,000 people in the 140 years Bunce Island operated as a holding space. I could almost hear the cries and groans of helplessly trapped people echoing among the ruins.

The trail next brought us to a graveyard of mostly unmarked stones. Among the more legible granite headstones was one for a captain that proclaimed him to be "a man of upright character, beloved by his companions."

Monkeys scampered in the trees and birds whirled overhead as the natural world closed in on this mostly forgotten piece of inhumanity. Trees and brush were beginning to swallow the ruins, as if to hide the shameful evidence. One of the buildings now resembles a gaping skull.

We walked quietly back to the boat, overcome with the emotions of what we had seen and deep in our own

I could almost
hear the cries
and groans of
helplessly trapped
people echoing
among the ruins.

thoughts. I tried to convey to my colleague and guides how terrible I felt about this monumental evil, this systemic rot that governments and faulty theology. Back in the boat, our guides watched us carefully.

"What message would you have us take of this island?" I asked.

The answer: "That slavery happened, and that it must never happen again."

I looked down at the floor of the boat, a few inches above the hull itself. Between the two layers of boards I could see water sloshing, murky and dirty, and I thought of the ships carrying people as cargo, stacked like logs between decks with their cries of pain ignored.

Approaching Pepel, we saw other fishing boats heading toward the dock and were told these were fishermen returning home—not from a fishing trip, but from another task we soon learned about. We saw hundreds of people gathered where only a few had been when we set off for the

island. From a distance we heard anguished wailing and screaming. Our boat slowed to let other vessels by—boats full of men and women bent over in grief.

We looked at our guides for an explanation. They told us a fisherman had been lost at sea, and these boats were full of friends and family who had gone to look for him. The boats were now returning at the end of a sad day with neither a corpse nor a rescued sailor, and the entire town had turned out to hear the news. The tear-stained crowd was shocked to hear someone they knew was missing and likely drowned. We did not hear any more details, but we felt the weight and grief of an entire community.

Stepping out of our boat onto the dock, we headed for our vehicle, quite unnoticed by a mourning village. Milton and I thanked our new friends, then drove away, stunned by the tragic timing of events. The visit to Bunce Island had filled my imagination with cries of anguish from the past that were then eerily reflected in the voices of people in the same area mourning yet another loss.

This visit was for me a powerful reminder of the impact of slavery in Sierra Leone. It also serves as a connection to those in North America whose lives were shaped by this and as a scathing reminder that human trafficking is still not over. It's time to awaken. **B**



Daniel Friesen lives in Winnipeg and is a sustainable development consultant working with World Renew and other organizations. He and his wife, Helen, have four adult children and are a part of the First Nations Community Church.

BIG QUESTIONS

Vocation/Calling

When I mentioned to a friend that I think everyone should find a job they love, he responded that some people just need to make a living. Is this a cop-out?

Having been blessed with a job that I love, I also want others to have a job where they find meaning and where their gifts and experiences can be shared in ways that honor creation, others, and God. I also realize that brokenness and sin affect society, so all work involves some kind of struggle and toil. In some cases, it feels as if the best thing that can be said about a job is that it provides enough money to make a living, and we should lament that some jobs don't do even that.

As Reformed Christians, we believe our work is a calling from God (Our World Belongs to God, 48). Yet our understanding of work as a calling can lead to an unhealthy idealism around work and how much we work. Work should not be the only way we honor creation, others, and God. That makes work an idol.

Because work, whether paid or unpaid, is a calling from God, it shouldn't just be something we drudge through simply to get a paycheck. Work will usually be hard, yet the Bible encourages us to learn to be content in every circumstance (Phil. 4:11). It's not helpful to make those who dislike their jobs feel guilty, but we can help others remember that God is present with us in whatever we do and whomever we meet: in the prayers we might say for those using the things we make, in the warm smile we give to customers who are lonely, in the thankfulness we have for the buildings and vehicles we use, and in the grace that we show others.



Illustration for The Banner by Gisela Bohórquez

While a job can be a blessing, it is good to remember that not everyone might feel blessed by their job. Those with the worst jobs are often young or marginalized and don't always have the ability to change jobs. Those of us with more power can do our best to advocate for working conditions that provide an environment that is as safe and life-giving as possible.

Brenda Kronemeijer-Heyink is the Christian Reformed chaplain at the University of Toronto. She attends Willowdale CRC in Toronto, Ont.

Bible/Doctrine/Church

If people go to heaven immediately after death, was it cruel to bring Lazarus back to life?

Think of what Paul writes in Romans: "If we live, we live for the Lord; and if we die, we die for the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord" (Rom. 14:8). For Lazarus' case, we might add: "If we are asked to 'come back' for the sake of some work the Lord has for us to do, we are the Lord's—in life, death, and resurrection." Although it may be "better by far" to be in the presence of the Lord, it may be "more necessary" for others that we remain (Phil. 1:22-24).

In any case, I appreciate the way that Dorothy Sayers rendered the scene in her series of radio dramas, *The Man Born to Be King* (broadcast in 1941-1942). Here's the dialogue after Lazarus is raised from the dead:

Mary [to Lazarus]: You are smiling—you are laughing—you are alive!

Lazarus (joyfully): Yes, I am alive!

Martha: Where have you been?

Lazarus: With life.

Mary: Do you know who called you back?

Lazarus: Life. He is here and he has never left me.

(The Man Born to Be King: Wade Annotated Edition, p. 264)

Lazarus would have to die again. His loved ones would have to grieve again. But they would grieve with hope because in the raising of Lazarus they saw a preview of things to come. More importantly, they were able to place their firm hope in the Lord, who waits (John 11:6) and weeps (11:35) but ultimately says "I am the resurrection and the life" (11:25) and raises the dead. This is our great hope—and the hope of all creation.

Justin Ariel Bailey is assistant professor of theology at Dordt University. He, his wife, and their two children are members of Covenant Christian Reformed Church in Sioux Center, Iowa.

Science/Environmental

What should we say to someone who worries that science disproves Christianity?

I'm a scientist and a Christian. I've occasionally been asked by Christians (with a little fear in their eyes), "Have

you ever learned something in science that made you doubt your faith?"

Many people share this concern. Studies show that people leaving the church often list science as a reason they doubt. But I have never found science to push me away from God. I grew up in the Christian Reformed Church, and my Reformed teachers and pastors always taught me that God's sovereignty means we shouldn't fear science.

When science and Scripture seem to conflict, people might feel they have to choose one or the other. But we don't do that when two Scripture passages seem to contradict each other. We assume there is underlying harmony. We go to experts to learn more about those passages, and ultimately we learn more about God.

God both inspired Scripture and created the world that we study scientifically. And the Belgic Confession tells us that God reveals himself both in the natural world and in Scripture. Although we might misinterpret one or both, we trust that God wouldn't govern the natural world in one way and inspire Scripture to tell us something contradictory. If our study of both seems at first to contradict, it's an opportunity to learn more about both and ultimately about God.

We shouldn't fear this. We don't earn our salvation by holding tight to a checklist of doctrines and interpretations of Scripture. We're saved by grace. We then do our best to understand God's Scripture and God's world out of gratitude. If we start by trusting God's grace, studying God's world might give us new mysteries to ponder, but that study should not lead us away from God.

Science is often portrayed as atheistic. Some atheists do see each scientific advance as evidence that God doesn't exist. But Christians who use Scripture as a lens for looking at the world see

each scientific advance as increasing human understanding of God's amazing creation. God can do miracles, but God is just as sovereign over everything that happens in scientifically explainable ways.

Loren Haarsma is a lifelong member of the Christian Reformed Church. He lives in Grand Rapids, Mich., and is currently a professor of physics and astronomy at Calvin University. He is the author of *When Did Sin Begin? Human Evolution and the Doctrine of Original Sin* (Baker, 2021) and *Origins: Christian Perspectives on Creation, Evolution, and Intelligent Design* (Faith Alive, 2008, 2013).

Digital Life

I'm already sick of reading election news on my news feed, and we still have months to go. Would it be irresponsible of me to bury my head in the sand and ignore it all?

One of the finer accents of the Reformed faith is an emphasis on engaging with the world even when it feels dark and deeply flawed. That includes getting involved in choosing leaders. Here are a few ideas to help deal with what your digital device is delivering this election season:

- » **Pray:** Prayer is often the last item on a list like this, but it should be first. Prayer changes things, and perhaps more importantly, it changes us. Shut off your screens and pray honestly about your hopes and fears. Earnestly seek God's will and the good of all.
- » **Be aware of your biases:** You're aware of the biases of class, gender, race, and age you carry around all day, but especially during elections we should be aware of the more subtle biases in how we get our information, such as through sound bites instead of complete stories or videos over text.

» **Read beyond the headline:** I struggle with this one. I want to collect as much information as I can on just about any topic, so I scan headlines—delightfully feeding my biases along the way, but looking silly later when I quote said headline but can't provide details to substantiate it.

» **Choose your sources well:** Facebook, X (Twitter), Apple News, Google News, and the like are not news organizations. They are technology companies that make money on the number of people they can attract to (and keep on) their sites. Instead of relying on these often unreliable sources, get your news from well-established journalistic news organizations.

» **Recognize red flags:** Moved to anger or vindication by a candidate's online post? Stop. Avoid the urge to like, share, or retweet. A strong emotional trigger from a post is a red flag you should recognize and pay attention to. It often means you are being manipulated.

» **Check the facts wisely:** It's tempting to spend a lot of time digging deeper to discern if something is true or not, but be careful: the trickery behind misinformation is so sophisticated that the average user is more likely to be further misled than to discover the truth. Instead, try professional fact-checking organizations like Factcheck.org or PolitiFact.com.

Dean Heetderks is co-director of Ministry Support Services of the Christian Reformed Church and art director of *The Banner*. Do you have suggestions to add to this list? Send them to dean.heetderks@gmail.com.



Got a Big Question for any of our panelists? Email it to editorial@thebanner.org with "Big Questions" in the subject line.

Martial Arts Ministry Supports Youth in Their Faith

NEWS

For more news and longer stories about the churches and ministries of the Christian Reformed Church, visit TheBanner.org. Or get the free app by searching for “CRCNA Banner” in your app store.

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Diego Flores, who has worshiped at Ebenezer Christian Reformed Church in Berwyn, Ill., since 2000 and was commissioned as a pastor there in 2022, recently promoted his latest class of students from *The Way*, a martial arts Bible study. He ran the first program in 2004 after a young person in the church learned Flores was formerly a martial artist. Since then, Flores has taught more than 75 students martial arts while also mentoring them in their faith.

Flores had left martial arts behind when he became a Christian, but that young person's interest 20 years ago led him to pray about going back to it. He felt God was creating an opportunity, and he told the interested youth that if he found four more students he would begin a class that would include a Bible study.

When the student found other interested people, Flores launched *The Way*. He named the ministry after the term referring to Jesus that early Christians adopted for their movement (Acts 9:2).

Each class begins with an hour of martial arts, then moves into a half-hour of Bible study using a curriculum Flores created. After eight to 12 months in the program and successfully answering questions in an oral exam based on the Bible study, students are promoted to their next martial arts belt.

Diego Flores (center, facing) leads *The Way*, a ministry for youth to learn about martial arts and the Bible.

Flores said he's had students from fifth grade to 12th grade participate, most of them from the community surrounding the church.

Students progress through six levels, starting with white belts, who learn basic self-defense moves, and ending with black belts, who have mastered the skills to handle two attackers. Students in lower levels study sections of Scripture; red belts read through the whole Old Testament; and black belts read through the whole New Testament with Flores. A student who completes the program as a black belt will have read through the whole Bible. *The Way* meets once a week in a gymnasium at Ebenezer, and red- and black-belt students also attend worship services as part of the program.

"It's been very good for building the kids up in discipline and respect and taking care of their bodies, but above all (for) taking care of their spiritual walk with God," said Flores. "My prayer for all of them is that eventually they become devoted followers of Jesus."

—Kristen Parker

Four Worshiping Communities, One Communitas: Ecumenical Partners Share Ministry in Alberta

In the heart of Alberta Avenue, a mature inner-city neighborhood in Edmonton, Alta., the worshiping communities of Avenue Christian Reformed Church, St. Faith's and St. Mary's Anglican churches, and an Indigenous spiritual community called Standing Stones come together in a shared ministry partnership called Lodgepole Communitas. The name draws inspiration from Alberta's provincial tree, the lodgepole pine, which is highly adaptable and able to thrive even in harsh environments, and from *communitas*, a Latin word referring to intense community spirit, social equality, solidarity, and togetherness.

"It's a community bound together for the mission of Jesus Christ," said Travis Enright, rector of St. Faith's and St. Mary's.

He also described Lodgepole Communitas as "a circle with many points of entry by which to experience the love of Jesus."

Some of those points of entry include meals cooked and served by volunteers several days a week and individual support offered through belonging centers, traditional healing circles, a Celebrate Recovery program, and reintegration groups of formerly incarcerated people. The Lodgepole Bakery, a social enterprise providing education and work experience, operates out of St. Faith's on Thursdays, making and selling sourdough bread, mandazi, samosas, and Ugandan-style chapati. The Bleeding Heart Art Space brings together local artists, musicians, and other forms of faith expression.

"Ours is a practical, on-the-street-level, following-the-footsteps-of-Jesus theology," Enright said.

The collaboration that created Lodgepole Communitas started in 2020 when



Lodgepole Communitas comes together in St. Faith's Anglican Church. Paintings in Ovide Bighetty's series *Kisemanito Pakitinasuwin—The Creator's Sacrifice* line the sanctuary walls.

Clergy Loretta Stadt and Travis Enright are two of the partners of Lodgepole Communitas.

