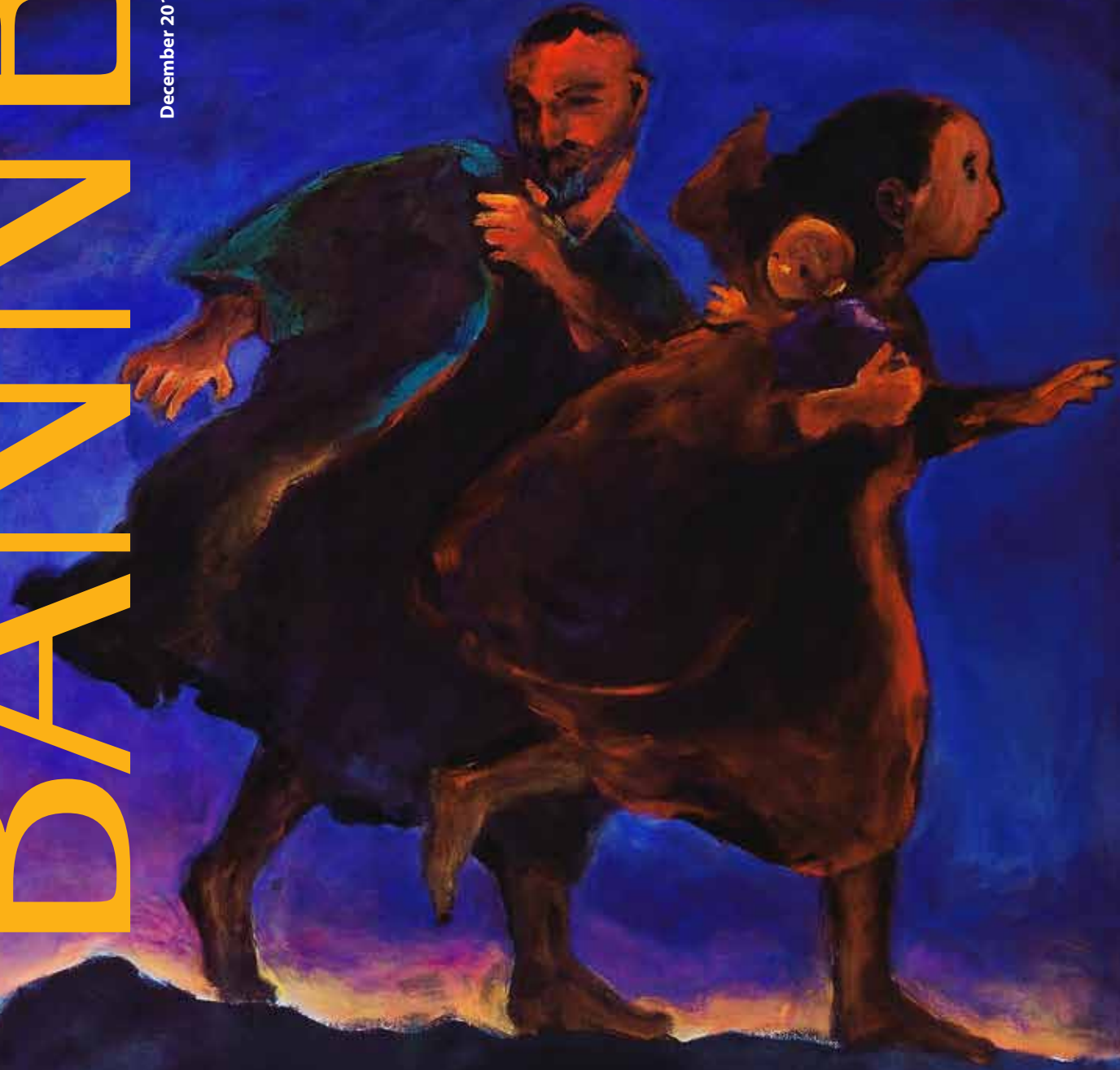




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Konah Bugunu: fisherman evangelist

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Cover: Carol Aust, *Flight of the Holy Family*

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Our Best Is Good Enough

THE KILLER PACE OF WORSHIP PLANNING AROUND CHRISTMAS shouldn't obscure how significant the gathering of sinner-saints truly is. Astonishing, how our ineffable, perfect, exalted God can accept the sin-stained fruit of our lips. Are there ranks of angels madly editing all those words and "cleaning up" off-key voices before they reach the throne?

Hardly. Through the gift of Jesus, God continued the process of our adoption—and parents don't need editors to deal with the foibles and limitations of their kids. Unconditional love lets a parent's ear perceive their babble as sweet perfection.

That's been serious comfort to me as a worship planner/leader for four decades. I've seen my pet ideas fizzle. I've delivered "turkeys" off the pulpit rivaling anything the faithful had roasting in their oven. And as a liturgist . . . well, let me tell you a story.

As a rookie theological editor at Faith Alive, I joined the team of *Reformed Worship* magazine (reformedworship.org). Editor Emily Brink assigned me to write an article introducing myself and sharing some of my credentials. I listed the following:

- I knocked over a huge vase of flowers, forgot to serve communion to the elders, and dropped a live microphone on the floor, all in a *single* worship service.
- I mixed up the names at a double baptism even though baby Susan was clearly identified with a pink ribbon and Jason with a blue one.
- In dramatizing the creation story I intoned, "Let there be light," hit the switch on the projector, blew the breaker, and left the faithful completely in the dark.

I listed more "credentials," but you get the point.

Putting my worst foot forward had an interesting consequence. I received an invitation to lead a retreat of pastors and their spouses on worship. I came prepared with stuff I'd begged, stolen, and borrowed. But I need not have bothered. I'd been invited because of that editorial. They sensed I could identify with their struggles around the ever-smoldering worship wars of that time. We cleared the agenda so we could share the personal pain, deepening wounds, and frustrations of wanting to worship God well but being at odds about how to do it. We cried, laughed, and prayed a lot. Awesome retreat!

Back then the battles were primarily about two modes of worship: "contemporary" and "traditional." We still needed to grow into a realization that God deserves the best of both. And we needed to learn other modes besides: worship from the world church, complaint taken directly from Scripture, and children's songs, among others.

The new joint CRC/RCA songbook *Lift Up Your Hearts* marks that significant convergence. It helps us blend many distinct "voices" into one continuous stream of praise, petition, confession, lament, and thanks that we direct to God's throne.

Will that make us perfect? Hardly. So this season, tell the lazy that God deserves our best. And tell perfectionists that our best is good enough for Abba.

The shepherds at the first Christmas service (Luke 2:20) made the sincere effort to come out to worship Jesus. And, no, they probably couldn't sing like (the) angels—as if it mattered!

Merry Christmas! ■

We cried,
laughed, and
prayed a lot.



Bob De Moor is editor of *The Banner* and pastor of preaching and administration for West End CRC, Edmonton, Alberta.

Bob De Moor Editor

Judith Claire Hardy Associate Editor

Gayla R. Postma News Editor

Henry Hess Editor,
Together Doing More

Kristy Quist Tuned In Editor

Dean R. Heetderks Art Director

Pete Euwema Graphic Design

Frank Gutbrod Graphic Design

Contact Us

1700 28th Street SE, Grand Rapids,
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Tracks of Grace

A SNOWSHOE hare lives under our front steps. I can't say that for sure, but the tracks in the snow below the window come and go. And there is poop.

Here at the hinge of the year, this annual time of stocktaking and fresh resolve, I'd like to offer up three ways to notice another set of tracks. These are tracks of the grace of God, left by the God of grace. Can you see them in the story that was 2014? I assure you, they will be there in 2015.

Grace leaves tracks. Paul writes, "[God's] grace to me was not without effect" (1 Cor. 15:10). Dr. Malan Nel observes that when we experience grace, we grow in three ways. Those ways might be "tracks" of God who is "at work in all things for our good" (Rom. 8).

The first "track" to look for is openness. Some are suspicious of openness. They fear a mind that is "so open that our brains fall out." The openness I'm talking about, though, is the courage to be open with each other about our stories,

the way Paul was as he continually testified to his old life and to the devastating experience of meeting Jesus Christ on the road in Syria. Our own openness might be the courage to wonder out loud if all our wealth delivers life or if it leaves us wanting and lonely.

The second "track" is creativity. It is the mark of every fundamentalist position to make people and communities more and more alike. This is as true of free market capitalism as it is of socialism, or of different religions or denominations within a religion. The grace of God from the God of grace brings freedom for fresh responses to life. Because grace is unafraid of the other, it values and makes room for more voices and so for creativity.

The third "track" is discernment. Discernment is the trait we need in order to know what is "a hill to die on" and what is not. Discernment is the understanding that there is a time to speak and a time to be silent, a time to reach out and a time to allow others to struggle until they find their own strength.

Above all, it is the insight that the most true thing about each of us is that we are deeply loved by God.

The acronym for these three "tracks" is "OCD." As one who has experience in thinking and behaving obsessively and with compulsion, I find a happy irony in using "OCD" to signify openness, creativity, and discernment. It's helped me to pay attention to the places where Jesus is at work in me and in the people around me, and it encourages me to follow him there—to, as Paul says, "work out my salvation." Sometimes there is poop along the way. There is just no getting around that.

May you have the grace to see the tracks of God's grace. And may you have the courage to follow. ■



John Luth is pastor of the Christian Reformed Church of St. Albert, Alberta.



*Being the Beloved
expresses the core truth
of our existence.*

— HENRI J. M. NOUWEN

Immigration Is Our Story

When countries build 10-foot walls, the demand for 12-foot ladders goes up.



For some 30 years I've followed the North American immigration debate closely. My files—first paper, then electronic—are bulging. Sadly, what is a human drama for millions still drags on as the United States considers “comprehensive immigration reform” to balance law and grace.

Before a recent trip to the Netherlands, I discovered forebears who had immigrated from Germany to the Dutch province of Groningen, apparently seeking work in the fields. On our trip, I tromped through church graveyards that contained many surnames familiar to me from living in Christian Reformed communities. Our history, in Canada as well as the U.S., is one of immigration.