Avenue CRC, a 9-year-old church plant, began using

St. Faith's worship space for its Sunday morning services. Anglican services start 90 minutes later and use different liturgies throughout the month.

"When the CRC came," Enright said, "they created a lot of energy and creativity. Things have flourished."

Loretta Stadt, who co-pastors Avenue CRC with Aaron Au, said Lodgepole Communitas is "a place of belonging, a place where the love of Jesus shines through in the joy of connecting with people of all walks of life—from the person who comes with a shopping cart full of belongings to the person who owns a large home in the suburbs; from the Indigenous person living with the results of generational trauma to the recent immigrant from Uganda and not-so-recent Caucasian person. ... Each person belongs and is welcomed as a beloved child of God. And through it all, I am slowly learning what it truly means to love as Jesus loves."

Support for the ministries of Lodgepole Communitas comes from various church donations, government grants, and a \$15,000 grant from Classis Alberta North. In an interim report to classis, Stadt shared how this "has allowed them to further the work of Lodgepole Communitas, inviting people in where they are and being blessed by them."

The bishop of the Anglican Diocese of Edmonton, Stephen London, visited in February 2023 to confirm seven young people in the faith and expressed thanks for the work made possible by the supportive network.

"This Communitas operates in so many ways to be a blessing—by holding worship, feeding the hungry, reintegrating the broken, visiting the sick, pioneering new ways (of) ecumenical sharing, (and) being the beloved community," London said. "Thank you for being the salt of the earth. May God continue to guide and bless you in this amazing work."

—Janet Greidanus



Photos by Janet Greidanus

IN MEMORIAM



Rev. Arthur J. Stienstra

1930-2023

A righteous man who was quick to offer compassion and forgiveness to others, Art Stienstra, 93, died Nov. 26, 2023.

Born and raised in Sneek, the Netherlands, Art studied business and economics at Wageningen Academy before joining the Netherlands Armed Forces in 1949 as a lieutenant. After discharge in 1952, he immigrated to Vancouver, B.C., married, and then immigrated to the U.S. to study at Calvin College (now University) and Seminary. After graduation he attended Kampen Theological University in the Netherlands for further study of Reformed theology.

Ordained in 1962, Art served Exeter (Ont.) Christian Reformed Church, then became the founding pastor of Faith CRC in New Brighton, Minn. After a year of Clinical Pastoral Education, he served Hawarden (Iowa) CRC; Silver Spring (Md.) CRC; Trinity CRC, Ames, Iowa; and Immanuel CRC, Fort Collins, Colo. During those years he also worked as a community college instructor and as a hospital chaplain in Mankato, Minn. He retired in 1992 but continued to serve several churches as an interim pastor.

Art enjoyed traveling in his RV and was said to be able to start a conversation with anyone.

Predeceased by Wieke, his wife of 67 years, Art is survived by five children and their spouses, nine grandchildren, and seven great-grandchildren.

—Janet A. Greidanus

Ecumenically Supported School Found Unity in Educational Creed



Photo by Unity Christian School

Students at Unity Christian Academy come from a variety of Christian traditions.

Unity Christian Academy in South Holland, Ill., has that name for a reason. The group of ecumenical partners behind its creation united around a desire for a Christian high school education and started with an educational creed.

The school opened six years ago, but the effort began in 2014 when a group of local clergy, business professionals, educators, parents, and community leaders met to discuss possibilities in the south suburbs of Chicago. They started with basic questions, the school's website says, including "What does this community want from its high schools?" and "What does the future of Christian education look like?"

School board member David Larsen, a member of Hope Christian Reformed Church in Oak Forest, Ill., said the educational creed was derived from Our World Belongs to God, a contemporary testimony of the CRC. Developing the creed from the beginning established unity among people from a wide variety of backgrounds.

"Even with little agreement on 'end times,' baptism, women in church office, and other firm and differing beliefs, all agreed on the educational creed and the need for a Christian high school," Larsen

said. "This unity of belief and purpose is reflected in the intentional cultivation of a board culture marked by prayer and understanding and a school focus on community service and engagement."

While there are Christians of many backgrounds on the board and in leadership, Larsen said the CRC is heavily represented. Head of School Neil Okuley attends Pullman CRC in Chicago.

"By design, Unity is a missional school," Larsen said. "While most families and students are Christians, non-Christians are welcomed and introduced—by curriculum and conversation—to the Christian faith."

The school is celebrating recent successes such as having a team of students selected to carry out an experiment in NASA's TechRise Student Challenge. Unity's team was one of 60 selected from about 500 who applied.

The school relocated in January to a recently purchased former Catholic school and church on 10 acres of land within a mile of the community church it had been renting.

—Dan Veeneman

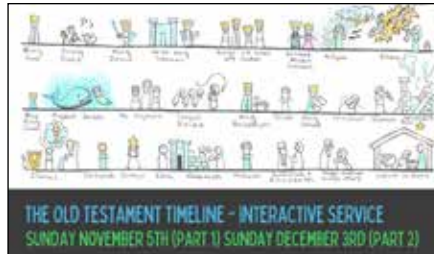
Edmonton Church Hosts Monthly 'InterActive' Service to Engage All Ages

The River Community Church, a Christian Reformed congregation in Edmonton, Alta., has been engaging church members of all ages since September with its monthly InterActive church service, the latest piece of the church's two-year experiment with intergenerational and conversational learning.

"We want to help create connections in the faith journey between all members of our church family, and we believe that relationship with one another is essential," children's ministry director Andrea Anderst explained.

In November, about 90 people, including around 20 children and youth, attended the first of a two-part interactive service series to draw the Old Testament in pictures to retell the story of God's redemption plan. Gathering first for cups of fruit salad, coffee, and other beverages, the group sat at round tables with an assortment of colored markers and a 12-page Old Testament timeline for each person.

Pastor Dale Melenberg welcomed the congregation and asked participants to "engage in the whole service for the benefit of each other. We recognize that everyone has something to share, and to model about faith matters. ... We want to learn



from each other, and we want to grow ourselves."

The November and December InterActive services reviewed the Bible's broad themes, beginning with creation, the fall, and the flood and leading to redemption. They're part of a whole series for the liturgical year based on *Our World Belongs to God*, a contemporary testimony, or dynamic statement of faith, of the Christian Reformed Church.

"These services include active experiences to help form connections," Anderst said. "We encourage dialogue, questions, and sharing because we think that this helps people to contemplate how the words of Scripture and the call of Christ actually interact with their daily life."

—Janet Greidanus

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Children, young people, adults, and older adults participate and learn together in The River Community Church's InterActive service Nov. 5.

IN MEMORIAM



Rev. John Pasma

1950-2023

Thoughtful, calm, compassionate, and generous, John Pasma was genuinely interested in the lives, stories, and work of others. Despite developing Parkinson's disease later in life and more recently esophageal cancer, John remained strong to the end, trusting in God and ever hopeful of recovering to have more time with family. John, 73, died Nov. 22.

After graduating from Trinity Christian College in Palos Heights, Ill., John taught history at London (Ont.) District Christian Secondary School before leaving to study at Calvin Theological Seminary. He was ordained in 1988 and pastored Rehoboth Christian Reformed Church (now Faith Fellowship) in Niagara Falls, Ont., and Covenant CRC in Edmonton, Alta. He retired in 2016. John was a longtime member of the Healthy Church Task Force in Classis Alberta North and served as regional pastor.

John enjoyed tinkering with his Volkswagens, taking long walks with his wife, cycling, listening to the news, driving across Canada, making jam, watching hockey games, and collecting, organizing, and digitizing old family photos. He regularly donated blood.

John is survived by Grace, his wife of 50 years; four children and their spouses; and 13 grandchildren. He was predeceased by two stillborn grandchildren. John's last act of kindness was donating his brain and spinal cord for Parkinson's research.

—Janet A. Greidanus

Classes, Churches Taking Differing Actions on Human Sexuality Decisions Within CRCNA

Regional groups of congregations of the Christian Reformed Church in North America are taking varying approaches to instructions from Synod 2023 to “guide into compliance the officebearers of their constituent churches who publicly reject the biblical guidelines affirmed by Synod 2022 regarding same-sex relationships” (*Acts of Synod 2023*, p. 1029).

Ministering Well With Those Who Identify as LGBTQ+

Some groups in the CRC are emphasizing synod’s admonishment to repent from the ways our communities have caused harm to believers who identify as LGBTQ+ and, “in accordance with Scripture and our confessions, (to) be places of belonging for LGBTQ+ members seeking to follow Christ” (*Acts of Synod 2023*, p. 1023). Eight churches from Classis Toronto and one church from Classis Central Plains created an LGBTQ+ Hospitality Cohort in September. (See “Nine Churches Form LGBTQ+ Hospitality Cohort,” November 2023, p. 19.)

The council of Church of the Savior in South Bend, Ind., sent an overture (a formal request) to the October meeting of Classis Holland asking that the classis “overture Synod to solicit resources and tools for LGBTQ ministry from Christian Reformed churches who are in agreement with the CRC’s position on homosexuality.” Church of the Savior wants the CRC’s Office of General Secretary to request “that any church that is both faithful to the CRC’s position on homosexuality and has a thriving and successful ministry to LGBTQ people (or simply has a representational percentage of LGBTQ members who feel a sense of belonging in their congregation) share pertinent information about their ministry (or their strategies for inclusion)” (parentheses original).

The overture further states, “If no such resources become available within a year, we ask that a report be made to that effect to Synod 2025. In such an



Photo by Steven Herppich

Delegates from the 49 classes of the CRCNA pray with one another during Synod 2023.

eventuality, we further ask that Synod 2025 recommend that the Office of General Secretary explore whether it is feasible to continue to ask CRC congregations to be places of belonging for LGBTQ members in the present context.”

Classis Holland did not adopt Church of the Savior’s overture. Church of the Savior pastor Christina Brinks Rea said the congregation’s council plans to forward the overture to Synod 2024 itself.

Guidance for Church Visitors

Classis Alberta North’s church visitor team met in September “expressly to talk together about Synod 2023’s instructions to church visitors.” The team’s report was included in the October classis minutes. From synod’s reminder to “all church visitors throughout the CRCNA of their authority and responsibility to, in a spirit of love and grace, guide officebearers into alignment with the biblical guidelines, including but not limited to all areas of human sexuality” (*Acts of Synod 2023*, p. 1030), the Alberta North team noted it chooses “to exemplify synod’s reminder to do our work in a ‘spirit of love and grace.’”

“Recognizing that individual and communal sanctification as well as being conformed to the image of Jesus Christ takes time, we feel a desire to take the time that will be required to walk alongside,” the report said.

Church visitors are appointed by a classis with a mandate “to ascertain whether the officebearers of the church faithfully perform their duties, adhere to sound doctrine, observe the provisions of the Church Order, and promote the building up of the body of Christ and the extension of God’s kingdom” (Church Order Art. 42).

Waiting for Clarity

Other classes weren’t as certain about how to follow through on the synodical requests. The interim committee of Classis Northern Illinois reported at the September meeting that it intended “to wait on the synodical directive to ‘guide into compliance’ those churches who have published statements contrary to decisions on human sexuality.” Pastor John Hoekwater, a member of the interim committee, told *The Banner* that synod “did not make clear what ‘guiding into compliance’ would look like when a church or pastor is noncompliant and states their unwillingness to become compliant or to change what is taught by them or their church regarding their understanding of homosexual sex and same-sex marriage—positions that are contrary to the CRCNA’s current position related to human sexuality and the seventh commandment.” Because “Synod 2023 provided no recommendations to classis regarding what to do when whatever guidance they give does not change a church or pastor’s position nor the terms under which a pastor and/or a church both welcome and choose leaders who are part of the LGBTQ+ community,” Hoekwater said, “our classis recognizes that next year’s synod will need to decide what to do with churches and pastors who are not in compliance.”

Classis Grand Rapids East, which was given specific direction from Synod 2023 “to guide the Neland Avenue CRC congregation and leadership into alignment with the biblical guidelines affirmed by Synod 2022 regarding same-sex, sexual relationships,” has not yet been public about its follow-through. At its September meeting, the classis empowered its executive committee to “establish a committee to help classis address alignment-related mandates received from Synod 2023.” A subsequent classis meeting in October, held “with the intention of speaking and listening with the above issues in mind,” was done in executive session.

Confronting Differences

Some classes within the CRCNA have member churches at odds with each other on these matters. At the October meeting of Classis Alberta South/Saskatchewan, 10 delegates added their names to a protest read by one pastor: “In keeping with the decision of Synod 2023, ‘That synod instruct all classes to guide into compliance the office bearers of their constituent churches who publicly reject the biblical guidelines affirmed by Synod 2022 regarding same-sex relationships,’ the council of High River CRC protests the seating of any delegate or delegation to this meeting which has rejected the biblical guidelines.”

At the October meeting of Classis Grand Rapids South, one delegation raised a concern on its credentials (forms submitted to the classis clerk ahead of the meeting) over an action in process by another member congregation “regarding possible non-compliance with Synod’s ‘HSR (human sexuality report) decisions.’” The action was a planned congregational vote, as described in the Grand Rapids South minutes, over “whether or not to be more inclusive of same-sex marriages, including possible officebearing.”

The congregational vote was later reported (at a November meeting of Classis Grand Rapids South) not to have received the required two-thirds majority to alter the

congregation’s articles of incorporation. The minutes of the November meeting of Classis Grand Rapids South noted that the chair led a prayer for guidance for all of classis “as we seek to be obedient to God’s Word.”

Listening

At least two other classes reported having times for discussion over the impact of synod’s recent guidance.