As believers, we know that grace trumps all else. For that reason we must support the passage of laws to put into place a system that reflects that truth. We must unselfishly urge our lawmakers to craft just and humane measures that will keep families together and allow for paths to legal residency or citizenship.

From my earliest days, I have often heard quoted the words of Psalm 16:6:

“The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places.” My paternal great-grandfather, the first of our family’s immigrant ancestors, worked as a boat hand. As I stood on a wharf that bears the North Sea’s rugged wind and weather, I imagined the struggle that prompted him and so many others to emigrate. And I gave thanks again for that decision, imitated by people from all over the world. Indeed, many who have come to North America can echo the psalmist that we are living our lives in “pleasant places.”

The Bible is a story of immigrants. Regarding strangers, God’s Word says, “The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt” (Lev. 19:34). That echo from a distant time and place must resound with us.

When countries build 10-foot walls, the demand for 12-foot ladders goes up. We have the technology to do away with walls and fences and still have the necessary controls and security. For immigrants who are already here, I urge love and understanding, leading to laws that break down barriers and allow all people to flourish. ■



Rev. Lou Wagenveld’s work in missions included planting a Hispanic church and starting a community center

in southern California.



Christian Schools

Many years ago I graduated from Roseland Christian, Chicago Christian High, and Calvin College (“A Case for Christian Schools,” Sept. 2014). Since then I have served as a teacher, administrator, and professor in Christian schools in the U.S. and Canada. Since my “retirement” I have traveled to China more than 30 times as a volunteer educator. The post-missionary Christian education movement in China is less than 10 years old, but schools are being established throughout the country. Recently I visited a new Christian high school, college, and graduate school in Beijing. These are fledgling efforts, but the seed has been planted.

Thank you, Christian Reformed Church, for my Christian education heritage!

—Jack Fennema
Columbus, Ohio

The point in the article “A Case for Christian Schools” about embracing culture rather than sheltering children is important: by shielding children from the world, are Christian schools really doing the future generation a favor? I believe the answer is no. The world is full of evil, but it is also beautiful. Christian schools need to show their students the beauty of the

TTERS

world, but they also need to prepare them for the battle that will come from living in our culture.

—*Elaine Ries
Bothell, Wash.*

Thank you for highlighting the importance of Christian education (“A Case for Christian Schools”). The article omits two important points: first, the peace of mind parents have knowing these teachers genuinely care for each student, seeing their teaching as a calling, not just a job. (Also, most Christian schools graduate students who rank higher academically than those in public schools.)

A second point is the need for Christians to support schools that integrate our faith into each subject. Some Christian schools have been forced to close due to lack of support. One was Roseland Christian School in Chicago, Ill. Readers can support the remaining Christian schools in Chicago at brightpromisefund.org or support the wonderful Christian schools in their own state.

—*Dave Thomas
Westwood, New Jersey*

Holy Land

Thank you for publishing the article about seeking justice for the Palestinian people (“Lessons from a Holy Land Tour,” Sept. 2014).

Nick Wolterstorff, Bert De Vries, and Bas Van Elderen started talking to us about these issues 40 years ago. But we weren’t ready to listen. Now the tide is finally turning. May we work for a justice that will lead to peace in the land.

—*Thomas Niehof
Ames, Iowa*

I find “Lessons of a Holy Land Tour” biased and overly simplified. Israel has fought six defensive wars. They would no longer exist if they had lost one of these wars. Their current “militarism” and security measures have been forced upon them.

This is a complex issue and it is disappointing that *The Banner* would publish such a one-sided article that suggests that people should be contacting their representatives in Washington, DC. Many people are already too quick to make judgments on this issue without becoming sufficiently informed.

—*Siebe Kloosterman
Cavan Monaghan, Ontario*

I spent three years living in Israel and Palestine. I appreciate Klompeen’s effort to convey both sides of this difficult issue (“Lessons of a Holy Land Tour”). A few points need further clarification. First, all current settlements are in the occupied territory of the West Bank, not the Gaza Strip. Under Sharon, Israel withdrew armed forces and all settlements from Gaza in 2005. The militants who were firing rockets from Gaza were not firing intentionally at the West Bank or at the settlements but at Israeli territory.

I encourage Klompeen to consider using gender-neutral language in seeking compassion for not only our brother Palestinians but for our sisters as well. We should be encouraged to invite our Israeli brothers *and* sisters to work toward progress on these issues.

—*Emily Thomassen
Palos Heights, Ill.*

From my “firsthand” view of the Holy Land, I can tell you there is a clear sense that the two cultures will *never* get along

(“Lessons of a Holy Land Tour”). They are diametrically opposite (like Abraham’s sons). To cast either side into the role of “victim” is to oversimplify, and that does the process of peaceful coexistence no good.

I challenge you to present another view of the Holy Land that has a strong basis in Scripture and a solid overview of the history of this land.

—*Janet Van Timmeren
Grand Rapids, Mich.*

Perfect Pastor

The “perfect pastor” does not exist because even pastors are sinners, as are the other members of the church (“Looking for the Perfect Pastor,” Sept. 2014).

Our church currently has an opening for a senior pastor. I’m not looking for a pastor who is a “10”—I’ll settle for a “5” as long as he is devoted to our Christian Reformed traditions and teachings.

We should never apologize for being Christian Reformed focused believers.

—*Sheryl Kamper
Chino, Calif.*

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NEWS CORRESPONDENTS

For correspondents' email addresses, see www.thebanner.org.

Gayla R. Postma News Editor
Email: gpostma@crcna.org

Anita Beem
Classes Lake Erie, Kalamazoo
248-559-2806 • 248-645-1990

Anita Brinkman
Classes Chatham, Huron
519-354-9126

Gregory Chandler
Classes Georgetown, Grandville
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Shashi DeHaan
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Ontario Church Hosts Nativity Set Exhibit

People recognize a good idea when they see it—or read about it in *The Banner*. Borrowing an idea from West End Christian Reformed Church in Edmonton, Alberta, First CRC in Sarnia, Ontario, is now hosting its own exhibit of nativity sets.

The Reach Team of First CRC hosted its first display last December as a way of reaching out to the community and will do so again this year. "I got the idea for doing a show when I read in *The Banner* about the one in Edmonton," said organizer Diane Plug.

To prepare for the event, she communicated with people at West End, which has been displaying nativity sets each Christmas for more than a decade. They offered suggestions about the best way to do things and



Nativity sets at First CRC's nativity exhibit.

DIANE PLUG

shared documents and promotion resources.

Sarnia event organizers put out a call for nativity sets in September using various media. Last year, they had 103 sets: old, new, large, small, homemade, international. "Many came from countries such as Mali, Ivory Coast, Honduras, Israel, Haiti, and the Philippines," said Plug.

As guests walked around admiring the many sets, they were

invited to enjoy a cup of tea or hot apple cider. Live music also contributed to the atmosphere. The team decided to set out a guest book rather than a donation box. "We wanted to be a blessing to the community," explained Plug. Response to the event was positive; words of appreciation and hopes for a similar event next year filled the guest book.

—Anita Brinkman

Fire Damages Ontario Church

A passing neighbor may have helped to save the Lucknow Community Christian Reformed Church building on August 25 when he heard the smoke alarm going off and called for help. Fire trucks arrived at the small Ontario church at the same time as property manager Eric Exel. Firefighters were able to put out the blaze from the inside, preserving the structural integrity of the building.

The fire, likely caused by an overheating electronic device, was small, said interim pastor Ken deBoer. But extensive smoke and water damaged the sanctuary and some of the

rooms below, including the kitchen and the nursery.

A restoration company started work almost immediately. Pews and books were removed for cleaning and ventilators and fans placed to dry out what could be saved. The rest, including carpet and much of the drywall, was disposed of. A month after the fire, member Jocelyn deBoer said, "It's just sinking in how much damage there actually is. Electronics are not salvageable. All the appliances have been condemned. The nursery is gutted to the concrete blocks. All the toys are gone."

Although the congregation initially thought a few weeks would suffice for clean-up, now they hope to be back in the building by Christmas. There are things to be thankful for, said deBoer. "No one was hurt. We've got insurance. [And] there's a clear sense that our church is not about a building, but about a community and a faith that holds us together."

Since the fire, Lucknow CRC has been worshiping in the local Presbyterian church, with weekly programs hosted by various other community churches.

—Anita Brinkman

West Michigan Parents Get Help Shopping for Christmas

Each Christmas season, parents who could not otherwise afford gifts can choose and pay for gifts for their kids—thanks to the Christmas Store for neighbors in the McLaughlin, Angel, and Nelson neighborhoods in Muskegon, Mich.

“Rather than being a program which gives gifts to families, [the Christmas Store] allows families to be a part of the process through purchasing new, quality gifts at a fraction of the actual cost. In doing so, a parent can say, ‘I gave this gift to my child,’ rather than feel inadequate for not being able to provide,” said Randy Vander Weit of Bethany Christian Reformed Church.

Now in its sixth year, the Christmas Store is a joint effort of many local churches, including Bethany CRC and Allen Avenue CRC, which hosts the store in its building. It was first coordinated through Community enCompass’s Healthy Neighborhood Project—a Christian community development organization connected to Bethany CRC. Now it is organized and run by many of the same neighbors who have shopped at the store.

Gifts are donated by church members as well as local businesses and nonprofits; they are then sold at 20 percent of the regular purchase price. “A parent can pay \$8 for a \$40 gift for their child; if the parents do not have money to purchase gifts, they can volunteer at the store for credit to purchase presents. It’s a win-win situation,” said one of the coordinators.

After being homeless for three years, one woman was unable to find employment or provide Christmas presents for her kids last year. She was grateful for the ability to volunteer to earn credit to shop. “It gives me the feeling of being able to supply something for my kids that I provided, rather than it being given to us,” she said.

Parents from the neighborhood receive a personal invitation to shop. In 2012, 79 families were invited, and 45 volunteers spent 196 hours on the store.

—Daina Kraai

[Muskegon neighbors shop at the Christmas Store.](#)



[A table is set for Willoughby CRC’s Angel Breakfast.](#)

British Columbia Daycares Celebrate Christmas

Three Christian Reformed churches in British Columbia take advantage of the Christmas season to reach out to the families served by their church-run daycare facilities.

Harmony Daycare at Maple Ridge Christian Reformed Church holds a big Christmas concert each year, filling the church to capacity. Church members provide an evening of free babysitting for parents to get their Christmas shopping done. Daycare director Heather Axeland added that the regular monthly dinner hosted for daycare families is extra-special in December.

Willoughby Christian Reformed Church in Langley hosts an annual “Angel Breakfast” for the families of its Covenant Kids Christian Daycare. Church council and other members flip pancakes and cook sausages for over 200 people while the children perform. The breakfast includes an invitation to the church’s Christmas services.

“The event is our outreach, blessing the parents with a free breakfast and a

message of the Christmas story from the children,” said Covenant Kids director Joni Garratt. “Our hope is to bless our families and pray that the Holy Spirit uses the children to touch their [parents’] hearts.”

At Nelson Avenue Community Church in Burnaby, 200 family members are treated to Christmas dinner served by church members. Parents also enjoy a children’s performance that emphasizes the true meaning of Christmas. In the past several years, church members have baked a dozen homemade Christmas cookies for each daycare family.

Deacons at all three churches work with the daycares to provide food hampers or grocery gift cards for families who need some assistance making the holiday special.

“All these things are simple forms of outreach,” explained Julie Brown, director of Nelson Avenue Daycare. “Not necessarily ‘preaching’ to the families but showing Christ’s love through simple jobs like serving food and cleaning up. It also gives church members the opportunity to talk with the families and make connections.”

—Tracey Yan

NEWS

Pastor's Faith Journey Comes Full Circle

From the tender age of 5, Michael Nanninga sensed a calling from God and a passion for ministry. His father is a pastor, and Michael used to stand at his dad's pulpit and look at the empty pews after church.

"Looking back now, I can see how God opened doors for me and gave me the courage to step through them," Nanninga said. "Philippians 1:6 serves as a reminder to me that 'He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion.' The golden chain of his salvation is really evident."



Michael (left) and his father, Rick Nanninga, prepare to serve communion together.

Nanninga was ordained at Cornerstone Christian Reformed Church in Chilliwack, British Columbia, on October 24, 2014. The service was officiated by his father, Rev. Rick Nanninga, pas-

tor at Barrhaven Fellowship CRC in Ottawa, Ontario. The two served communion together the following Sunday, when Michael also preached his inaugural sermon.

Nanninga will serve as associate pastor at Cornerstone alongside pastor Bill Veenstra. Veenstra baptized Michael 26 years ago, further evidence of God's faithfulness throughout the generations. Veen-

Synodical Committee for Pastoral Guidance Regarding Same-Sex Marriage Visits Ontario

An evening session with the Committee for Pastoral Guidance on Same-Sex Marriage drew more than 140 people from churches in Hamilton, Ontario, and showed that Christian Reformed church members hold a variety of views on how to carry out appropriate ministry involving people in same-sex relationships.

Held at the fall meeting of Clasis Hamilton (a regional group of churches), the event was one of six Canadian stops on a listening tour, part of the committee's mandate from Synod 2013 (the annual leadership meeting of the CRC). The committee also plans to visit seven U.S. classes.

The committee is not reexamining the church's position on homosexuality. Its mandate is to give

pastoral guidance to churches, pastors, leaders, and church members on doing ministry in a cultural setting where same-sex marriage is legal. The CRC's position, established in 1973 and reaffirmed in 2002, is that homosexual orientation is not a sin but that homosexual practice is.

Committee member Wendy Gritter, along with Peter Noteboom, facilitated the session. Gritter noted that their mandate from synod was to follow a shepherding model, listening to the churches and reporting back to synod as it does its work.

The evening included individual reflection, prayer, and small group discussion. Responses showed that while everyone wants to show love and hospitality to those who are living in a

same-sex relationship, there isn't as much agreement about how that should look, especially when it comes to church membership and participation.

Many attendees said that as they navigate questions that arise in response to same-sex marriage, they need more resources and education on the biblical teachings and the church's stance. Others want help to balance cultural tensions with church convictions and tensions between created reality and scriptural reality.

One person asked the denomination to reexamine the report from 1973. This was met with applause as attendees expressed the view that the language contained in the report is outdated and offensive. One woman shared a personal experience of how she

found the church's treatment of those who are gay and lesbian to be harmful. She stressed the importance of following Jesus' example of love rather than seeing people who are gay and lesbian as projects to be fixed. Others stated that individuals who practice homosexuality should not be welcome in the church.

A survey conducted by the committee early this year drew 5,000 responses that reflect the diverse perspectives held in the denomination. In discussion about the implication of that for the church, some suggested looking at other denominational structures that allow for a more inclusive and broader idea of belonging to the body of Christ. Others stated that the church should place God above all in this discus-



L-r: Revs. Rick Nanninga, Michael Nanninga, and Bill Veenstra.

stra was then serving at Clarkson CRC (now ClearView CRC) in Oakville, Ontario, alongside Michael's father.

Michael explained that his father was one of the first "youth pastors" in the CRC. Michael will

also be primarily serving families and younger members, but he looks forward to helping create more intergenerational connections in his new church.

—Tracey Yan

sion, not personal needs or the pressures of society.

Reflecting on the evening, some expressed their fear of division in the denomination because of differing views. They worry that scriptural study will not necessarily unify these differences. Others said that it is in recognizing all brokenness that the church can move away from judgment to a space of hospitality.

"Our hope as followers of Jesus is that our faith will have transformational power on the people who enter our circles. But we must be careful not to equate belongingness with specific kinds of behavior," commented Shawn Groen, a member of First CRC in Hamilton. "If we can begin to separate belongingness and behaving, we will be more comfortable journey-

ing and suffering with people wrestling with deep questions about love and acceptance."

The challenges that face the committee and the church were evident in the discussion. Yet as Gritter pointed out, although there will be pain in the process, there is also the possibility of growth.

In addition to listening sessions at classis meetings over the next year, the committee is also attending Christian Reformed campus ministry and chaplains' conferences. The committee will be giving an interim report at Synod 2015 and hopes to hold a listening session there as well. The final report is scheduled for presentation at Synod 2016.

—Krista Dam-VandeKuyt

Reaching Out with Helping Hands

Not every project that Operation Nehemiah takes part in lands on the front page of the *Chicago Tribune*, but this story captured the hearts of people from miles around.

Since 1946, the Sabec brothers, Don, 81; Lawrence, 77; and Ron, 67, had lived in a small home in New Lenox, Ill. The home was filled with memories but increasingly run-down. A leaky roof, faulty heating, and gaping holes in the walls prompted the county to warn that the building could be condemned.

Then the community stepped in—including Rob Lach. A general contractor, member of New Life Christian Reformed Church in New Lenox, and founder of the nonprofit Operation Nehemiah, Lach coordinated the effort to rebuild the dilapidated house within just two months.

"Our mission is to help individuals and families as well as other nonprofits that are in need of construction-related services through the use of volunteers and donors," Lach said.

One organization did the majority of the fundraising, Lach noted. Operation Nehemiah provided the volunteer labor, tools, and equipment. A group of six to 10 volunteers from New Life did everything from demolition, carpentry, plumbing, electrical wiring, drywall, flooring, and more; three other churches were also involved, along with several organizations and businesses.



The Sabec brothers' home as the rebuild begins.

"The people of New Life Church have always had a passion for serving in our community," said Rev. Ron Vanderwell. "A new development for us has been an emphasis on learning how to do this together. . . . We have been developing teams and leaders in order to help people like the Operation Nehemiah leaders better include and mobilize other volunteers to [make] a very practical difference in the lives of people around us."

In addition to the complete home renovation, a physician at New Life helped one brother with his orthotics; another member repaired the brakes on the brothers' car.

"This is a great way to share something practical in Jesus' name," Vanderwell said. "But beyond that, we have a lot of members who work in the construction trades. It's so important to help Reformed believers realize that they can make a real difference for God by doing what they do best. Sometimes we accidentally send out the message that people have to come to a church building to serve the kingdom of Christ. Those three brothers could tell you that every day they now wake up surrounded by a very tangible reminder of the grace of Christ."

—Melissa Holtrop

NEWS

Mixed Results for Sunday Classis Meetings

In May 2013, Classis California South (a regional group of churches) moved its meetings to Sunday afternoons and evenings to promote better attendance and allow more time for prayer and fellowship. The experiment has met with mixed results. At its last meeting, 13 of 19 organized churches were represented by at least one delegate.

Cor Pool, pastor of Hope Community CRC in Riverside, Calif., explained some of the pros and cons of Sunday meetings. "It gives us more time for prayer and wor-

ship and an opportunity for some leadership training. Delegates normally don't have to take time off from work to come, and it's also possible for others to come who are interested in the work of classis," he said. On the negative side, "Some of our churches have Sunday evening services so they are not able to attend or are not fully represented. For pastors with Sunday preaching, it does make for a busy day."

One of the biggest drawbacks of the Sunday meetings is that three churches in Las Vegas find

it difficult to attend because heavy freeway traffic makes for a very long drive to and from California on Sunday afternoons.

"It is much more difficult for me now that classis has moved to Sundays," said Steve Wunderink, pastor of Grace Valley CRC in Las Vegas. "I miss the time with my fellow elders and pastors. It was a time we could touch base as well as attend to business. I also would love to represent our classis on committees or at synod, but I am not known or seemingly unavailable."

Will Verhoef, who serves as a pastor at The River CRC in Redlands, Calif., and as the clerk of Classis California South, explained that the classis executive team is in the initial stages of a conversation about trying something else.