Classis B.C. North-West formed a listening circle at its October meeting “to get at the still-unanswered question from Christ Community Church in Victoria, B.C.’s March 2023 credentials,” the minutes said. At the March meeting, “Christ Community Church requested advice on living in the tension of diverse perspectives from Synod 2022.” Participants in the October listening circle shared responses to the following questions: “Synods 2022 and 2023 focused on human sexuality. In the terms of the complete definition in (Heidelberg Catechism) Q&A 108: 1. How has your congregation offered a hospitable welcome? (and) 2. How has your congregation supported visitors, attendees and members who haven’t felt welcome because of this definition?”

Responses gathered from the listening circle were to be passed on to councils of member congregations.

The interim committee of Classis Eastern Canada invited pastor Syd Hielema to facilitate a discussion at its October meeting. Hielema led “the delegates and guests in devotion and conversation on the theme ‘A Gentle Heart to Heart about Human Sexuality and CRCNA.’” Meeting minutes noted that members “are not all on the same page regarding synod’s decision(s) on the human sexuality report. Reflections centered around a long-term conversation rather than a quick fix to our differences. ... We were thankful for this time of sharing and listening as the Lord is building his church.”

—Alissa Vernon, News Editor

IN MEMORIAM



*Rev. Kenneth
Van De Griend*

1944-2023

Ken Van De Griend was a passionate, diligent, enthusiastic, and humble man with a heart for missions, both at home and internationally. Ken, 79, died Nov. 22.

A graduate of Dordt College (now University) and Calvin Theological Seminary, Ken was ordained in 1969, then went to Taiwan as a missionary with Christian Reformed World Missions (now part of Resonate Global Mission). After returning to the U.S., he served Ackley (Iowa) Christian Reformed Church; Peace CRC, Cedar Rapids, Iowa; Shawnee Park CRC, Grand Rapids, Mich.; and Rock of Life CRC, Willmar, Minn.

For the next five years he served The Bible League as director for Southeast Asia and then pastored First CRC in Waupun, Wis., while serving as part-time director for Southeast Asia for Leadership Resources International (now WordPartners), a global ministry equipping and encouraging pastors. Although Ken officially retired in 2007, he continued to work full time for LRI and part time as a pastor at First Byron CRC in Byron Center, Mich., until his death.

Ken was fluent in six languages and loved discussing theology. He also loved the outdoors, especially fishing with family.

He is survived by Wanda, his wife of 60 years; three children and their spouses; 13 grandchildren; and one great-grandchild.

—Janet A. Greidanus

News From the Pews

The Banner loves to hear about what member congregations of the Christian Reformed Church are up to. Here are some things we learned about recently and shared on *The Banner's* Facebook page. See more at facebook.com/crcbanner.

Share your photos and news tips at news@thebanner.org.



Plymouth Heights Christian Reformed Church in Grand Rapids, Mich., is one of several Michigan congregations that have recently sponsored Bible collections for the Bible-distribution charity Project Bible Runners after a member of LaGrave Avenue CRC in Grand Rapids became a local contact for the Illinois-based organization. Bibles donated before August 2023 were sent to Kenya, Ethiopia, Uganda, and South Sudan. Bibles donated in September and October were sent to Nigeria and Cameroon. Another shipment to Kenya was scheduled for January.



The Sun Valley GEMS Club at Bethel Christian Reformed Church in Sun Valley, Calif., celebrated three long-serving counselors in November who all turned 75 in 2023. Louise Treiling, Kathy Klaasen, and Linda Hunt began serving when their daughters were young. Now some of their daughters and one granddaughter serve as GEMS counselors in other congregations. "These three women have built a legacy of truly helping women and girls, not just in their own families but also in the wider family of God, to meet the Savior through their love. The Sun Valley GEMS Club thanks God for the blessing to have Louise, Linda, and Kathy faithfully sharing the love of Jesus in their club for many decades," church administrator Katie Venhuizen said.



Maranatha Christian Reformed Church in Woodstock, Ont., sends care packages twice a year to its post-secondary students, one sponsored by the church's youth group around reading week in October and one from the whole congregation in mid-February. This past October the youth group sent 17 packages decorated with words of encouragement or fun drawings. The gifts are an encouragement to the students and a witness of God's love to those around them. "Many of their school friends are amazed that our church remembers our students in this way," ministry coordinator Kristin Klein said. First-year college students receive an extra gift: a handmade blanket created by congregation members or by the knitting group that rents space in the church's facility. Klein said the church sends the blankets within the first six weeks of a student's first semester "so that they arrive around the time that homesickness starts to kick in."

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**Christian
Reformed
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Pastors Practice Spiritual Resting

By Kristyn DeNooyer, Thrive

Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.

—Matthew 11:28-30

These verses are familiar to many of us. Yet they extend an invitation to something that rarely comes easily in our fast-paced, productivity-obsessed world: rest. When busyness is worn as a badge of honor, the choice to seek rest can feel counterintuitive or even wasteful. Deep rest requires intentionality, self-compassion, and practice—lots of practice.

In the Faith Practices Project offered by Thrive, the Christian Reformed Church's ministry dedicated to congregational support, Thrive co-director Chris Schoon puts it this way:

"When we rest, the Spirit works to realign how we value ourselves (and others) in connection with work, with cultural definitions of failure and success, and with material possessions. In resting, we begin to remember and believe that our real worth is found in God's love and care for us. As we learn to trust God's loving care, the other labels used to define us (either to make us feel more important or less important than others) lose their grip on us."

As an agency dedicated to equipping and encouraging congregations and ministry leaders, Thrive is committed to offering camaraderie and resources to those feeling the ache of tiredness and need for deep rest. One such opportunity took place in late 2023 through a Pastors' Conference that gathered CRC parish pastors, regional pastors, and chaplains for a centralized event with space for mutual encouragement and connection.

Held Nov. 14-16, the event was a time of refreshment and support for ministry leaders who were invited to step away from the demands of ministry to spend time reflecting on personal well-being and cultivating their own relationships with God.

Pastor Mary Hulst, chaplain at Calvin University, spoke on strength through spiritual habits. She guided pastors in listening to the Holy Spirit and offered opportunities for pastors to listen to one another as a way to pay attention to what God is doing in their lives and shared experiences.

Lesli van Milligen, Thrive co-director, provided leadership for the conference. While there were some training opportunities available, she said, one of the conference's main goals was simply to give space for spiritual renewal.



"We were able to offer individual coaching to participants as well as individual prayer support to those who asked for it," van Milligen said. "Participants commented on how there was room to rest and reflect throughout the event and told us on many occasions that they felt truly cared for."

Nicole Romero-Johnson, an attendee who serves as a chaplain for Pine Rest Christian Mental Health Services in Michigan, echoed this. "I appreciated the intentional encouragement to take a nap and to have a snack," she said. "One of my main takeaways was to pay attention to my body and soul and to prioritize time for replenishment and rest."

Romero-Johnson went on to share more about the ways she has been craving time for rest in her life and ministry. "The nature of my job can be really heavy, and while I do feel called to chaplain ministry, hearing story after story of all the suffering that people go through has left me with far more questions than answers," she explained. "However, it has been a powerful experience to wrestle with God and to be intentional with my own self-care. This includes setting hard boundaries about work and home and giving myself permission to rest and unplug. Some days this is easier said than done. Practices currently in my life that help me feel connected to God have been being outside, even if it is a short walk to feel the cold air on my face, as well as spending time with loved ones, usually around a warm beverage."

Another takeaway for Romero-Johnson has been "to ponder ways to be more contemplative throughout my day and to close my day with reflection, even when I feel 'reflected out.'"

Gary Hoeksema, a commissioned pastor at Church Rock CRC in New Mexico, was rejuvenated by the connections he made at the conference. The 75-year-old recently celebrated his first year as a commissioned pastor.

“Meeting pastors from all across the U.S. and Canada, reconnecting with others, and renewing old relationships was memorable,” Hoeksema said. “I reconnected with a man I had met 25 years ago when we were both on the Young Calvinist Federation board (now called ThereforeGo Ministries), and reconnecting with others in our classis was great.”



“The breakout sessions were intriguing and informative,” Gary Hoeksema said. “The plenary sessions were instructive and personally applicable. I appreciated the unity of thought and focus without a hint of division.”


The conference included a free afternoon to allow attendees to

explore the beauty of their surroundings in Albuquerque, N.M., to continue fellowshiping with one another, or to retreat to their hotel rooms for extra sleep.

“We were delighted to be able to offer conference participants a setting that encouraged conversation, rest, and reflection,” Den Haan said. “We wanted participants to experience great content and the time and space to sit with that content in conversation with others, with nature, and with God.”

Overall, Thrive staff felt that the conference addressed a longing among ministry leaders for rhythms of rest and retreat and for opportunities to step away from the daily routine to share space with others who could bear witness to looming exhaustion, provide encouragement in seasons of burnout, and point one another to Jesus, who offers true rest.

“It was a blessing to many that Thrive was able to host this important opportunity for pastors and chaplains to step out of their day-to-day routines, breathe, and be cared for,” said Kim Rankens, a Thrive staff member who provided operational support for the event. “Nearly everyone I talked with commented on how much this was needed.”

Thrive hopes to regularly offer the Pastors’ Conference as a signature support event for all ordained clergy throughout the denomination. The next conference is scheduled for 2025, but in the meantime there are several supports available to pastors desiring rest in their ministry. A list of those supports can be found on the Thrive website (crcna.org/thrive). 

Romero-Johnson agreed. “The conference was a great place to meet other CRC pastors/chaplains that are outside of my everyday contexts,” she said. “There were some who were new to ministry and others who were about to enter into retirement. Some were feeling passionate about their calls, and others were feeling burnt out and weary of ministry.”

The Pastors’ Conference offered breakout tracks for each role represented. Schoon worked with parish pastors, ministry consultant Dave Den Haan with regional pastors, and ministry consultant Tim Rietkirk with chaplains. There were also sessions available for spouses that Romero-Johnson’s husband, Keegan, and Hoeksema’s wife, Carlene, both attended.

Survey Says ...

Spiritual Practices at Work in the CRC

Every year, the Christian Reformed Church conducts a survey of its members to measure the health and well-being of its congregations, to see how they are changing over time, and to track what resources might be needed. To ensure the burden is not too great on any particular congregation, the survey is sent to only a fifth of churches each year with a request that they encourage their members to participate. Though anyone is welcome to complete the survey each year, each church is expected to participate only once every five years.

The survey for 2024 is now open.
Learn more at crcna.org/survey.

The Public Reading of Scripture as a Spiritual Discipline at Calvin Seminary



EACH TUESDAY, the Calvin Theological Seminary community gathers for Public Reading of Scripture thanks to a \$20,000 grant from the Grace & Mercy Foundation. This grant provides food at each week's gathering and aids Seminary faculty and students as they start PRS groups in other languages and locations.

PRS is grounded in 1 Timothy 4:13, which instructs, "Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching."

In addition to promoting community through regular listening to Scripture, PRS is an important spiritual discipline because it trains believers for godly living, helps combat false teaching, promotes regular study, and reinforces the importance of public Scripture reading as worship and renewal.

Training for godly living: 2 Timothy 3:16-17 says, "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work." As we study Scripture, we trust God will use it to equip us for righteous living. God uses Scripture to train and form us into God's image and likeness to live in righteousness and holiness before him (1 Cor. 9:24-27).

Helping combat false teaching: False teachers and unsound teaching abounded in the early church (2 Cor. 11:12-15; 2 Pet. 2:1-3). To combat false teachings, the apostle Paul encouraged Timothy and other church leaders to know Scripture well. The same instruction applies to believers today. To combat false teachings that threaten to destroy the church, we must know Scripture well. How can we do battle if we don't have proper weapons?

Promoting regular study: When we read Scripture communally, we're motivated to study regularly on our own. Times of personal study grow our knowledge, which can then be shared to edify others. Regularly hearing Scripture in community and studying it privately deepens our understanding of the text and of God.

Reading as worship and renewal: Since Old Testament times, publicly reading Scripture has been a cornerstone of worship. God commanded the Israelites to listen to God's Word publicly and regularly to aid their obedience (Deut. 6:4-9) and meditation (Josh. 1:8-9; Ps. 119:11). Scripture was often read at ceremonies of covenant renewal between God and Israel (2 Chron. 34), when the people of God were reminded of their failure to keep the covenant and encouraged to repent of their sins.

Through the regular Public Reading of Scripture, Calvin Seminary aims to form disciples of Jesus Christ who are trained for godly living and equipped to combat false teachings, who regularly study God's Word, and who recognize the importance of reading Scripture as an act of worship and spiritual growth.

—Leah Jolly, first-year master of divinity student,
and Jeff Sajdak, dean of students

The View From Here

A Prayer for Park Benches

I HAVE A PARK BENCH. Maybe you have one too.

My bench is at the end of a wooded loop trail at Cascade Peace Park in Grand Rapids, Mich. It sits on a bluff about 150 feet above a small babbling brook that trickles into the Grand River a quarter of a mile away. Surrounding my bench are the large maples and oaks of a mature forest, which means there is little undergrowth to obstruct my view. Bucks, does, and the occasional fawn meander there, unafraid of hunters and only occasionally startled by an off-leash dog. Ironically, a plaque on the bench indicates that it is dedicated to a canine companion, but other visitors have carved their own messages into the planks. My bench is my retreat, and since moving back to Michigan from Haiti in 2017, it has witnessed many of my wrestlings with God.


If Jesus walked among us today, I think he would have a bench, or at least a retreat spot. During his sojourn among us, Jesus consistently sought quiet places to commune with his Father.