"We struggle to make classis meetings the kind of inspirational, attractive, and excellent events that would draw churches. I'm not sure we are in a good place yet," Verhoef concluded.

—Tracey Yan

CRC Executive Director Attends White House Gathering

As president of Trinity Christian College in Palos Heights, Ill., Steven Timmermans was part of the U.S. president's Interfaith and Community Service Campus Challenge, a White House initiative aimed at using interfaith cooperation and community service to build understanding between different communities and contribute to the common good.

So it was in his former role that Timmermans attended a White House forum in September for college presidents and other supporters of the initiative. Timmermans, now executive director of the Christian Reformed Church, hopes that church members too "are lifelong students of history, geography, theology, and sociology so that in our communities and neighborhoods, we know how to relate to those of other faiths (or no faith at all) in a hospitable way that the Holy Spirit will use."



CRC executive director Steven Timmermans (right) with Rev. Brenda Girton-Mitchell, director of the Center for Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships in the U.S. Department of Education.

Timmermans said he was struck by a talk given by David Campbell, director of the Rooney Center for the Study of American Democracy at the University of Notre Dame. "His research

suggests that one of the most significant engines of civic engagement in our society is religion—particularly via social relationships built into congregations," Timmermans said.

Congregations often have to learn and relearn the local contexts in which they worship and minister, he added. Participation in community-based efforts could be for some a powerful tool that propels ministry. "Dr. Campbell talked about the 'nones,' that growing segment who identify with no faith tradition. He noted that involvement of people of faith in civic matters can show these 'nones' what faith can do in real and authentic ways," he said.

Timmermans noted that some people greet the term 'interfaith dialogue' as a threat, "as if it is trying to find the lowest common denominator among religions." He doesn't agree. "Pluralism doesn't demand some sort of bland commonality; [it] requires that we step

into the public square with our religious identities intact."

"This project isn't focused on greater Christian unity or cooperation but rather on interfaith literacy and understanding, so desperately needed in a world of deadly conflict and terrorism in the name of religion," Timmermans said. "I hope that as we await the synodical study committee on [religious persecution] and then act on it as well as on our continuing call to be witnesses, we would become more able to be agents of reconciliation used mightily by the Spirit."

—Gayla R. Postma

Highlights of 2014 Fall Classis Meetings

Two or three times each year, Christian Reformed churches send representatives to their classis, a regional grouping of churches. Delegates at those meetings review and make decisions about shared ministries and practice mutual accountability for their congregations' individual ministries. Here are the highlights of the most recent classis meetings:

Several people were **welcomed into ministry** in the Christian Reformed Church, including **seminary graduates** Bernard Ayoola, Amanda Bakale, Brad Bierma, Rick Boomsma, Matthew Burns, Cindy De Jong, Adrian de Lange, Woodrow Dixon, Joseph Groeneveld, Paul Han, Katherine Garvelink Hirschberg, Thomas Brent Kladder, Jeremy Kreuze, Charles Gregg Lawson, Dae Lee, Samuel Lee, Michael Nanninga, Brent Pollema, Jane Porter, Matthew

Postma, Kyle Sanford, Sarah Schreiber, Cory Van Sloten, Caitlin Visser, Caleb Walcott, Albert Wu, and Andrew Zylstra.

Transferred in from other denominations were the following ministers: Alex Agubya, Joseph Chen, James Chiang, Ilyong (Paul) Choi, Myungkil Kim, Yoon Whan Kim, Sangkyu Oh, In Chul Shin, and Peter Van Drunen.

The following ministers were **released from their congregation**: Rev. Bruce Vaandrager (Ada [Mich.] CRC); Rev. Michael Van Boom (First CRC, Edmonton, Alberta); Rev. Gary Luurtsema (East Saugatuck CRC, Holland, Mich.); Rev. Greg Selmon (First CRC, Seattle, Wash.); Rev. Philip Landers (Faith Community CRC, Colton S.D.); Rev. Randy Simon (New Hope CRC, Spokane, Wash.); Rev. Tim Spykstra (CrossPoint CRC, Chino, Calif.).

Simon Cunningham, Gene DeJong, Paul Worster, and Yichul

(Lee Chul) Jeong were **released from ministry in the CRC**.

An emerging church does not have its own council and is under the care of a council of a neighboring Christian Reformed Church. An organized church has its own council. The following churches were designated as **emerging**: Reformed Presbyterian Church, Tampa, Fla.; Lake Worth (Fla.) CRC; and Avenue Church, Edmonton, Alberta.

RedArrow Ministries (Paw Paw, Mich.) and City Reformed Church (Milwaukee, Wis.) were **organized**.

Crossroads Community CRC in Flanders, N.J., Family of Faith CRC in Marquet Heights, Ill., First Harvest Chapel CRC in Tustin, Calif., and McBain (Mich.) CRC **closed**.

—Banner Staff

For more information on fall classis meetings, please visit thebanner.org.

IN MEMORIAM



Rev. Lee Koning

1947 – 2014

Lee Koning, 67, a person and preacher of grace, was well-versed in every area of ministry and a thoughtful observer of life and relationships. He passed away on October 4 following a 19-month battle with cancer.

Koning graduated from Calvin Theological Seminary with a B.Div. degree and later earned a D.Min. from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Ill. He served Christian Reformed congregations in Michigan and Illinois.

Although he related genuinely and sincerely with people of all ages, Koning was especially drawn to children and the elderly. He was a warm and loving pastor. Fellow pastors saw in him a friend and mentor. He was an earnest student of the Scriptures and was widely read.

Koning lived life to the full. His hobbies included astronomy, fly fishing, golf, tennis, science, and bird watching. He played organ and piano well. He was an imaginative storyteller.

Koning is survived by his wife, Patricia, two children and their spouses, and seven grandchildren.

—Louis M. Tamminga
Further information on recently deceased ministers is available each year in the front pages of the Christian Reformed Church's annual Yearbook and on The Banner's website.

Selling More Than Yogurt in Iowa

A new frozen yogurt shop in Pella, Iowa, does more than just sell yogurt. The Mango Tree benefits Many Hands for Haiti, a ministry supported by area Christian Reformed and Reformed Church in America congregations. The store is staffed primarily by volunteers.

Calise Gritters, a member of Calvary CRC, said she sees The Mango Tree as God's tool. "Every time I volunteer, I feel like I am getting more back than what I put in," she said. "I put in hard work, but I get back joy and refreshment and a renewed hope for both the lost in Haiti and the lost in Pella."

Kathy Rozeboom, a member of Faith CRC, said, "Going to Haiti twice has really opened my heart and eyes to see how we can do God's labor of love here in Iowa.



MATT GRINDROD

The Fun Run had 373 participants.

The Mango Tree is great community involvement: meeting people of the community, sharing your love for the Lord, and working with others who have the same love of helping."

Volunteers at the store have the opportunity to earn "points" toward a trip to Haiti to see the work of Many Hands for Haiti. This work includes developing in-country leaders and feeding programs, pouring cement floors in homes, and much more, according to marketing manager Lindsey Klyn.

At its recent grand opening, the ministry organized a fun run called the MH4H Color Blast, which raised \$10,000 for a new truck to be used in Haiti. Yogurt was 30 percent off for the day. Organizers hope The Mango Tree will raise \$50,000 annually to support the work of Many Hands for Haiti.

—Kyle Hoogendoorn

NEWS

CHURCH WORLDWIDE

Secularism Grows as More U.S. Christians Turn 'Churchless'

If you're dismayed that one in five Americans (20 percent) are "nones"—people who claim no particular religious identity—brace yourself.

How does 38 percent sound?

That's what religion researcher David Kinnaman calculates when he adds "the unchurched, the never-churched, and the skeptics" to the nones.

He calls his new category "churchless," the same title Kinnaman has given his new book. By his count, roughly four in 10 people living in the continental United States are actually "post-Christian" and "essentially secular in belief and practice."

If asked, the "churchless" would likely check the "Christian" box on a survey, even though they may not have darkened the door of a church in years.

Kinnaman, president of the California-based Barna Group, slides them into this new category based on 15 measures of identity, belief, and practice in more than 23,000 interviews in 20 surveys.

The research looked at church worship attendance and participation, views about the Bible, God and Jesus, and more to see whether folks were actually tied to Christian life in a meaningful way or tied more by habit or personal history.

Ed Stetzer, president of LifeWay Research, once called nominals—people attached by name only—"survey Christians." They don't want to cut ties with their parents or go all the way to atheism," Stetzer said, "so they just say 'Christian' since it is the default category from their heritage."

Kinnaman now has the numbers to back that up.

"We are far from becoming an atheist nation," he said. "There are tens of millions of active believers in America today. But the wall between the church and the churchless is growing higher and more impenetrable as more people have no muscle memory of what it means to be a regular attendee at a house of worship."

How these people think, pray, and use their time is shifting away from a faith-based perspective. As a result, a churchless or secular worldview "is becoming its own social force."

Stephen Mockabee, an associate professor of political science at University of Cincinnati, has compared church attendance to medication: "It's not only the drug but also the dose that matters."

According to Kinnaman, about a third (32 percent) still identify as Christian. They say they believe in God, but they're wobbly on connections. Kinnaman calls them "Christianized but not very active."

Other "tribes" among the churchless include:

- 25 percent are self-identified atheists or agnostics. Kinnaman calls them "skeptics." Their ranks have changed in the last two decades. The percentage of women is up to 43 percent from 16 percent since 1993. Highly educated and more mainstream than before, "this group is here to stay," he said.
- 27 percent belong to other faith groups such as Jews or Muslims or call themselves spiritual but not religious.
- 16 percent are Christians—people with a committed relationship with Christ, Kinnaman said—who don't go to church anymore.

Kinnaman predicts no change in direction. He concluded, "The younger the generation, the more post-Christian it is":

- Millennials (born between 1984 and 2002)—48 percent
- Gen X-ers (born between 1965 and 1983)—40 percent
- Boomers (born between 1946 and 1964)—35 percent
- Elders (born in 1945 or earlier)—28 percent

—Religion News Service

IN MEMORIAM



Rev. Case Admiraal

1948 - 2014

Case Admiraal, 66, known for his ready smile and love for his congregants, always remembered the names of young and old. He died of a heart attack on September 20 while doing his daily exercises.