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The most impactful example for me comes from Matthew 14:22-23. I believe, with good reason, that Jesus' night on this Galilean mountainside was one of his darkest apart from Gethsemane. He had been rejected by his townspeople at the synagogue of Nazareth (13:53-58). He had just learned about the beheading of his cousin John the Baptist (14:1-12). He was harassed and harried by crowds agitating for messages and miracles (14:13-21). He was tired and probably discouraged. What Jesus needed most of all was time for rest and prayer with his Father. He needed a good park bench.

Jesus wasn't the only one. Moses, Elijah, Paul, and many other biblical leaders sought out spaces of discernment, prayer, and communing with God. In the centuries after Christ, early church pastors, missionaries, and bishops would go to desert places of prayer and retreat, which eventually led to the founding of the first monasteries. Many of those places still exist.

People often ask me what my greatest hopes and prayers are for the Christian Reformed Church and its leaders and members. At the top of my list is this: that God will open our hearts to relationship with God through prayer, rest, reflection, listening, and discernment. In our changing culture, where there are no easy answers and a multitude of voices screaming for our attention and our time, what is most needed is simple. It is what we have always needed: a park bench—a place to commune with God, our creator, our savior, our sustainer. God longs to meet us there. God wants to richly bless us with what we need to thrive.

May God bless you with God's presence, God's peace, and God's rest! 



Rev. Zachary King is the general secretary of the Christian Reformed Church in North America. He is a member of Fuller Avenue CRC in Grand Rapids, Mich.

Spanish and Korean translations of this editorial are available at TheBanner.org.

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Este artículo está disponible en español en TheBanner.org/spanish.

Christian App Bridges the Gap for Japanese Worship

IN THE HEART of Japan's Fukuoka Prefecture, a man named Yamoto has been confined to a hospital for nearly two years.

"I can't go to church, but I want to worship," he said.

Yamoto yearns for spiritual connection, and he's found it by regularly tuning in to telephone messages that nourish his faith.

The messages, produced by ReFrame Ministries' Japanese ministry team, include a daily devotional called *Tohoku Asa no Kotoba (Morning Word)* as well as a longer weekly reflection called *The Hour of Christ*.

"The messages are a valuable source of sustenance," Yamato wrote in a message to ReFrame's Japanese ministry team. "I listen to it every day. Thank you for your continued support of spiritual guidance. Please continue sending them."

Yamoto's plight is shared by many Christians in Japan, where Christian communities can be scarce and many Christians don't feel comfortable attending church even if they're physically able to do so.

To address the growing need for accessible spiritual content in Japan, ReFrame partners with the Reformed Church in Japan to develop new ways to share the gospel alongside long-time programs like *Morning Word*.

As part of this effort, pastor Masao Yamashita and other members of ReFrame's Japanese ministry team are developing a mobile-friendly website and a dedicated smartphone app. The app takes inspiration from the user-friendly Bridge App that more than 125 Christian Reformed congregations in Canada use.

"Japan's fast-paced lifestyle and widespread smartphone usage make



Isolated Christians in Japan find encouragement in telephone devotional messages and other programs from ReFrame ministries and its local partner.

this new app a very important step towards making biblical content more accessible," Yamashita said.

Yamashita plans to launch a website designed with smartphone adaptability by June 2024. The app will provide a seamless and convenient way for individuals such as Yamato to engage with faith-based resources.

The app will host the devotionals that Yamoto hears from his hospital bed as well as video programs from the *Church in My Town* series. The 75-video series shares tours of different churches in the RCJ plus interviews with leaders and members of the churches.

"These videos have not only allowed seekers to see the churches themselves, but also to see members of these nearby churches," Yamashita added. "Many Christians don't know a lot about their fellow congregations in the Reformed Church of Japan."

—Brian Clark,
ReFrame Ministries

Paving the Way to a Physically Accessible Church

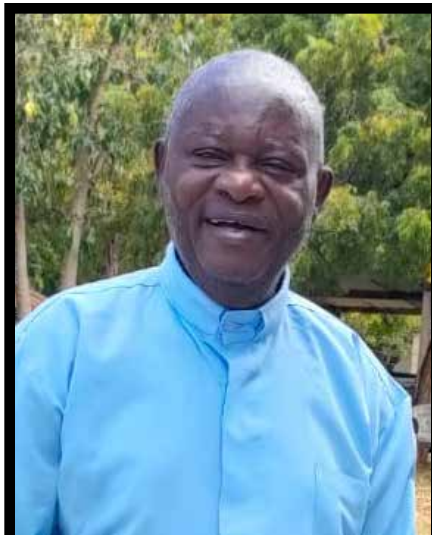
THE COMMUNITY IN MALINDA, Kenya, waited anxiously as the rainy season quickly approached. Resonate Global Mission missionary Kakarioba Bosire lives there, and he explained that the community calls this weather “the rains.” Unlike a typical rainy day, these rains cause relentless trouble and hardship.

Pastor Moses Mwangi was worried about the deep potholes on the road to his church filling up with water. He knew that those who attempted to come would be left with car repairs, damaged clothing, or illness and that attendance on Sundays would be small—unless something changed.

“People who had cars were afraid of damaging them, and others who walked would arrive covered in mud,” Bosire explained. Knowing that the road leading to church was a major barrier to people hearing God’s Word, Mwangi called on Resonate to help.

Bosire met with Mwangi and four other church members at the church to work through Timothy Leadership Training (TLT). TLT delivers affordable, doctrinally sound, and effective training to equip leaders for mission in more than 39 countries.

In TLT’s first manual, *Caring for God’s People*, Mwangi and the leaders learned that a project like paving the road would be a key way they could live out their faith and be Christ’s hands and feet for their neighbors. The group created an action plan to fix the road.



Pastor Moses Mwangi and his congregation in Malinda, Kenya, worked together to build a road so the church building would be more accessible.

With the rainy season fast approaching, they quickly shared their plan with church leadership and raised money among the church community to improve the road leading to church. Mwangi was hopeful but apprehensive. Would they be able to finish the project before the rains began?

The group sought the support of another six church members and hired a small team to help do the work. Together, they began laying stone to fill potholes and flatten the road.

The group worked diligently to outpace the rains, but the downpour began. They continued working in the pounding rain, only pausing when conditions became unmanageable.

“They were determined to make the road better for God’s people, and the rains could not stop them,” Bosire said.

The workers even used the relentless rain to gauge whether their repairs would hold steady in the muddy ground. After a few more days of grueling labor, they were pleased with their work. They had improved 600 meters of road.

The congregation and community members were inspired by the church’s hard work and care for the community. They were excited to attend Sunday morning worship without worrying about damaging their vehicles or putting their well-being at risk.

Proud of their church’s hard work and motivated to continue making the church accessible, its members contributed more funds. The TLT group prayed about how to use this additional blessing to better serve the community and discerned a need for two wheelchair ramps leading to the church’s entrances.

Mwangi now rests easier on Sunday mornings knowing that God has provided a way to keep church members safe as they travel to worship. The church, now safely reachable by car and by foot, also provides physical accessibility for all of God’s people to hear God’s Word.

—Ashlynn Howe,
Resonate Global Mission

Service Means a Better Future

DIEGO ALBERTO CATINAC GUARCHAJ is full of hope for a better future—and not just for himself. The 32-year-old is a community leader who serves as secretary of the board of directors of his community organization. He lives in the mountains of rural Guatemala and is qualified to be a school teacher, but with few available teaching jobs, he does farm work instead.

When Guarchaj heard that World Renew was going to start a leadership development project in his community, he was excited to participate. But as he and the members of his board began to examine some of the leadership patterns that could be holding their community back, Guarchaj realized that his own ideas of leadership were limited to “showing up and getting things done.” True community leadership includes much more.

“The workshop facilitators told the story of Jesus washing the feet of his disciples framed as leadership and service,” Guarchaj said. “The story made me realize that being on the board is actually a way that I can serve my neighbors. The training process strengthened me—not only as a leader, but spiritually.”

As Guarchaj investigated and practiced obedience to God by loving others, he became more aware of his neighbors’ needs, and he began to prioritize those over his own ideas and agenda.



Diego Alberto Catinac Guarchaj is learning how to be a servant leader in his rural Guatemalan community.

“I learned that being active in my church isn’t enough,” he said. “That only makes me like the Levite or priest in the story of the good Samaritan. I said I loved God, but I was not serving his people.”

In other words, Christian leadership requires living out a life of service throughout the week, not just on Sundays.

Today Guarchaj is a dynamic community leader who intentionally gets to know his neighbors so that he can understand their strengths and challenges. He then focuses on tapping into their strengths and helping them meet their challenges.

Guarchaj’s story is an example of the blessings of shared success—the kind of success that is achieved only by working with and caring about others.

Through World Renew’s partners, Guarchaj learned that leadership comes with social power. This power is protected by laws and can be used to help shape community life in collaborative and relevant ways.

“But what matters is to truly love my neighbor and to unite for a better future,” Guarchaj said. “God is at work among us. I pray that we will continue to learn to serve each other and work together to improve our community.”

—Beth DeGraff,
World Renew

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Frost

AS I WALK OUTSIDE one cold morning, I'm struck by the gorgeous frost on the ground. Frost is a unique and beautiful aspect of creation and an interesting meteorological condition.

For frost to form, the air temperature needs to drop below the dew point. The dew point is the temperature at which the air can no longer hold the moisture it's carrying.

Think of heat as vibration. The hotter something becomes, the faster the molecules vibrate. It's like a dance party—if people are dancing fast or jumping around and you throw some beach balls into the crowd, those beach balls bounce off the people and stay up in the air. The beach balls are held up by the action of the people. But when a slow song comes on and people move less, the beach balls fall to the floor. There is less action to hold up the beach balls.

The same is true of moisture in the air. Our air always holds a certain amount of moisture. The amount of water molecules air can hold depends on the speed at which the air molecules are vibrating. If the air molecules slow down, they simply can't hold up the water molecules anymore, and the water falls.



Clayton Lubbers teaches science at Byron Center (Mich.) Christian School and has been teaching for over 25 years. He loves the outdoors and commonly meets and sees God while hunting, fishing, and exploring creation.

During the evening, the temperature usually cools. As the sun goes down, the heat on the earth's surface rises high into the atmosphere and out to space. What that means is that the air at ground level begins to cool and can no longer hold as much moisture. Water molecules begin to drop, collecting on the ground as dew.

When the temperature is below freezing, something beautiful happens to that dew. Water is a polar molecule, which means one end of the molecule has a slightly positive charge and the other has a slightly negative charge, like a magnet. This means that water,

when it freezes into a solid, tends to organize itself in a very specific way to form ice crystals. We see these crystals as frost. These molecules begin to stack up on each other, creating gorgeous crystalline patterns.

It's all due to the geometry of the water molecule that God designed. It allows these molecules to join together and form unique shapes and patterns.

This reminds me of our churches. Each one is unique, with its own gathering of people with different gifts, talents, and struggles. But the people in each congregation are designed to fit together. God created humans as social beings, and we are usually drawn to community, much like these water molecules are drawn to each other.


If you live in a frosty part of the world, take a look outside on the next cold morning and look how frost forms differently on the grass, window panes, or other outdoor structures. And the next time you gather in your community, remember to recognize the uniqueness of each individual and the unique pattern you make together! 



Photo by Forrest Cavalle/Unsplash

Dust and the Divine

What Lent Can Teach Us About Caring for Creation

By Kyle Meyaard-Schaap

“**F**or dust you are and to dust you shall return” (Gen. 3:19). I’ve always found these Ash Wednesday words to be beautifully poignant. As my pastor imposes the ashes and looks me in the eye, the words move that part of my soul that’s shaped for mystery. They connect to a primordial part of me that feels it is good and right that I share in the common denominator of creation, that I take my mundane place in the order of things.

These words also make another part of me bristle. After all, I am so much more than dust. I am bounding heart and rushing blood. I am crackling synapses. I am self-aware consciousness—that rarest of natural miracles. I love and long and hurt. I dream and strive and accomplish. *I am dust?* I think incredulously as I make my way back to my seat, the mixture of ashes and oil still glistening on my forehead. *I don’t think so!*

Our Twin Identities

At first blush, these two reactions may seem mutually exclusive, an irreconcilable tension that must be resolved.

The truth is, though, that these two responses—acceptance of our creatureliness and pride in our uniqueness among creatures—are both good and right. Both are consistent with the biblical anthropology of Genesis 1 and 2. The problem only comes when one half of the anthropological equation is distorted and privileged above the other.

In the first creation narrative of Genesis 1:1-2:3, we see that God creates humans toward the end of God’s creative activities. But—contrary to some popular belief—humans are not the “crown of creation.” As Carol Bechtel, professor of Old Testament at Western Theological Seminary, reminds us, “that honor goes to the Sabbath.” Not only are humans not the final and culminating product of God’s creative actions in Genesis 1; humans don’t even get their own creative day.

We are made on the sixth day along with “all the creatures that move along the ground” (Gen. 1:25). In other words, we share our big day with beavers, badgers, and billy goats.

At the same time that the Genesis 1 narrative places humans in the midst of the rest of creation, it makes clear that humans are unique. Human beings alone among God’s creatures are made in God’s own image and likeness (Gen. 1:27). Many others, including myself, have written elsewhere about how sharing in God’s likeness is much more a call to responsible care than it is an invitation to privileged exploitation the Western church has all too often taken it to be. However, what I want us to see now is that the Genesis 1 creation narrative holds in dynamic tension humanity’s commonality with the rest of creation and our distinction from it.

The creation story of Genesis 2:4-25 does something similar. In Scripture’s second creation narrative, God created human beings not with the words

of God's mouth, but by the works of God's hands. God kneels and fashions human beings "from the dust of the ground" (Gen. 2:7). The Hebrew is even more explicit. It tells us that God formed the *adam* from the *adamah*. In Hebrew, *adam* means "human being" or "man," and *adamah* means "soil" or "ground." To say that God formed the *adam* from the *adamah* is both to employ one of the many puns the Hebrew language is so fond of (but which so often get lost in the translation of the text) and to assert a profound metaphysical truth: humans are creatures, made of the same molecules and atoms as the rest of creation.