Born in the Netherlands, Admiraal immigrated with his family to the United States in 1956. In 1973 he graduated from Calvin Theological Seminary.

After one year as a school teacher, Admiraal served Christian Reformed congregations in Illinois, California, and Michigan.

Admiraal was a preacher of grace. His carefully crafted sermons were enhanced by fine illustrations. The congregation was his family. Many of his colleagues turned to him for advice and affirmation. He will be remembered most for his childlike godliness and thoughtfulness.

Admiraal was an avid reader and student, a fine singer and storyteller. He had a lifelong interest in sports and loved gardening and camping. As with so many pastor couples, the Admiraals were in the ministry together.

He is survived by his wife, Karen, six children and their spouses, and 11 grandchildren.

—Louis M. Tamminga

FAQs

Church

Q In a search for a second pastor, our calling committee includes the current lead pastor. How can members openly discuss the pros and cons of the present situation that may well need some improvement? Does the Church Order even allow the current pastor—a paid employee—to serve in this capacity?

A This question is of great interest to me because my congregation is doing exactly the same thing.

The direct answer to your question is that the Church Order's only requirements for committees of assemblies (including the council) are a "well-defined mandate" and "regular and complete reports of their work" (Article 33-a) but nothing related to membership. It leaves that issue to the discretion of the assembly and sanctified common sense.

So much for the legality. But is it wise to have him or her on this committee?

Calling (or search) committees usually propose the adoption of a church profile, a clear statement of what will be expected of a second minister, and only then, eventually, after a number of interviews, a recommendation for calling a specific person or having the congregation choose one of two. This can take a lot of time and is usually done in stages. In most congregations that I know of, the council is expected to decide on a vision for the future of the congregation and to keep that vision before the members. The minister(s) play(s) an important leadership role in this matter. There is also the issue of a good match in team ministry. To me, it is vital that he or she should be there. The key is that all members should speak their mind with absolute honesty, sincerity, and grace.

—Henry De Moor is professor of church polity emeritus, Calvin Theological Seminary, Grand Rapids, Mich. He's the author of *Christian Reformed Church Order Commentary (Faith Alive, 2011)*.

We know that God is trustworthy,
just, and loving.

Ethics

Q Is it wrong to abort a fetus diagnosed with a disability or ailing condition? Should we bring a child into a life of suffering?

A I can sympathize with expectant parents who struggle through sad and scary news about their unborn child. My youngest daughter has Down Syndrome. My wife and I experienced the fears and grief that accompany such a diagnosis. And after seven years of raising her, I can also empathize with the challenges of raising a child with special needs. It is not easy.

But neither is it as hard as we had initially imagined. My daughter has brought joy to families, friends, churchgoers, and strangers alike. In her own way, she is a blessing, transforming our lives for the better. And through it all, there is always love—given and received.

We do not know what an unborn child's future holds. We also do not know how God uses suffering. God suffered through Jesus Christ, who suffered not only on the cross but numerous times in his life, from a perilous birth and infancy to threats of stoning in his adult ministry. Christ's lifetime of suffering was for our salvation.

We do not know whose lives will be touched, and how, through our sufferings. But we know who holds the future, and that God is trustworthy, just, and loving. Shouldn't we bring a child into a relationship of love with God and with each other, even in the midst of suffering?

Expectant parents have to answer that question while under medical pressures and stressful fears within a short time period. Hence Christians should be loving and gracious to those who have made a difficult choice.

—Shiao Chong is a chaplain at York University in Toronto, Ontario.

Relationships

Q We have been married for over 30 years and generally have always gotten along well. However, since becoming empty-nesters we have grown apart. There seem to be fewer and fewer reasons to stay married. I find myself fantasizing about being single again, which I know is wrong. What can I do?

A Deciding to build an intimate relationship with someone whose shortcomings and failures are already well-known to you is going to be a challenge. Familiarity does indeed breed contempt. It's much easier to pull away from such a daunting task and begin to imagine something new and fresh—if only you were single again.

Your fantasizing is signaling you that your marriage is moving into a crisis and that you are at a crossroad. The path you take will depend on your true motivation. By nature we follow our wants much more than our "shoulds"; we are moved by what we desire much more than by our beliefs. When your beliefs and what you desire line up together, you will know what path you want to take.

The unhealthiest thing you can do is nothing—to passively accept the status quo and let your marriage slowly atrophy further. The healthiest is to confess to your spouse that you are unhappy and worried, and that the way things are now between you can't continue.

Deciding to risk opening up to the person most familiar to you, who has also become a stranger, is not easy. Just know that if you ask the Holy Spirit for help, Jesus has promised to be with you and to guide you.

—Judy Cook is a family therapist and a member of Meadowlands Fellowship CRC in Ancaster, Ontario. ■



LEAVING HOME

JESUS' EXILE EXPERIENCE

“SO [JOSEPH] GOT UP, TOOK THE CHILD AND HIS MOTHER DURING THE NIGHT AND LEFT FOR EGYPT, WHERE HE STAYED UNTIL THE DEATH OF HEROD. AND SO WAS FULFILLED WHAT THE LORD HAD SAID THROUGH THE PROPHET: “OUT OF EGYPT I CALLED MY SON.”

—MATTHEW 2:14-15

TURNS OUT that the part of the Christmas story most likely to get skipped over is my favorite part. Two verses work hard to summarize years of exile, the entire covenant narrative, and position Jesus as fulfillment of prophecy. But in a show of extreme verbal economy, the gospel writer cuts out the whole exile experience. I tried to find credible information on that period of Jesus' life but only turned up apocryphal stories like the one about his bathwater curing leprosy.

It wasn't until I decided to sit and visit with the holy family that I started to get

a picture of what that exile might have been like.

“*Mary, Mary—wake up,*” Joseph says. “*We have to go to Egypt.*”

“*It's the middle of the night, Joe. Can't Egypt wait 'til morning?*”

The holy family is wiped out from hosting the magi—men worthy of being received by Herod the Great, no less. Mary is exhausted. The young couple have done their absolute best to properly feed and tend to their guests. Tradition among Palestinians in Bethlehem demands showering guests with hospitality for three full days—a far cry from hosts in

Western cultures. Even in Mexico, where people take pride in being hospitable, people know the saying “After three days, guests, like fish, start to stink.”

That particular night, Mary cherished her rest, but Joseph had the trump card: “*Can't. God's angel said, 'Leave tonight.'*”

A flight from Tel Aviv to Cairo is about an hour-and-a-half long. Today we look at maps and think, “*Meh—240 miles.*” But Mary and Joseph were traveling on foot. The Bible says nothing of a donkey; I doubt Joseph could afford even a “beater” donkey. Besides, Joseph was 40ish, Mary was a teen, and Jesus was at

most 2, so their walking capabilities varied greatly. The road ahead of them was 20 southbound miles of country paths to avoid Jerusalem, and then 220 miles along the Via Maris, a limestone road that hugged the Mediterranean coast and ended in Heliopolis, today's Cairo.

This past summer I hiked a six-hour stretch of wilderness with Christian Peacemaker Teams about 27 miles from Bethlehem, along the South Hebron hills. Plants with inch-long barbs spring from the parched land. The rocks feature head-cleaving edges; all the animals are clawed, fanged, or poisonous. Nature seems to scream, "Go away!" As I was photographing a flock of sheep, three muscular sheep dogs charged at me from a cloud of dust. I'm convinced they would have mauled me had my water bottle not fallen out of my backpack and spooked them. Now imagine the holy family with their toddler in the dark, dodging thieves, soldiers, lions, and feral dogs while carrying liquids in wineskins, solids in sackcloth, and whatever utensils they needed.

Two things happened once Jesus crossed into Egypt. First, Herod's power did not extend to Egypt, so Jesus was out of his reach. Second, Jesus became stateless. Egypt, like Palestine, was under Roman occupation. The Roman-appointed ruler gave anyone living there their rights, which generally favored the people group the ruler identified with most. Jesus was neither Roman nor Egyptian, and most of the Jews in the country were in Alexandria. He had no claim to a nationality, no army standing behind his rights, and no relatives to offer him protection.

The 1951 United Nations Refugee Convention defines a refugee as someone who, "owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable to . . . avail himself of the protection of that country." It is not a stretch to say that the holy family had

a well-founded fear of persecution and left Palestine because they could not seek protection from local authorities.

But there's more to the word *refugee*, both semantically and biblically. Semantically, the word comes from Latin *re* meaning "back" and *fugare* meaning "to flee." The root of the word means to run backward, to retreat. In a sense, if we take Matthew 2:14-15 as a reference to Amos 11:1, which itself points to the Exodus story, then we are getting into the *midrash* tradition of returning to a story in order to make the connections of a covenant narrative. God is pointing here to a pattern of deliverance. Just as he called the humble slaves out of oppression from the

ancestors, the Aztec and Ben zaa' people, were roaming this continent 2,400 years before the first European landed on its shores. I'm still *from* somewhere else.

Imagine how much more important lineage was in a time when birth determined one's lifelong social status and tribalism was the main social structure. I can tell you: every aspect of Mary and Joseph's life got harder once they left Palestine.

Whenever I'm in the Old City of Jerusalem, I go to the Aroma Cafe outside Jaffa Gate for an iced coffee with vanilla ice cream. For several days I'll come in early in the morning with the same order and a smile for servers taking my orders

JESUS EXEMPLIFIES THE STATELESSNESS TO WHICH WE ARE CALLED AS HIS PEOPLE.

Egyptian empire, so too Jesus, lowered by becoming human, stateless, and persecuted, becomes the firstfruits of God's deliverance.

Jesus exemplifies the statelessness to which we are called as his people. We are all sojourners in need of deliverance from the powers and principalities of this world, but also citizens of the greater kingdom.

Exile is where I begin to sit with familiarity at the holy family's table. I can relate. I'm a Mexican immigrant to the United States. Unlike Jesus, my family didn't flee from certain death. My dad was invited to come and stay, so we did. But after 22 years of living here, I still feel like an exile. People ask me where I'm from, even though my accent is a mix of West Michigan and Philadelphia ("Aunt" to me sounds more like "flaunt" than "ant"). When people persist in asking, if I say I live in Grand Rapids, "No, where are you *from*?" I take it as a way of saying that I can't be *from* here unless I'm white or African-American. Never mind that my

in English, which is not their first language. Invariably it takes at least two days for me to get a single smile in return. A Jerusalem friend once told me that Israelis traveling abroad often approach someone they suspect of being a fellow Israeli Jew with a one-worded question: "*Sabra*?" It comes from *tzabar*, meaning "prickly pear." It is a self-imposed term referring to a culturally common disposition: prickly and tough on the outside, but soft and sweet on the inside.

After receiving a few genuine smiles from one of the cashiers at Aroma, I asked why my friendliness had failed at first. "We don't know you; we don't have to pretend to be friends," she said. I don't know what Egyptians in Tanis and Heliopolis were like 2,000 years ago, but imagine a smiling Joseph asking for work at Aroma Cafe in a second language to him and them. He had no reputation, no recommendations. It would have been as hard for Joseph to find work in order to feed Mary and Jesus then as it is for »

refugees in our neighborhoods today. Imagine turning Jesus' dad down for a job based only on the fact that he is a foreigner!

Then there's the issue of housing. The spring after I started third grade in Philadelphia, the pastures across the road became a luxurious housing development. I knew I'd never live there; we weren't rich. But a wealthy Korean family who'd moved to Philly for grad school and tried to buy one of those houses outright—no loans—said they were turned down because of their ethnicity. Their presence in the neighborhood would have driven prices down. This was 1988, not 1940. Redlining today is illegal, though arguably it still happens. But imagine a Palestinian Jew seeking housing in one of the great capitals of power back then.

Let's skip forward. Joseph is taking money from his job to an address he now calls home. On his way he decides to buy ingredients at the farmer's market for a delicious meal called *makhlubeh*. This will cheer Mary up for sure. He'll cook it himself. A typical meal in Bethlehem, the dish consists of rice, golden raisins, sliced roasted almonds, lamb, and dried goat yogurt to flavor the whole dish. All the ingredients are placed under the rice as it bakes. When it's served, the pan is flipped over so the good stuff is on top. Joseph gets the rice with no problem. He buys nuts and raisins at the specialty stand. At the butcher's, he's forgotten the word for "lamb," but he bleats, and the butcher gets it. Finally he goes to the creamery for dried yogurt. He can't find it, and he doesn't know how to say "yogurt" in Greek, Latin, or Egyptian. The labels are in Egyptian. He mimics milking, bleats again to show the clerk. No dice. He points to a goat being tugged on its way to the butcher, repeats the milking motion. The attendant hands him goat milk. Putting it down, he points to cheese, milk, and cream while shaking his head, but the attendant loses his patience and says something Joseph doesn't understand. The other customers laugh. On his way home, Joseph realizes

that having *almost* everything is still not enough to make *makhlubeh*. He can't return the other ingredients.

Perhaps the most important part of living abroad is the need for friendship. I was 20 when I moved back to the U.S. from Mexico City and had to replace my entire social network. In Mexico I taught at a language institute. My coworkers and I would often go home past midnight after chatting in cafes through lunch, dinner, and coffee. I knew not to expect that level of friendship from classmates and coworkers here, but I did not expect the difficulty I had in getting people to open up. More than once I scared off a friend by mentioning something he thought was too personal, but which to me was simply trust-building. The feeling of loneliness is exaggerated after a misstep with a person with whom one wants to establish a deeper friendship.

Now imagine Mary and Joseph talking to other parents about their toddler. "Little Jesus never disobeys," she says. "He is fascinated with Bible stories and prays all the time. Truly I tell you, we couldn't ask for a better son." I'm the parent of a toddler. When I ask her to come to daddy, be it for a hug or because she's getting too close to the sidewalk, she looks at me, laughs, and runs away. Truly I tell you, the last thing I need to hear is how obedient someone else's kid is.

The best way to describe displacement from home is to compare it to hunger pangs. If you've ever skipped a few meals or fasted, you get part of what I mean. Once hunger really sets in, you can't take your mind off of the fact that you should be eating. TV might distract you—until a food commercial comes on. Trying to work just makes things worse. Living abroad—the food, the language, the customs, the people—is a constant reminder that you're not home. After a while, you feel that lack of comfort as pangs. You can't escape it.

Joseph and Mary knew they had to flee to Egypt, but they didn't know how long they would be there. At the heart of the refugee experience is wondering how

long deliverance will take. Palestinian Christians who left their homes in 1948, 1967, or even in the last 20 years have no legal recourse for going back to claim whatever lands and possessions they left behind. When they hunger and thirst for justice, it comes from a deeper place than piety—it comes from pain and suffering. The day before God told Joseph it was time to go back, I picture him rubbing his temples, trying to make sense of all the things he'd missed at work because of language issues, thinking "How long, Lord God, how long?"

But God is the God of returns. Eventually Herod died, and Joseph and Mary did go home. Like Joseph, like many refugees and immigrants, I trust that God will either take me back home or that he will give me that sense of belonging in a place where I'm still considered a foreigner.

For refugees, the longing goes beyond a sense of home. It's about deliverance from oppression, about God's justice and mercy. As Christians, we often read the Christmas story and skip over the holy family's sojourn into Egypt.

This Christmas, I invite you to welcome the stranger at your gate. Prepare a roast and accept their *makhlubeh*. Practice loving your neighbors as yourself, be they new to the neighborhood or new to the country. Stretch yourself to accept the ways in which they build trust—this is important. Be open and extend the ways in which you build trust—this is just as important. Show them the hospitality of someone who owes Jesus, the refugee, a debt of gratitude for his deliverance from the oppression of sin. Do it for Jesus this Christmas.

You may find yourself hosting a child of God. ■

STUDY QUESTIONS ONLINE



Mariano Avila is Hope Equals project manager for Christian Reformed World Missions. He is married to Kate Avila; their daughter is Isabel Paz.

Dad, Descartes, and Dementia

DAD HAS DEMENTIA. The disease gnawing away at his brain has been eating away at his independence as well, so that he is no longer able to drive, dress, or bathe himself without assistance. He understands little and recalls less of what is said to him. He is challenged by such tasks as taking a pill, choosing the right piece of silverware, or finding his way to his recliner. When speaking, he often stops mid-sentence, unable to locate words and string them together to express his thought.

So is he even the same man as the one who raised me? I started to think of his life as being over. I wondered why God hasn't taken him. I even wondered about his faith. Is he still capable of believing in God? How can he think about what is true, noble, right, pure, lovely, or admirable (Phil. 4:8) if he can hardly think at all?

A lecture given by James Houston, a professor of spiritual theology at Regent College in Vancouver, British Columbia, helped me deal with these questions. Houston claims that modern ideas about personhood were shaped by René Descartes, the 17th-century philosopher who based human knowledge on the proposition "I think, therefore I am." In other words, what is most central to humanity is not that we *feel* or *act* or *will*, but that we *think*. Following Descartes, most moderns view themselves primarily as objective, disinterested thinkers. If personhood consists of thinking, though, where does that leave someone like my dad?

Perhaps I had been unfairly using reasoning ability as a yardstick for measuring Dad. When I started to pay attention to other aspects of the person he still is, I discovered that he lives more fully than I had imagined. He always liked to laugh and still has a sense of humor. Recently, when a doctor grasped his arm

Faith extends far beyond what we can comprehend or articulate.



and carefully walked him up and down the hall to check his gait, my dad wryly commented, "That was fun," as if they had just danced. He continues to have a rich emotional life, experiencing sadness over others' misfortunes, enthusiasm over a good meal, anxiety about being alone, delight at my dog's antics, and regret when he exasperates my mother.

I've also noticed that dad is fully relational. He enjoys being with my mother and still tells her regularly that he loves her. He frequently asks her to "sit and talk." She sometimes objects, "I was just there and you didn't say anything." For him, though, sitting and talking means communion, whether words are spoken or not. He also relates to me. When I help him do stretching exercises, he will reach forward much farther if I sit across from him and he is reaching not into empty space but toward my outstretched hands. He regularly thanks me for assisting him.

Laughter, empathy, anxiety, joy, yearning for relationship, and gratitude: despite

limitations of thought and memory, Dad is still richly human. Descartes tried to reduce us to thought alone, but we are so much more. As for Dad's faith, I've decided that someone who long ago placed himself in the loving arms of Jesus remains in those arms even after he has forgotten where he is. I think of the words the psalmist penned when under enemy attack: "Truly my soul finds rest in God; my salvation comes from him" (Ps. 62:1).

Isn't God still my dad's rest and salvation, even though his adversary doesn't swing a sword but culls his brain cells instead? For Dad—for all of us—faith extends far beyond what we can comprehend or articulate. ■



Robert J. Ritzema, a clinical psychologist, practices part time as a therapist at Psychology Associates of Grand Rapids, Mich. He

worships at Square Inch Church, a Christian Reformed church plant in Grand Rapids, Mich.

God's Unexpected and Surprising Ways

Childless after years of infertility, Elizabeth and Zechariah conceive a child.

Not yet married nor yet intimate, Mary and Joseph are faced with an unplanned and unexplainable pregnancy.

From those ancient times, we learn that two couples are expecting a child—and both in unexpected ways.

In this time of Advent reflection, ask yourself, “Am I comfortable with the ordinary and predictable, or am I earnestly seeking God’s unexpected and often surprising ways?”

Recently a group of people from across the Christian Reformed Church looked at our shared future. They identified challenges and encouraged us to launch out in unexpected and daring ways. Society is changing so fast, they said, and we need to adapt by not always relying on doing the things that served us in the past but rather freeing ourselves to experiment and try new approaches.