Yet the story does not stop there. After God fashions the soil-creature, God does something shocking: God breathes his very own spirit into it.

Both Genesis creation stories are united in their shared insistence that humans are both similar to and distinct from the rest of creation. Humans are made from the stuff of the earth and share their creative day with all the other land animals. At the same time, with the image of God and the breath of God, human creatures are distinct among created things.

Our Twin Identities Out of Balance

If humans are both dust and reflections of the divine—two sacred, God-given identities meant to inform and contextualize each other—what happens when the balance is thrown out of whack? What happens when one identity is emphasized over the other?

Well, we don't have to read much further in Genesis for an answer. Humans distort their twin identities in the very next chapter. The serpent tempting the woman in Genesis 3 strikes at the heart of the dynamic tension between humanity's creatureliness and our uniqueness in the midst of creation.

The serpent targeted human limits.

"God knows that when you eat from (the tree) your eyes will be opened, and

**Both Genesis
creation stories
are united in their
shared insistence
that humans are
both similar to
and distinct from
the rest
of creation.**

you will be like God, knowing good and evil," the serpent says in Genesis 3:5 (emphasis added). To be like God—that is, to be without creaturely limits—was at the heart of humanity's fall. By believing the lie and reaching for the fruit, the first humans rejected the dynamic tension of God's good design and elevated their exceptionalism at the expense of their mundanity. It's a lie we've been reaching for ever since.

What happens when our human identity becomes imbalanced—when we exercise our dominion over creation without regard for our creaturely limits? The answer is all around us.

Since the advent of the industrial revolution roughly 200 years ago, the average surface temperature on Earth has risen about 1.2 degrees Celsius (about 2 degrees Fahrenheit). Of course, Earth's temperature always fluctuates. That's part of God's good design. But this time is different. This temperature rise has materialized hundreds of times faster than at any other time in history and has occurred even though, according to natural climate variations, Earth should currently be entering a cooling period. These increased temperatures are leading to stronger

and wetter storms, longer droughts, more intense flooding, bleaching corals, and scorching Arctic summers. Millions of people have been and will be forced from their homes and thrown into food insecurity as a result.

Biodiversity is currently in free fall. Almost 1 million species are currently threatened with extinction—more than any other time in human history. Many of these may be lost within decades. And the top five reasons, according to the 2019 Global Assessment Report from the United Nations, are all human-driven: changes in land and sea use, climate change, pollution, natural resource exploitation, and invasive species.

Maybe that's why the Ash Wednesday words come at the end of God's heart-wrenching description of the consequences of humanity's rebellion. After God finishes a litany of innocence lost (Gen. 3:14-19), God takes one more opportunity to remind his creatures exactly who they are. I can imagine God grabbing their shoulders and shaking them, wracked with grief but intent on getting a final point across: "Remember, dear creatures: you are dust." God's reminder is meant to correct the distortion, to restore balance to our twin identities. It didn't take long, though, for humanity's hubris to push God's warning from its collective memory, and our arrogant attempts at reaching beyond our creaturely limits have continued all the way from Genesis 4 until today.

Our Twin Identities Rebalanced

So how might we recover balance between our dual identities as creatures of dust and image bearers of God? By letting the text be our guide.

Often in the Western world, our image-bearing role has been understood as a blank check for us to do as we please with the rest of nonhuman creation. For many, this becomes the bedrock justification for an extractive form of dominion that desacralizes creation and reduces God's good works to little more than raw material

for firing our industrial machines. Too often in the history of the West, the image of God has been conceived primarily as a privilege.

Yet the text frames the *imago Dei* not first as a privilege, but as a sacred responsibility. For instance, the Hebrew word translated as “image” in Gen. 1:26-27 is *tzelem*, often translated in the Old Testament as “idol.” This may seem strange, but it makes sense when we remember what an idol in the Old Testament was: a reflected representation of a higher power. In the ancient Near East, new rulers and kings of large empires would often erect statues of themselves throughout their territories. The purpose was to communicate their power and authority to subjects in far-flung provinces. Of course, the statues of these rulers were not the rulers themselves. But they did point to the ruler and remind the subjects who their true king was.

This is one way that Genesis 1 describes our image-bearing identity. Humans are uniquely privileged to share in God’s likeness, yet we are bound to exercise that privilege in a particular way—one that reflects the rule and reign of the Creator. Image bearers of God do not merely carry a collection of discrete privileges divorced from the rest of creation; rather, they have an immense and sacred responsibility toward creation. The responsibility, carried out through our actions in the midst of creation, is this: to point the rest of creation to its true and only King, to mirror the joy and delight of creation’s Maker by using our own creative words to speak goodness over all created things, and to represent creation’s true King in the midst of creation. We are not meant to usurp the authority of the true King or to use our status as a license to abuse and exploit. Instead, we are called to live in the midst of creation in such a

way as to remind the created world—and ourselves—who the true ruler is.

As with our *imago Dei* identity, I believe our identity as creatures of dust has also been misunderstood. This identity is not a cause for self-hatred or revulsion, but a reminder and affirmation of our deep connection to the rest of God’s good creation. In Genesis 2, humans are not the only creatures formed out of the ground; so too is “every living animal of the field and every bird of the air” (Gen. 2:19). What’s more, God brings these other soil-creatures to the man to see if any of them might be suitable help-mates for him. The man then engages in an act of deep intimacy: giving the creatures their names. In other words, Genesis 2 shows us that humans not only share common origins with other creatures (i.e., the earth), but from the beginning they have also been in deep, intimate relationship. Indigenous wisdom, as well as St. Francis and other Christians throughout history, have recognized this relationship and have a word for it: kinship.

I’m often met with skepticism when I invite other Christians to consider Scripture’s descriptions of their kinship to the rest of the nonhuman creation. Many are concerned that it risks sliding into idolatry. I can appreciate the motivation behind this concern. I also believe it is misplaced.

There is a massive gulf between loving creation as kin and then turning around and worshiping those kin as god. Kinship need not open the door to idolatry. The doors it does open tend to be much less dangerous and much more transformative: affection, appreciation, delight, love. Baba Dioum, a Senegalese forest engineer, said in 1968, “We won’t save places we don’t love. We can’t love places we don’t know. And we don’t know places we haven’t learned.” Kinship offers


us the opportunity to learn about the creatures and creation around us so that we might learn to love them and that we might still be moved to protect them.

I think many of our Western theological wineskins about our place and role in the midst of creation have been filled with notions of superiority and entitlement. God’s good creation is in crisis as a result. It is time for us to reimagine, with curiosity and creativity, new (or rather, very old) ways of relating to Earth and its creatures. Kinship and responsibility are two gifts to help us as we do.

Remember You Are Dust

Lent is one more of these gifts. We could see it as an ancient invitation to a holy reset, an invitation to recognize the cultural, economic, and political forces that elevate a distorted version of privileged human exceptionalism and to exchange it for humble human responsibility, sacrifice, and service. It can be an invitation to replace human separation from the nonhuman creation with kinship.

These words, “dust you are,” are a reminder—even for just 40 out of 365 days—to embrace our connection to the earth, to look at the suffering of creation without looking away, and to recommit to sacrificial care of God’s glorious world.

After all, are we not creation too? 



Kyle Meyaard-Schaap is ordained in the Christian Reformed Church and lives in Grand Rapids, Mich., with his wife and two sons. He is the author of *Following Jesus in a Warming World: A Christian Call to Climate Action*.

Finding Peace After Losing a Child

His sudden death
sent shockwaves
throughout
the northwest
Central Interior of
the province.

IT WAS DEC. 5, 1967. Saying goodbye to the pastor and his wife after babysitting their children, Ronald slung his backpack over his shoulder and crossed the road to take the short path to the railway. At the end he turned and began to follow the tracks. It was darkening, snowing too, and he pulled the toque with the earflaps tightly over his head. Then the bushes on both sides of the track began to shimmer with reflected light, briefly making him wonder what made them do that.

Ronald was a 13-year old student at the Christian school in Houston, B.C. His sudden death sent shockwaves throughout the northwest Central Interior of the province. An inquest confirmed that the train engineer carried no blame for the accident.

One of a family of six, Ronald was a better-than-average student with a wonderful sense of humor. He planned to become a teacher. He and his brother Irwin, 11 at the time, had been inseparable: when you saw one, you'd see the other. Two sisters, Julie-Ann and Margaret, were too young to understand the impact of what had happened. Early the next morning, 4-year-old Julie-Ann was heard singing at the top of her lungs, "The joy of the Lord is my strength." But Irwin knew.



Frank DeVries is a past principal of Christian schools in Wyoming, Ont.; Houston, B.C.; and Vancouver, B.C. He and his wife, Celia, attend Fleetwood Christian Reformed Church in Surrey, B.C.

The interment took place at the town's small cemetery on an exceptionally cold winter day. Led by the pastor at whose home Ronald had been babysitting, it was attended by many, including Ronald's grandparents, who had flown over from Ontario. The memorial service that followed became a symphony of praise. Many tears flowed, but with the hope and assurance of new life, the Lord's faithfulness was joyfully celebrated in word and song. The school and church communities showed their compassion and care in more tangible ways:


the kitchen counters were literally covered by foodstuffs of all sorts.

Ronald was a student in my combined grade 7/8 class. He was also my son. When I came back to school the following Monday I was profoundly moved to see that my colleagues had thoughtfully removed Ronald's desk. Together with a TV that the mayor of Houston had brought to our home for Irwin, they were gestures of love that deeply touched us. But however good all God's people had been to us, even after the overwhelming display of God's love and care at the memorial service, our hearts yearned for more. We still sought an answer to the question we had often been told we could never ask of God: Why? Why did we have to lose our wonderful child? We loved him so much!

We found an answer in the opening words of Isaiah 57: "The righteous perish, and no one takes it to heart; the devout are taken away, and no one understands that the righteous are taken away to be spared from evil."

The verse brought us a great measure of understanding, acceptance, and peace.

The accident had other results. More than ever before, both my wife Celia and I experience deep empathy with others who have to go through difficult times. Ronald's death also forged between the pastor's family and ours a strong bond of friendship that has lasted to this day. But when one of our other kids would be late coming home, we'd worry much, mostly unduly.

We had our son Ronald for nearly 14 years. They were good years, but then he left us for something even better. In the many years that followed, it would occasionally happen that my wife and I would just look at each other, and we'd remember, and tears would come. But God is good, and afterwards we could always laugh again. 

Cross-shaped Protection

The lectionary ...
gives us Psalm 91
on the first Sunday
in Lent as an
important passage
for the season.



Sam Gutierrez is the associate director of the Eugene Peterson Center for the Christian Imagination at Western Theological Seminary. More of his creative work can be found at printandpoem.com.

IN THE SMALL CITY of Voiron, a short distance from the Carthusian monastery in southeastern France, a 400-year-old recipe containing a unique combination of 130 herbs, plants, barks, spices, and flowers is carefully followed step by step behind locked doors. Once the perfect blend is crushed and mixed with water, the secret ingredients slowly age for eight years in French oak barrels stored in a cellar.

When the time is right and the liquid has matured into a gorgeous shade of spring green, the distillery bottles it and exports it to countries all over the world.

In the late Middle Ages, little was known about the human body and illness. Infant mortality was high, childhood diseases ran rampant, and life expectancy hovered around 32 years of age. “Health care” back then involved numerous elixirs developed by alchemists and sold to the public as tonics for various ailments. In 1605, an artillery marshal of King Henry IV of France gave the monastery of the Grande Chartreuse a manuscript containing a recipe for an “elixir of long life” developed by a brilliant but unknown alchemist in the 1500s.

That same elixir is known today as a light-green liqueur called Chartreuse. Over the centuries, many have tried to mimic the medieval potion by using some of the known ingredients, such as lemon verbena, citrus peel, mace, star anise, fennel, mint, and sage, but no one has been able to replicate the one-of-a-kind mixture that starts sweet and quickly transitions to spicy and pungent as it moves from the front of the tongue to the back.

Today, Chartreuse is an ingredient in some cocktails, but because of its limited supply, secret ingredients, and history, it is still believed by some to be an enchanted elixir that can cure

sickness, bestow long life, and protect against danger.

For thousands of years, Psalm 91 has been an important psalm for Christians around the world, especially in times of trouble. Immediately in verse 1, we read words that have brought immense comfort for generations: “Whoever dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty.”

In a world where the nightly news reports one tragedy after another—terrorism, homelessness, hate crimes, genocide, animal extinctions, polluted oceans, melting glaciers, mass shootings—it’s hard not to feel crushing anxiety. In all this uncertainty, it’s natural to want—to need—protection from the many dangers we seem to be facing.

It’s calming to know that Psalm 91 promises to give us what we so desperately need.

In verse 4, God is described as a mighty bird, a fiercely loving parent who covers, shelters, and protects her children with her sturdy wing. Verses 9 and 10 build on this theme: “If you say, ‘The LORD is my refuge,’ and you make the Most High your dwelling, no harm will overtake you, no disaster will come near your tent.” Psalm 91 paints a powerful picture of a God who protects his children from a dangerous world filled with arrows and armies, pestilence and plagues.

However, there is a major problem with Psalm 91.

Many biblical commentators quote English clergyman Leslie D. Weatherhead, who said of Psalm 91: “It’s just not true.” Weatherhead advised preachers not to preach Psalm 91 or use it in their ministries.