As the celebration of Christ’s birth fast approaches, let us put on our Advent lenses and understand, once again, that God often uses the unexpected. We long to make our plans, to be in control, and to live predictably. I suspect the same was true for Elizabeth and Zechariah, for Mary and Joseph.

But with God at the center of our lives, we need to be prepared for unpredictability.

How can we prepare for the unexpected? God uses each of us differently, but notice the similarity in the ways Mary and Joseph each responded to their encounter with angels. After questioning the angel Gabriel, Mary responded with, “I am the Lord’s servant; may your word to me be fulfilled.” Joseph’s encounter with an angel was by means of a dream. After awakening, “he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him.”

As God’s instruments, our response to the unexpected should be clear: to follow God’s lead in faith and obedience toward the surprising future he has in store for us.

In this Advent season, prepare for the unexpected. And then follow God where he leads, first to a manger, then to a cross, then on to an empty tomb—and after that to the ends of the earth.

Thanks be to God. ■



Dr. Steven Timmermans is the executive director of the Christian Reformed Church in North America.
El doctor Steven Timmermans es el director ejecutivo de la Iglesia Cristiana Reformada en Norteamérica.
 스티븐 티머먼스 박사, 북미주 개혁교회 총무



How can we prepare for the unexpected?

Los inesperados y sorprendentes caminos de Dios

Después de años de no tener hijos a causa de la infertilidad, Elisabet y Zacarías concibieron un hijo.

Sin estar casados y sin haber tenido intimidad, María y José se enfrentaron a un embarazo no planeado e inexplicable.

Lo que podemos conocer de aquellos tiempos antiguos es que dos parejas estaban esperando un hijo, y las dos de una manera inesperada.

En esta época en que se reflexiona sobre el advenimiento, pregúntese: ¿estoy cómodo con lo que es común y predecible? O ¿estoy buscando de manera decidida los caminos inesperados y con frecuencia sorprendentes de Dios?

Recientemente, un grupo de personas de toda la Iglesia Cristiana Reformada acaba de reunirse para considerar el futuro que compartimos todos nosotros, identificó los retos que enfrentamos y nos animó para que nos pongamos en marcha en una manera inesperada y atrevida. Dijeron que la sociedad está cambiando muy rápido y necesitamos adaptarnos, sin depender todo el tiempo en cómo hacíamos las cosas antes y que nos ha funcionado sino en que ahora nos liberemos para experimentar e intentar nuevas formas de hacer las cosas.

Ya que la celebración del nacimiento de Cristo se está acercando con rapidez, vamos a ponernos nuestros lentes de advenimiento y entendamos, una vez más, que con frecuencia Dios hace uso de lo inesperado. Nos encanta hacer nuestros propios planes, tener todo bajo control y vivir de una manera predecible. Me parece que fue igual para Elisabet y Zacarías, y para María y José.

Sin embargo si Dios está en el centro de nuestras vidas, necesitamos estar preparados para lo impredecible.

¿Cómo nos podemos preparar para lo inesperado? Dios nos usa a cada uno de nosotros en forma diferente sin embargo debemos darnos cuenta de la forma tan parecida en que tanto María como José respondieron al encontrarse cada uno con ángeles. María, después de cuestionar al ángel Gabriel, respondió, "Aquí tienes a la sierva del Señor. Que él haga conmigo como me has dicho." El encuentro que José tuvo con el ángel fue por medio de un sueño, y cuando él se despertó, "hizo lo que el ángel del Señor le había mandado."

Como instrumentos de Dios, nuestra reacción a lo inesperado debe ser clara: dejarnos guiar por Dios y seguirlo en fe y obediencia hacia el futuro sorprendente que él nos tiene reservado.

En esta época de advenimiento, prepárese para lo inesperado, y luego siga a Dios hacia donde él lo lleve, primero a un pesebre, luego a una cruz, después a una tumba vacía y por último hasta lo más recóndito de la tierra.

Demos gracias a Dios. ■

예상치 못한 하나님의 놀라운 방법

아기를 가질 수 없는 오랜 불임의 세월 뒤에 엘리사벳과 스가랴는 아기를 갖게 된다. 결혼도 하지 않고 아직 관계도 갖지 않았던 마리아와 요셉은 계획하지도 않고 설명할 수도 없는 임신과 마주하게 된다. 두 커플 모두 예상치 못한 방법으로 아기를 갖게 되었다.

이 대림절 묵상의 시기에 자신에게 물어보자. 나는 일상적이고 예측가능한 방식이 편한가, 아니면 예측할 수 없고 심지어 종종 놀라움까지 한 하나님의 방법을 바라는가?

최근 개혁교회의 한 그룹은 우리의 미래와 직면한 도전들에 대해 살펴보았고, 미처 생각지 못한 과감한 방법으로 대응해야한다고 촉구했다. 그들은 세상이 너무 빨리 변하므로 이에 적응하려면 과거에 우리가 하던 것에 안주하기보다 실험과 새로운 접근을 시도하도록 우리 자신을 개방해야 한다고 말했다.

성탄절이 다가오는 이때, 대림절의 렌즈를 끼고 하나님은 때때로 뜻밖의 일을 사용하신다는 것을 다시한번 명심하자. 우리는 통제할 수 있고 예상할 수 있는 삶을 살고 싶어한다. 솔직히 나는 엘리사벳과 스가랴, 마리아와 요셉도 우리와 같았으리라고 생각한다. 그러나 하나님이 우리의 삶의 중심에 계시다면, 우리는 예측불가능한 상황을 준비해야 한다.

어떻게 우리는 예상치 못한 일을 준비할 수 있을까? 사람마다 다르긴 하지만, 천사를 만난 마리아의 반응과 요셉의 반응에서 공통점을 찾을 수 있다. 마리아는 가브리엘 천사에게 질문한 후에 "나는 주의 종이오니 주의 말씀대로 내게 이루어지이다." 라고 응답했다. 요셉은 꿈에서 천사를 만난 뒤에 "주의 천사가 그에게 명령한대로 하였다."

뜻밖의 일을 만날 때 하나님의 도구인 우리의 반응은 분명하다. 우리를 위해 예비해 놓으신 놀라운 미래를 향하여 믿음과 순종으로 하나님의 인도하심을 따라야 한다.

이 대림절 기간에, 예상치 못할 일을 기대하고 하나님을 따라가자. 말구유에서 시작하여 다음은 십자가, 그 다음은 빈 무덤, 그 후엔 땅끝까지, 하나님이 인도하시는 곳으로 따라가자.

하나님께 감사하자. ■

OUT AND ABOUT

The Whispered Name “Jesus”

Elaine asked the Chinese students in her Spotlight English Club if they had ever been to a Christmas party. None had.

The dozen students in South Asia met for a few hours each week to practice English in a Christian setting. They used Spotlight resources produced by ReFrame Media, the English language outreach of Back to God Ministries International, and its ministry partner Words of Hope.

“I asked if any of them had ever decorated a tree in their house. They laughed,” recalled Elaine. “I asked if they had ever put up a string of lights. They shook their heads.”

So Elaine decided to organize the students’ first Christmas celebration, encouraging students to invite friends. Twenty-four people came.

“There are stories of Santa and reindeer, but today I will share with you the



For the first time in their lives, they received Christmas gifts.

story that started Christmas,” Elaine said to the group.

She then played Spotlight’s recording of the Christmas story and passed out scripts so students could read along.

“I heard them whisper the name ‘Jesus’ just to make sure they pronounced it correctly,” Elaine said. “The most beautiful name whispered in the sanctuary of a classroom.”

Together they sang songs, opened gifts, and ate cookies.

“When they joined in on ‘Silent Night,’ I thought the off-pitch and wrong notes had never sounded so sweet—after all, it was their first time singing it,” Elaine reflected. ■

—by Claudia Elzinga,
Back to God Ministries International

Plaster Creek Stewards Receives \$1.1 Million Grant



Plaster Creek Stewards (PCS) recently received a \$1.1 million grant from the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality.

The grant enables PCS—a collaboration of Calvin College faculty, staff, students, and community members who are working to restore Michigan’s most contaminated watershed—to further their education, research, and restoration efforts.

This most recent grant is the largest the group has received since beginning work in 2009. Getting here wasn’t easy, said Dave Warners, a member of the PCS leadership team and a biology professor at Calvin College.

“We submitted nine grant proposals for funding before the first one came through,” said Warners.

The group has now received four grants totaling nearly \$1.6 million. The new grant will enable PCS to expand restoration efforts to three new locations. ■

—by Matt Kucinski, Calvin College

Plaster Creek Stewards at work.



Young members of Grace CRC in Scarborough, Ontario.

Faith into Action

Grace Christian Reformed Church in Scarborough, Ontario, is responding to God's call to do justice by working with several area community groups: The Lighthouse, Yonge Street Mission, and Agincourt Community Services, said pastor Bart Velthuizen.

"Being involved with these community services keeps us aware of the exceptional challenges faced by those caught in the cycle of poverty, new immigrants, and refugees," he added.

Grace CRC's community service is one example of how Christian Reformed people are answering God's call to do justice—a topic being explored in a two-year research project focusing on Christian Reformed church members and congregations in Canada.

Results from the first year of the Justice and Faith Project show a strong commitment to doing justice among CRC people and to understanding what justice means through a biblical lens.

Darren Roorda, Canadian Ministries Director, sees the Justice and Faith Project as an opportunity to learn and grow together in how the church lives out its shared mission, both as a denomination and as congregations. The project also provides an opportunity for CRC denominational agencies to better understand how to support and serve congregations.

"The Justice and Faith Project crystallizes how [agencies] might catalyze local churches in carrying out justice in word and deed as we look to the future," said Roorda.