In his commentary on this psalm, Stan Mast, a retired Christian Reformed



pastor, notes that when he preached this psalm in his last church, several World War II veterans told him that their pastors “had given them this Psalm as God’s Word for their coming battles, and they were heartened by it.” But Mast then acknowledges the problem Weatherhead pointed to: encouraged as they entered boot camp, some of these soldiers, with Psalm 91 tucked inside their pockets, were severely injured or killed on the battlefield.

Was Leslie D. Weatherhead right? Should pastors push pause on preaching Psalm 91?

Every year, as the church lives into the rhythms of the liturgical calendar, Christians walk the road of Lent by following in the footsteps of Jesus. Lent is a season of sober reflection marked by repentance, prayer, and fasting. These disciplines are essential because Lent can be a particularly dangerous time on one’s spiritual journey—one filled with temptation. We need practices that will help us stay awake and alert. Along with these disciplines, the lectionary, in the third

year of its three-year cycle, gives us Psalm 91 on the first Sunday in Lent as an important passage for the season.

Because of the complexity created when powerful promises collide with the grit of reality, it shouldn’t surprise us that Psalm 91 is Satan’s Scripture of choice when Jesus undergoes the trials of desert temptation in the early chapters of the synoptic gospels. Like Jesus, we need the words of protection that Psalm 91 promises. But we also need to be aware that the devil might also use those exact same words to seriously injure or destroy our faith. Like those soldiers who tucked Psalm 91 inside their pockets and yet were struck down, Christians with Psalm 91 tucked inside their hearts still experience the same devastating heartache that everyone experiences—job loss, the deaths of children and friends, depression, sickness, disabilities, addictions, anxiety, poverty, and discrimination.

When this happens, it’s easy to become disoriented, and we are tempted to doubt our identity as beloved children of God.

All by itself, Psalm 91 can lead us down a difficult path. But when we look at Scripture as a whole, a richer truth is revealed. The broad biblical narrative tells us about a God who comes down and becomes one of us. God in Christ is not removed from our pain, suffering, and sickness, but enters the deep sadness of life. Christ weeps with us, dies on a cross for us, and rises from the dead for us with a promise to make everything new.

When we hold this story in mind and take another look at Psalm 91, we now read God’s promise of protection through a cross-shaped lens. In fact, the cross is what ultimately unlocks the problem of Psalm 91. As we reach the end of Lent with Christ, we see what looks like a dead end on Good Friday. However, the story holds a surprise when on Sunday, the dead end is transformed into a doorway that opens to a safe and spacious land.

The strange truth of the whole Scripture is that God’s promises don’t circumvent death, but forge a path straight through it.

In 2021, Chartreuse mostly disappeared from retail stores all over the world. The shortage was largely due to the Carthusian monks refusing to increase production to match the rising demand during the pandemic. The secret recipe with the potential to offer needed protection was out of stock.

That’s never true of God’s promises. God’s protection from the danger of death’s finality is the remedy that never fails. When we feel afraid, we can face the danger of living and dying while holding on to the promise that God “will be our shield and rampart,” now and forever. **B**

These 5 Movies Should Sweep the Awards Shows

Editor's Note: In anticipation of the Academy Awards and other award shows in this season, Christian Reformed youth director and movie buff LeMarr Jackson shares five contenders from 2023 he thinks should rake in trophies.

1. *Oppenheimer* (R)

My Score 86; Tomatometer 93%

This is a masterpiece. Christopher Nolan is by far my favorite director. *Oppenheimer* dives into the psyche of a genius with a moral quandary that will affect the entire world. Should *Oppenheimer* help to create a weapon of mass destruction that will kill thousands or even millions of people over time, or should he sit this fight out and potentially let Nazi Germany create the weapon first?

In *Oppenheimer*, characters, governments, and countries fall prey to selfishness and blind ambition, leading ultimately to isolation and harm. Contrast this with the message of the apostle Paul, who tells us not to conform to the patterns of this world, but to be transformed (Rom. 12:2), and then to transform our communities into God's intended community—one ripe with renewal, growth, and shalom.

2. *Spider-Man: Across the Spider-Verse* (PG)

My Score 85; Tomatometer 95%

This is the second film in an animated series (the third is in production). Both movies are fresh, futuristic, and pithy. *Across the Spider-Verse* took years to craft, and not a second was wasted. Every frame is reminiscent of a vibrant comic book; every storyline feels perfectly woven by a master weaver. This film explores the canonical events that all Spider-People throughout the multiverse

must experience—find love, get bitten by a super-spider, and lose a father figure—and it delves into what makes Miles, the protagonist, different from the others.

God has chosen us to be different, set apart, even anomalies, in the world. The world doesn't have the final say in our lives because the author of everything is holding the pen. And what God says goes. Miles is called to something greater, and so are we.

3. *When Evil Lurks* (R)

My Score 84; Tomatometer 98%

This movie is not for everyone. It's a Spanish-language film that uses horror tropes to flesh out strong themes of family, trust, and the role of faith in society. If you can get past the gore, you'll find a rich, original story in which two brothers go on a journey to cleanse their town of an evil presence and protect their loved ones.

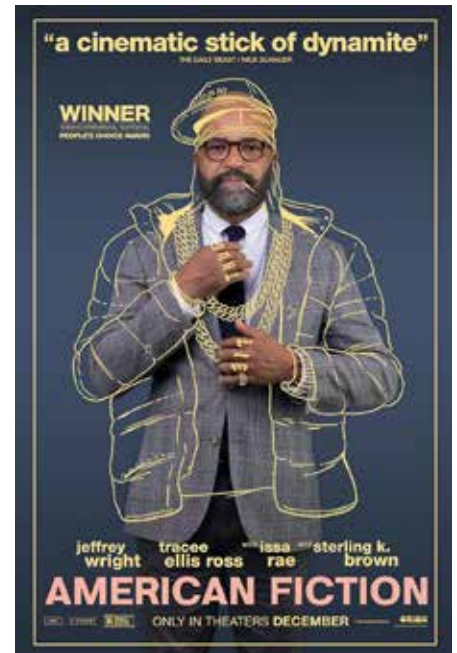
We too need a Savior. *When Evil Lurks* explores a town of people who have no faith and no answers when evil runs amok, but we who believe have a very different perspective. Sin does not rule over us as we serve the One who has conquered death, hell, and the grave!

4. *American Fiction* (R)

My Score 83; Tomatometer 91%

American Fiction was far and away my favorite exploration of race this year. Racial identity is explored in a broad yet nuanced way that isn't tokenizing. The main character is an author of color who doesn't want his work to be limited by his racial identity.

American Fiction reminds me of identity and who God says I am. When Jesus is baptized before starting his ministry, we see his Father affirm his identity: "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased"



(Matt. 3:17). Jesus' ministry comes out of his Father's love. We should operate the same way instead of working to be identified by what we produce.

5. *Barbie* (PG-13)

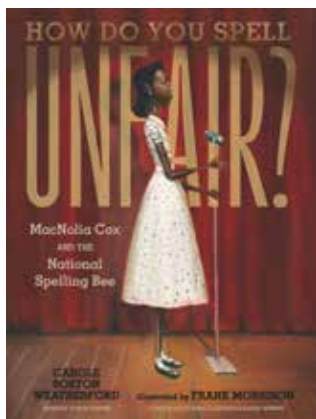
My Score 82; Tomatometer 88%

Barbie reflects on the rich themes of modern womanhood, beauty standards, and self-love. Director Greta Gerwig balances hard conversations with levity and class. Also, the production design is Oscar-worthy.

This movie reminds me that perfection is found in Jesus, not in anything we can manufacture. Our value comes from our being made in the image of God. Like Andy writing his name on Woody's cowboy boot in *Toy Story*, God claims us as his children: "See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands" (Isa. 49:16). Though the world may try to overwhelm us with societal standards, we don't have to work to gain God's love and approval. God already loves us. **B**



LeMarr Seandre Jackson's mission is to raise the bar for student and Christian leadership. He is the director of youth ministry at Madison Square Church in Grand Rapids, Mich.



How Do You Spell Unfair? MacNolia Cox and the National Spelling Bee

By Carole Boston Weatherford; illustrated by Frank Morrison

Reviewed by Sonya VanderVeen Feddema

“MacNolia Cox was no ordinary kid. Her idea of fun was reading the dictionary.” So begins author Carole Boston Weatherford’s gripping true account of how a Black eighth grader from Akron, Ohio, won her school’s spelling bee and advanced to a citywide bee in 1936. In an event attended by 3,000 onlookers, Cox faced 50 of the city’s greatest spellers and won, the first Black student to do so.

Illustrator Frank Morrison’s spectacularly expressive artwork captures Cox’s single-minded devotion to honing her God-given talent and seeking her place in the world despite discrimination. Christian parents and caregivers would do well to share this book with children and talk about God’s love for all people and God’s desire that all should flourish. (Candlewick)



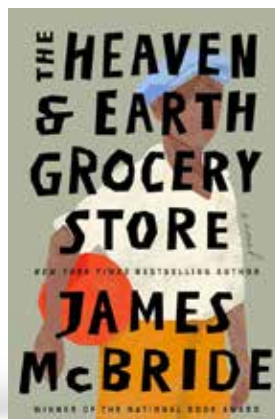
Reality

Reviewed by Daniel Jung

Reality, starring Sydney Sweeney as Reality Winner (her real name), is a reenactment of real life that makes you feel as if you’re watching a one-act play.

The movie’s dialogue is taken directly from FBI transcripts of its interrogation of Winner, a United States intelligence worker whom the FBI suspected of stealing National Security Agency documents about Russia’s interference with the 2016 presidential election and leaking them to the media.

I’m a preacher who tells stories about Jesus Christ from four different accounts of his life, and this movie heightens my appreciation for the “screenplay” choices made by each of the gospel writers. *Reality* is proof that tales of espionage and treason can be told subtly and still contain as much intrigue as high-octane depictions. (Max; rated TV-MA for infrequent profanity)



The Heaven & Earth Grocery Store

By James McBride

Reviewed by Sonya VanderVeen Feddema

In 1972, construction workers at a new housing development discover a human skeleton.

Forty-seven years earlier, in a Pennsylvania neighborhood where Black and Jewish people live shoulder to shoulder sharing their miseries, joys, and secrets, the community finds its center in the Heaven & Earth Grocery Store, run by a Jewish couple.

When a shocking incident occurs in the store, lives are forever altered.

Author James McBride’s novel, which includes some coarse language, sexual innuendo, and violence, is a gripping page-turner replete with expertly drawn characters. Despite dealing with harsh realities, it ends on a note of satisfied justice and renewal in a place where the heavenly vision of “the land where the lame walked and the blind could see” is a solid hope. (Riverhead Books)

The Lowdown

Hope Ain’t a Hustle:

Pastor Irwyn Ince assures us in this exploration of the book of Hebrews that not only do we have hope, but hope cannot disappoint us because it is validated by God himself. Foreword by Christina Edmonson. (Feb. 6, IVP)

Season 3 Drops: The acclaimed comedy series *Abbott Elementary* follows a group of dedicated teachers brought together in one of the worst public schools in the country. Starring Quinta Brunson and Sheryl Lee Ralph. (Feb. 7, ABC)

God and Country: A new documentary movie looks at the implications of Christian Nationalism in the U.S. and how it distorts not only the constitutional republic, but Christianity itself. What happens when a faith built on love, sacrifice, and forgiveness grows political tentacles, conflating power, money, and belief into hypernationalism? (Feb. 16, in theaters with limited release)

Clashing Kingdoms, Rival Rulers: For the first time, a full season of *The Chosen*, a streaming TV show, will be released exclusively in theaters. Season 4 promises to deliver where last season’s incredible walking-on-water finale left off. (In theaters Feb. 1, Fathom Events)

How Do We Know That God Is Good?

I feel that there is a fundamental misunderstanding in these questions about how to know God's existence or goodness.



Michael Wagenman is the Christian Reformed campus minister at Western University in London, Ont., where he invites undergraduate students to put their faith into loving service and mentors graduate students. His most recent book is *The Power of the Church: The Sacramental Ecclesiology of Abraham Kuyper* (Wipf & Stock, 2020).

IN THE OLDEN DAYS of the 2010s, when you had a question and Grandma wasn't around to ask, you asked Google. If you typed in "Is God good?", the first page of results would list Christian websites pointing to Bible verses that define and assert God's goodness. So easy!

Today, artificial intelligence (AI) is all the rage. When I asked GPT-4 the same question, I got this conversational response: "There is much debate and discussion about this question." In the end, GPT-4 claimed, "It is a matter of personal belief." So God is good if you believe God is good, but not if you don't (#weird).

For a decade after 9/11, a bunch of books were published by a group known as "the New Atheists." Christopher Hitchens argued in his 2007 book *God Is Not Great* that a good God can't be squared with all the world's pain, suffering, and death.

In response, many Christian apologists doubled down on the rational arguments for God's existence and goodness. But most of the YouTube debates I've watched between Christian apologists and atheist critics devolve into talking past each other. Curiously, the Christians often appear to think their point will be more persuasive if they shout (#facepalm).

I feel that there is a fundamental misunderstanding in these questions about how to know God's existence or goodness. It's in the verb "to know." We live in a world made up of facts. The world is knit together in our minds by knowing these facts. We function in the world as if storing these facts and generating new facts with increasing computational intelligence are of utmost importance. This is how we understand "knowing" something.

So when we entertain the question of God's goodness, we conceive of it within this rationalist worldview where God and God's goodness are

viewed as straightforward, knowable facts about the universe—as a simple "yes-or-no" question.

But it can't be this simple because, as the Bible repeatedly insists, God is utterly different, categorically other, and absolutely unimaginable—in short, unknowable. Here lies the problem, then: how can we know anything about the unknowable?

To "know" in the Bible is not about possessing brute facts, but about intimate stories. A particular community, often persecuted and marginalized, has carried its stories through history—stories of their encounters with this God who keeps bringing light out of darkness.

A fleeing murderer and traitor who returns to liberate an enslaved nation. A teenager forcefully relocated and enslaved for re-education who never forgets his home or identity. An addict who can't quit but whose husband never gives up on her. A young adult who betrays his teacher to protect his own reputation but who is forgiven and reconciled to the one he had abandoned. There are millions of stories like these in this community.

By inhabiting stories like these we become a part of this community. This isn't a community with secret access to facts about the universe. No, this is a community learning to trust life despite the facts of death. This is a community of people building their lives on God, the Unknowable One with whom the "impossible" can be surprisingly possible and shockingly good.

To know God and God's goodness isn't to have a bit of data stored in your meat computer. It is to realize that I was lost, and now I've been found. It is to wake up to new life even though I was dead just a moment ago. To know God and God's goodness is to receive the infinite grace that is every breath of life. **B**

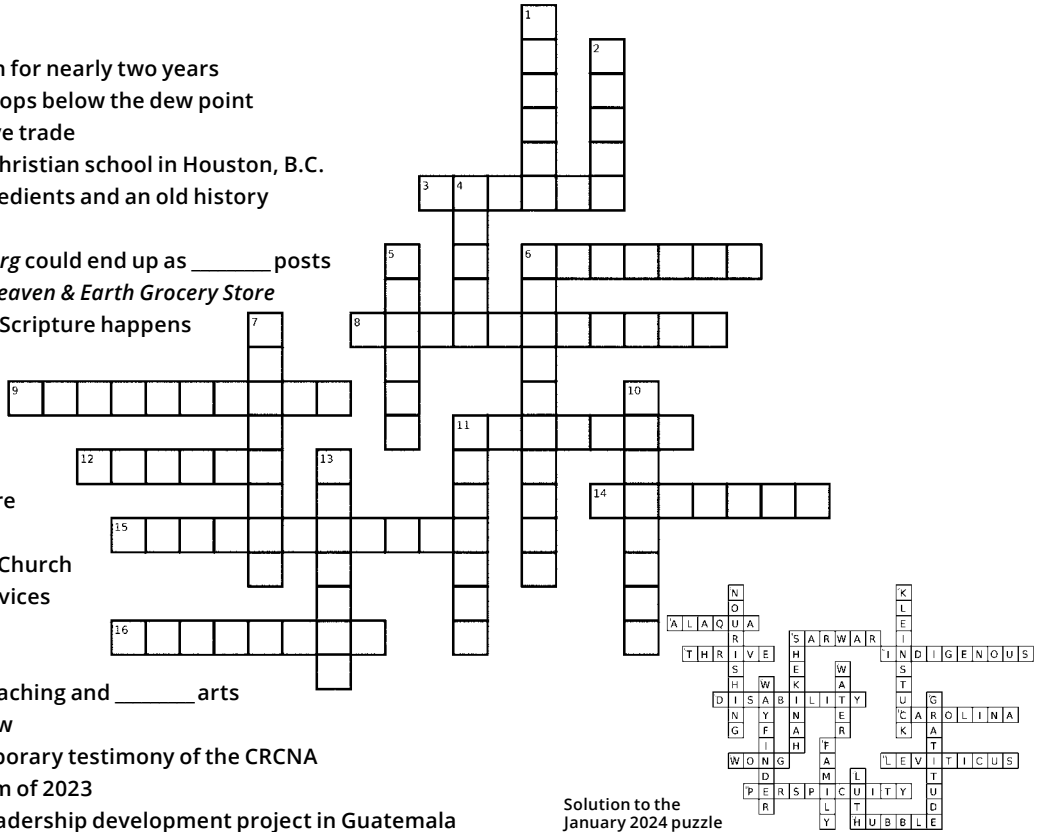
Find the answers to the crossword clues in this issue of *The Banner*. See the solution in the next issue!
 (Word Play appears monthly except for the July/August issue.)

Down

- 1. He was confined to a hospital in Japan for nearly two years
- 2. It forms when the air temperature drops below the dew point
- 4. A former hub of the West African slave trade
- 5. He was a 13-year old student at the Christian school in Houston, B.C.
- 6. A light-green liqueur with secret ingredients and an old history
- 7. He wrote the book *God is Not Great*
- 10. News tips sent to *news@thebanner.org* could end up as _____ posts
- 11. The last name of the author of *The Heaven & Earth Grocery Store*
- 13. Calvin Seminary's Public Reading of Scripture happens on this day each week

Across

- 3. _____ *Elementary* is a hit TV show that follows a group of teachers
- 6. The park in Grand Rapids, Mich. where Zachary King's bench is located
- 8. Once a month The River Community Church in Edmonton, Alta., hosts _____ services
- 9. A Latin word referring to intense community spirit
- 11. The Way program combines Bible teaching and _____ arts
- 12. It means "soil" or "ground" in Hebrew
- 14. Our World _____ to God, a contemporary testimony of the CRCNA
- 15. Title of LeMarr Jackson's favorite film of 2023
- 16. He participated in World Renew's leadership development project in Guatemala



Solution to the January 2024 puzzle

**Would you like to receive *The Banner* for free?
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Or go online to *TheBanner.org/Signup*.

You do not need to be a member of the Christian Reformed Church to sign up.

DEADLINES: Ads for the March issue are due February 2, 2024; April issue: March 1, 2024. Subject to availability. Details online at thebanner.org/classifieds, or for display ads see thebanner.org/ads. Advertising in *The Banner* does not imply editorial endorsement.

PRICES: Most ads are \$0.45^{US} per character (min. 150 characters including punctuation and spaces). A discounted rate of \$0.38^{US} per character and \$65 per photo applies to Anniversaries, Birthdays, Obituaries, Denominational and Classical Announcements, and Congregational Announcements.

TO ADVERTISE: Place your classified ad online at thebanner.org/classifieds or email it to classifieds@thebanner.org or fax it to 616-224-0834. Questions? Call 616-224-0725.

Church Positions Available

CO-PASTOR SEARCH Drayton Reformed Church, in Drayton ON, Co-Pastor search, to assist with preaching, teaching, youth leadership & other ministries. Please check our Pastoral Search tab on website: www.draytonreformed.org, or contact dkabbes75@gmail.com

COORDINATOR/YOUTH PASTOR - Calvary CRC in Orange City, Iowa, is seeking a coordinator or pastor to oversee youth ministries, enhance congregational life, and preach as educated/gifted. Duties may include, but are not limited to youth meetings, service trips, counseling, as well as leading worship services. For more information, please contact Wayne Huisman at wayne@huismanglobal.com.

FULL TIME ASSOCIATE PASTOR First CRC in Lynden, Washington is seeking a full-time ordained associate pastor to provide general pastoral ministry in the congregation to support our senior pastor, including preaching, with specific focus on overseeing our ministry to youth, young adults and young families. Email resume and statement of faith to Brian VanderWoude at search@firstcrlcynden.org.

FULL TIME PASTOR Westside Fellowship CRC in Kingston, ON is prayerfully seeking an experienced, relational, passionate leader to shepherd our congregation as we seek to follow Christ. Please reach out to our search committee at searchteam@wfcrc.ca for more information.

FULL TIME PASTOR Enjoy beautiful sunsets followed by the glow of a bonfire in west central Minnesota. Raymond CRC is searching for a full time pastor to preach the Bible and lead our congregation as we together seek to glorify God in all we do and to joyfully acknowledge His sovereignty over all things. Our prayer is that our next pastor will lead us as we continue to grow our faith in God and stir in us a passion for reaching the lost in our community, so they know Jesus Christ. If you feel the Holy Spirit nudging, you to consider being our next pastor contact secretary@raymondcrc.org for more information.

FULL-TIME PASTOR Fresno CRC, Fresno, California seeks a Full-Time Pastor to lead our diverse and growing congregation. We are prayerfully seeking a Pastor who is called to an urban setting, with a passion for worship, fellowship and mission. God is calling us to be a community of servant hearted disciples with a passion for Jesus, People and Mission. If you feel God calling you to this community, please reach out to Matt.Schuring@mac.com

FULL-TIME PASTOR POSITION Bethel CRC in DeMotte, IN is seeking a Pastor who is dynamic and passionately led by the Holy Spirit in preaching God's word to a multi-generational congregation with emphasis on youth, shepherding and growing our church. Please contact us if interested by reaching out to Russ Vander Molen at: vander5@embarqmail.com. Also visit bethelcrcdemotte.org for job description and church profile.

GGCRC (ggcrc.org) is seeking a FT Sr. Pastor to provide leadership, direction and vision. Must be a committed Christ follower to serve Him and His people. Qual: M.Div. accredited theological seminary. Min 5 yrs church pastor exp. Proficient in English; fluent in Mandarin or Cantonese. Authorized to work in the US. Inquire at srpastorsearch@ggcrc.org.

PASTOR INWOOD CRC, Inwood CRC, in Inwood IA is searching for our next pastor. Our congregation values a pastor that is distinctively reformed, eager to preach God's Word, and excited to build on over 100 years of God's faithful ministry at Inwood CRC. We ask those interested in shepherding our congregation to prayerfully consider ministering in Inwood, and to contact Nathan Nieuwendorp at nathan.nieuwendorp@gmail.com for more information and our church profile. www.inwoodcrc.org

Meetings of Classis

CLASSIS NORTH CASCADES will have its next regular meeting on February 29, 2024, at 7 p.m. in Bethel CRC, Lynden, Washington.

Employment

ASSISTANCE NEEDED: Retired Missionary Physical Therapist to Bangladesh living in Jenison, Mi. seeks someone to aid him in writing his memoir/autobiography. Call him at 616.217.1983 or e-mail him at larrygolin@aol.com

CEO OPPORTUNITY The Emmanuel Seniors Living Society is seeking a permanent CEO to lead the non-profit organization as it provides a Christian environment for seniors in Edmonton, AB, Canada. The Society is a registered charity and has provided independent & assisted living options for over 50 years. For more information go to www.emmanuelhome.ca or email info@emmanuelhome.ca.

LOOKING FOR CARE GIVER FOR SENIOR We are looking for live in home care for our father living alone in Cookstown, Ontario. Willing to

pay a salary as well as providing free room and board. Looking for someone to cook meals, do light housekeeping, run errands and provide respite care. No medical experience is required. Drivers licence and recent clean criminal record check required. email charliebaptist44@gmail.com for details. "

TRUCK DRIVERS Zeeland greenhouse looking for motivated CDL A & B drivers for deliveries. Get paid well by the HOUR, not the mile! Drivers rewarded for dedication & hard work. Full & part time (if not available 4+ days a week) positions starting mid-April through start of June, also opportunities in the fall. Be home Sundays. Some Saturdays may be required. All expenses - trucks, fuel, & tolls, are covered by the company, not the driver. Retired? Great extra income if you have a current CDL, medical certificate, & good driving record. Contact Amy: 616-875-7211 for info or @ Meadowridge: 8952 Tyler St. in Zeeland

Anniversary

WEDDING ANNIVERSARY 70 YEARS

EUWEMA, Conrad and Catherine celebrate 70 years of marriage on March 3, 2024. Their children, Agnes and Allen Kerkstra, Grace and Mike Bowles, Pete and Cindy Euwema, Ken and Marcia Euwema, Mike and Danielle Euwema along with 13 grandchildren and 15 great grandchildren give thanks to God for their life, their love and their legacy.



TE BRINK, ALFRED & JEAN were married for 70 years on December 4, 2023. They celebrated their anniversary with family and friends in Denver, CO at Hillcrest CRC. Their anniversary is a celebration

of their life together, love, and their commitment to each other and God.

Birthday

90 YEARS

ROELS Dr. Edwin, Lord willing will be celebrating his 90th birthday on February 2. His family is so grateful for the beautiful, Christlike example he has always been to us. We praise God for His faithfulness and gracious blessings over the years. Birthday greetings can be sent to 2805 E Fulton, Grand Rapids, MI 49506.

Obituaries



BUSSEMA, Cornelius "Corny", age 91, was born on August 20, 1932 in Oak Park, Illinois to Jeanette and John Bussema. He passed away on November 21, 2023 at home in Burr Ridge, Illinois. Cornelius and

his wife Florence were long-time members of Western Springs Christian Reformed Church, before attending Christ Church of Oak Brook in later years. He had a long and successful career, first working with his father's excavation business, then as co-owner/operator for Garden City Disposal, and finally with Waste Management for many years. He was always willing to lend a helping hand and known for his ability to fix just about anything. Corny knew when to be serious but had a wonderful sense of humor. He could spin a yarn of epic proportions and have everyone falling for the story hook, line, and sinker. Over time, the family caught on to his antics and loved to be there for the next tale with an unsuspecting listener. His caregivers, Elizalde, Therese, Arthur and Sharon all worked with him over the past 5 years, grew to appreciate his humor and charm, and developed true friendships - these special people will always be a part of the family. He is survived by his children, Laura (Rich) Kuipers, Valerie DeBoer, John (Catherine) Bussema, David (Mary) Bussema, as well as, his grandchildren, John DeBoer, Stephanie Kuipers, Michael DeBoer, Thomas (Sheila) Kuipers, and Alexander Bussema. He is also survived by his sister in-law, Ruth Visser and many nieces and nephews. He was preceded in death by his wife of more than 64 years, Florence Bussema, his sister Marion, his son in-law, Gary DeBoer, his sisters in-law, Martha (Robert) Molenhouse, Bernice (William) Buiten, Connie (Duane) Rosendahl, and brother in-law, Richard Visser. A private funeral ceremony was held on December 1, with interment in Lakewood Cemetery in Holland, MI. Memorial contributions may be made to the Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation at 4595 Broadmoor Ave SE Ste 230, Kentwood, MI 49512, Timothy Christian Schools at 188 West Butterfield Road, Elmhurst, IL 60126, or Holland Christian Schools at 956 Ottawa Ave. Holland, MI 49423. Funeral arrangements are under the auspices of the Downtown Chapel.

KAMSTRA, Praise the LORD for the life of William "Bill" Kamstra who died peacefully in his sleep on December 5, 2023, age 98. Bill lived a life focused on service to others. A veteran of WWII, Bill spent 43 years in education as a teacher & principal at Baxter Christian School, Grand Rapids Christian High School and Jenison High School. He served in Christ's Church as Elder, Deacon, and youth leader, in Crossroads Institute and in Friendship Ministries. Bill was preceded in death by his wife Adrianna (Bykerk), and his grandchildren Kevin Kamstra

and Amy (Veldkamp) DeKock. A beloved Father, he is mourned by his children Douglas & Marilyn Kamstra, Carol & Roger Veldkamp and Dan & Anne Kamstra. As a cherished Grandfather he is mourned by his grandchildren: Brian & Jessica Kamstra, Joel & Maribeth Kamstra, Eric & Emily Kamstra, Sara & Mike Vanderwoude, David & Rachael Veldkamp, Scott DeKock, Will Kamstra and London Kamstra. As a dearly loved Opa, he is missed by 17 great-grandchildren. Ephesians 2:9-10. Soli Deo Gloria.

POST, JENNY nee Leijstra, of Downers Grove, went home to be with her Lord on December 14, 2023. 5N670 Rochefort Lane, Wayne, IL 60184. Devoted wife of the late Dick Post; loving mother of Teresa (the late Mike) Hughes, Gert (Allen) Heerema, and Gerald (Regina) Post; dear grandmother of 5, great-grandmother of 14, and great-great-grandmother of 3. Born in the Netherlands, Jenny immigrated first to Canada and later to the Chicago area. She learned English by singing hymns with the Salvation Army, spurring a lifelong love of music. Jenny and Dick scrimped and saved to send their children to Timothy Christian Schools, where she was involved in the Friendship Club. Jenny's family will remember her chocolate chip cookies, her sense of humor, and her singing "Because He Lives" to every new baby. Her lifelong commitment to Jesus gave her life purpose and will influence future generations for years to come.



VAN LAAR John Van Laar, age 91, went to be with his Lord Saturday, Dec. 9. He was preceded in death by his parents Lambertus and Sadie (Boermans) Van Laar, grandson Brian Brockette, sister Myrtle Van Laar, and wife Barbara (Hoeksema). He will be lovingly remembered by his children Jim Van Laar, Joan Brockette, David (Keri) Van Laar, Dan (Julie) Van Laar, Lynn (Jerry) Sytsma; 15 grandchildren; 5 great-grandchildren. John was a member of Calvin Christian Reformed Church.

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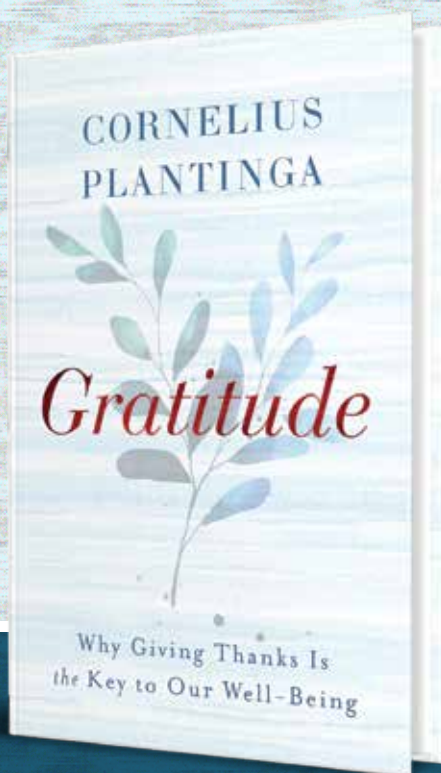
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God's Gardeners

Our restless, hurry-addicted culture has not taught us how to create hospitable environments for deep growth.



Ruth Ann Bos is majoring in English writing and art at Redeemer University. She attends Immanuel Christian Reformed Church in Hamilton, Ont.

FOR A MOMENT, she forgets that she's in exile as she plucks the smooth, red pomegranate off the branch, with its little crown and promise of juicy red pearls. Forty years have passed, and the Israelites' deliverance is coming. But 30 years of exile remain. The prophet Jeremiah's words, regularly recited by her mother, now echo in her head: "Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce" (Jer. 29:5). That's what her family's life is: settling as exiles in a foreign land, building houses, planting gardens, harvesting their produce, and waiting to return home.

I inhale the basil plant's fragrance as I snip off its flowers and remove the leaves nibbled by insects. Time seems to slow down. The plant glows in the afternoon sun, and my breathing becomes rhythmic. I love this garden that bursts at the seams with tomatoes, greens, peppers, squash, and sunflowers. *What would it be like to stay put long enough to cultivate a garden?* I wonder.

Gardens usually require a faithful gardener to water the plants, tend to diseases, prune branches, ward off insects, and harvest produce. If the gardener neglects to care for the garden, it suffers. Yet many young adults today don't fully know how to be God's spiritual gardeners. We don't know how to care for others' needs, our lives, and God's creation. We move from one thing to the next, unable to set down roots.

This is not good soil for flourishing, yet we don't know any other lifestyle.

We do know how to "build" and "garden" in temporary ways. Friendships and connections change with each season of life. Our responsibilities are fleeting, whether those are classes, sports, or jobs. Yet we are still expected to be faithful gardeners of God.

Centuries before their Babylonian exile, the people of Judah were also accustomed to a nomadic lifestyle, living in tents as they wandered the wilderness on their way to the Promised Land. But when God exiled them from that land for their disobedience, he didn't want them only to pitch tents in their 70 years in Babylonian captivity. He wanted them to settle down (Jer. 29:5). Their situation was temporary, but they served an everlasting God who cared about how they settled, seeking the flourishing of their home away from home.

Our restless, hurry-addicted culture has not taught us how to create hospitable environments for deep growth, so we might react against the faithfulness and discipline that are required to make these spaces. However, we can learn to "build" and "garden" like the Israelites by obeying God's call to live in his presence and faithfully care for what is in front of us. Life is short, yet Christians of all ages are called not to be passive as we pass through, but to be active as we settle down.

How can you "build" and "garden" here and now, practicing reliance on the everlasting God?

She bites the soft flesh of a sun-warmed apricot from the garden, closing her eyes and smiling as sweetness explodes on her tongue. The juice reminds her of the refreshing presence of God—the God who commanded her people to build houses and plant gardens, the God who made this apricot grow on the tree to sustain her on this hot day. God is faithful to God's people even in their exile, establishing the works of their hands in their temporary home. She remembers the prophet's other words about God: "You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart" (Jer. 29:13). She can't wait to go home. **B**

What an Ice Storm Taught Me About Depending on God

Too often I think
I have to walk the
ice alone.

A HUGE STORM rolled through Iowa, coating everything in sight with a thick layer of ice—roads, trees, cars, street signs, and houses.

It was 1993, and I was in kindergarten. I regularly walked home from school with my big brother, Todd. The day of the ice storm, Todd burst through the front door of our house, yelling, “Mom! Mom! Help Laurel! She’s afraid of the ice and can’t walk home! She’s standing on the road crying!”

My mom scrambled to grab her boots and winter coat. “Go back to Laurel and keep her company,” she said. “Tell her I’ll be right there.”

Less than a minute later, Mom had her boots and coat on and walked out the door. To her surprise, she was greeted by Todd. “Laurel’s coming!” he told her.

Looking down the street, Mom saw me shuffling calmly and steadily toward home.

Mom walked as quickly as she could across the slippery ice to my side. As she approached, she was startled to see a look of pure serenity on my face. She knelt by my side, noting the remnants of the tears that had streamed down my cheeks moments earlier.



Laurel Dykema lives in Grand Rapids, Mich. and attends Westend Christian Reformed Church. She has a bachelor’s degree in Bible and theology from Kuyper College and more than a decade of experience as a professional writer for nonprofits.

“Honey, are you okay?” Mom asked me.

“I prayed to Jesus, Mom,” I said, smiling peacefully. “And Jesus’ angels helped me get across the ice, so I wasn’t afraid anymore.”


When my mom told me this story recently, I was struck by what a wonderful picture it is of my relationship with God. Sometimes life feels a lot like

slippery ice—when I feel like I keep falling and lose the will to try again. Or when uncertainty and ambiguity keep me frozen with fear, unable to take another step. Or when I feel the icy grip of anxiety around my heart.

As a 6-year-old, I depended on God and his angels to help me across the ice. And the truth is, I still need to completely depend on God to help me through the hard things in life.

As an adult, though, it can be difficult to have a mindset of daily dependence on God. I tend to think of myself as independent and self-reliant. For some reason, I tell myself in hard times that I need to figure things out on my own, “pull myself up by my bootstraps,” and carry on. Too often I think I have to walk the ice alone.

But—thank God!—that’s not true.

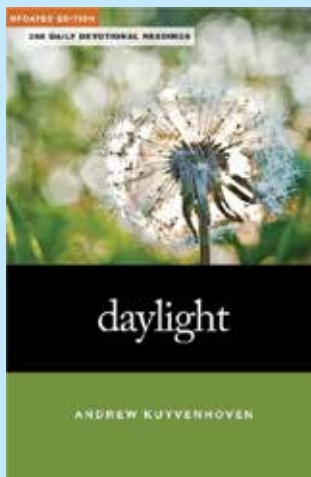
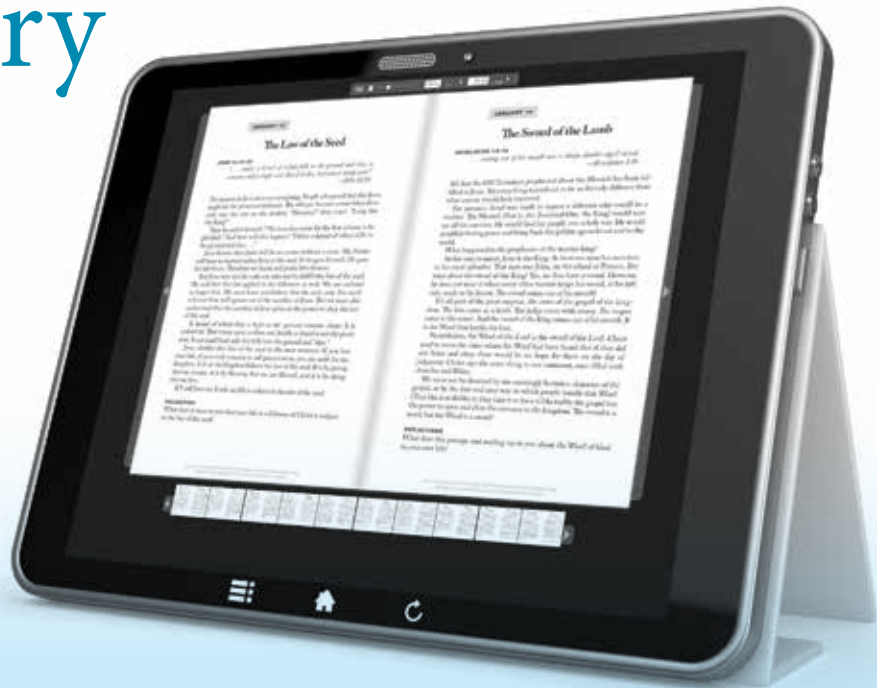
I have a relationship with Jesus Christ—the God who is with me in every storm. The One who is present with me in every difficult moment. The God who walks across the ice with me. 

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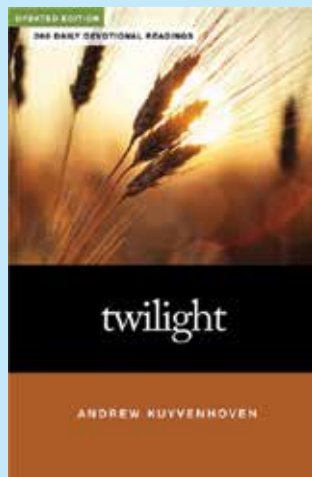
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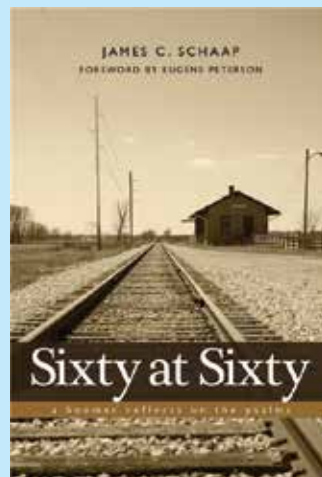
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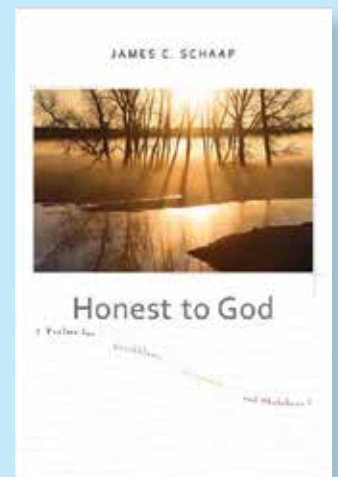
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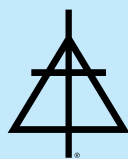
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