The project, in partnership with the Institute for Christian Studies and the Centre for Community Based Research, continues in 2015. It will include several events in locations across Canada where Christian Reformed people can gather to share and learn how to more fully respond to God's call to do justice. ■

—by Steve Van de Hoef,
Canadian Ministries Office

You add.
Catholic Mission

Praying at Midnight

Why am I going to bed at 10:30 p.m., only to get up at 11:45 p.m. for a two-hour time of prayer? These were my thoughts as I joined six friends in getting into our sleeping bags on a hard church basement floor.

The others didn't share my reservations, I suppose, although they were as tired as I was. These friends are Korean Christian Reformed Church pastors, and prayer seems to be part of the Korean spiritual DNA. The idea of a late-night prayer vigil was not so strange to them.

We were in Canterbury, England, participating in an event called "UK Prayer Mission 2014"—one of 30 teams, numbering 450 people in all, gathered in 30 different communities across England to pray for revival.

As seven CRC pastors, we were among the few participants from America. Most were from Korea, praying for their spiritual grandmother, Great Britain, which once sent many missionaries abroad.

Midnight seemed to me an inconvenient and unconventional time for two hours of prayer. Wouldn't sleeping on a hard church floor be enough to show my devotion?

But I remembered times in my life when it seemed the night was just starting at midnight: those wonderful late-night hours with the one who became my wife; the nights when my children, now adults, faced adolescent challenges and temptations; the numerous times as a pastor when I would leave the house at midnight to come alongside a parishioner or a friend in crisis.

Could I reframe this midnight call? Could I discover in the dark hours of night a love for God similar to my love for my wife, my children, and God's people? Could I express a passion for the people of the UK through two hours of midnight prayer?

Rather than tell you about it, I invite you to consider the challenge yourself. Find something worth praying for, and find some people—including perhaps a Korean companion—who believe in a God who answers prayer. And plan a midnight prayer vigil. ■

—by Rev. David Koll,
CRC Candidacy Committee

A group from the CRC joins a prayer vigil in Great Britain.



Broken People Welcome

Joe Ortega makes no bones about who he is trying to reach as pastor of Celebration Community Church, a new church plant in Holland, Mich.

“We are focused 110 percent on broken people. None of us have it all together. All of us are on the verge of not making it in our lives,” he said.

Funded in part by Christian Reformed Home Missions, Celebration began about six months ago, meeting on Sundays at Faith CRC in Holland.

Ortega said his goal is “trying to create an atmosphere of acceptance and to think about the needs of the broken people who come through the doors.”

Ortega recently presided at a funeral for one of those people—20-year-old Candelario Soto. Soto came to Celebration several weeks ago and took to the church right away.

Though troubled and hurting, he had a big smile and quickly grew committed to Celebration. He soon brought his girlfriend and invited his mother.

Ortega and his wife, Jackie, saw something in Soto and decided he ought to serve on the church’s leadership team.

But then Soto died, drowning in nearby Lake Macatawa.

“When we did the funeral, I talked about his story, about how he is an example of who we are trying to reach,” says Ortega. “I talked about how he was on fire for the Lord.”

The service was standing-room only. ■

—by *Chris Meehan, CRC Communications*

Pastor Joe Ortega ministers to “broken people.”



Answering the Call to Serve



Calvin Seminary President Jul Medenblik talks with CRC Executive Director Dr. Steven Timmermans.

“I want to serve in a way that helps the church serve God better.”

That’s how Dr. Steven Timmermans summed up his calling to serve the Christian Reformed Church as its new executive director at a recent “town hall” meeting for Calvin Seminary students.

He went on to speak about the process of call.

“The ‘call thing’ is God acting and using those around you to help you discern,” he said. “There is always some anxiety, but that’s OK.”

Seminary President Jul Medenblik, the lead questioner, continued by exploring with Timmermans the fact that he is the first nonordained leader of the CRC.

Timmermans explained that the theme of his vocational life has been learning and developing in work communities—from working as a clinical psychologist at a hospital to preparing teachers for special education to several leadership positions in Christian higher education.

And that’s what he expects to do as the denominational leader—help churches, agencies, and their

leaders learn and develop in various intersecting work communities.

Some of the questions touched on the future of denominations.

Recalling recent headlines about one major independent church in crisis, Timmermans affirmed the value of interdependence and accountability that denominations provide and ensure. “It’s a very faithful way to live out God’s call.”

As for church membership trends in the CRC, he noted that the number of churches is holding, in part due to church plants.

When it was mentioned that the seminary student body is divided between CRC members and those from other traditions, Timmermans encouraged the seminary not to minimize the Christian Reformed identity coming from its creeds, confessions, and testimonies, but to promote and celebrate them.

Timmermans finished by saying that as future pastor leaders, seminarians should remember that each generation needs to tinker with structures. ■

—by *Jinny DeJong, Calvin Seminary*

You add.
God multiplies.

CRWM Missionary Uses Song

“Love. It will not betray you, dismay you, enslave you. It will set you free.”

The lyrics and melodies of this song by Mumford and Sons captivated Vin the first time he heard them.

Vin didn't understand all of the words, but his attentiveness to the song made Justin Van Zee, a missionary with Christian Reformed World Missions in Cambodia, aware of an amazing discipleship opportunity in his own home.

A few months ago, Van Zee moved into an apartment with Vin and three other young Cambodian men.

“My pastor asked if I'd be willing to share an apartment with a few guys to create an environment for intentional discipleship and spiritual growth,” said Van Zee.

When Van Zee agreed to his pastor's proposal, he pictured his ministry as an organized Bible study with assigned readings. But he quickly learned his roommates had different learning styles.

Like much of the world's population, the majority of Cambodians are oral communicators. This means Vin prefers listening to the Bible on audio recordings.



CRWM missionary Jason Van Zee (center) talks with his roommates in Cambodia.

With this in mind, Van Zee began using song lyrics as a launching pad for meaningful conversations.

“I'm not here just to teach,” he said. “I'm here to learn, to listen, and to let the light of my housemates illumine the dark places of my life.” ■

—by Brian Clark, *Christian Reformed World Missions*

Super Chickens Help Ugandan Farmers

Ojoo Thamin's life has recently taken a turn for the better, thanks to a “super chicken” introduced to him by World Renew.

Ojoo lives in Armumukeng, a village in the Nebbi region of Uganda, where the majority of families make their living as small-scale farmers.

Some also raise cattle and goats to supplement their income. While people might have a handful of chickens for their own consumption, chicken farming has never been considered a viable income-generating activity.

World Renew and its local partner, the Church of Uganda (COU) Nebbi Diocese, have been working with farmers to help them think about chickens in a new way. They've explained that manure can be used as a fertilizer to improve crops and that there is a ready market for eggs and chicken meat in nearby communities.



Ojoo Thamin feeds some of his family's chickens.

They have also taught men and women how to properly feed, vaccinate, and care for their flocks.

Next came the “super chicken.” World Renew and COU are introducing Ugandan farmers to a new hybrid breed of chicken called a “kroiler.” Kroilers are considered dual-purpose chickens because they provide good meat and also lay eggs in large quantities.

Kroilers lay an average of 150 eggs per year, while traditional chickens lay only 40. The birds grow to be 5 to 7 pounds—twice the size of traditional Ugandan chickens.

In addition, kroilers can live on a diet of kitchen waste and are resistant to many local diseases.

Ojoo attended all the trainings about chicken farming and in March 2014 received a few chickens to get him started. By July, he had 32 birds and hoped to increase that number to 120 by the end of the year.

He said that he is proud to have learned new skills in building chicken coops, vaccinating birds, and caring for them. He plans to sell some of his chickens to pay school fees for his children and to improve his family's diet. ■

—by Kristen deRoo VanderBerg,
World Renew



Men gather in the Coit Church basement.

Coit Community Studies Urban Violence

I had just been ordained a commissioned pastor at Coit Community Church when pastor Jerome Burton suggested applying for a Sustaining Congregational Excellence Health and Renewal grant to examine the issue of urban violence.

After receiving a grant, he asked me to oversee it with the help of others. Sustaining Congregational Excellence grants offer an opportunity for smaller Christian Reformed churches to engage in a project specific to their ministry context.

Last year, some 27 grants were awarded for everything from church renewal to outreach to the homeless of Los Angeles to a community garden.

We began our project by bringing in experts and speakers. But soon things got more personal. For the men who met weekly at Coit for a Bible study and meal, violence was not academic.

And so we talked about it. One man unburdened himself, describing the things that had led to him spending more than 20 years behind bars. Another was injured in street violence. When he got out of the hos-

pital, he returned to speak about the incident.

A man talked about the painful death of a loved one. Another described being a soldier in Afghanistan and Iraq. These men also dis-

cussed their new, eternal life in Christ.

Comfort came from the Bible and from the fellowship. Some of the men made professions of faith; recently a father and his sons were baptized.

When we got the grant, I was scared. New to the ministry, I wondered if I could handle the challenge. For that matter, violence is a tough topic. How would we address it in a way that made it real?

The stories made it real. The compassion the men showed made it real. The laughs everyone shared made it real. Prayer before and after the study made it real. And Sunday worship made it particularly real. ■

—by Chris Meehan,
CRC Communications

Navajo CRC Member Publishes Autobiography

Ernest Phillip Benally has walked the way of Christ for many years as a member of the Christian Reformed Church.

The walk has not always been easy. But Benally, a Navajo and retired social worker, has never allowed frustration to push him from the church he loves.

“I became connected with the Christian Reformed Church when I was enrolled at the Crownpoint Bureau of Indian Affairs Boarding School,” he writes in a new book, *My Walk of Faith*.

The son of traditional Navajo parents, Benally



Ernest Phillip Benally

turned to Christianity at an early age, particularly because he loved the Bible stories, prayers, and gospel songs he learned while receiving religious instruction at the school.

He writes about his disappointment over not being ordained into the ministry but also discusses earning a Masters degree that allowed him to work as a social worker among his people.

He served Christian Reformed Home Missions as regional leader for Classis Red Mesa from 1996 to 1999.

Copies of the book are available by contacting Al Mulder at amulder@crcna.org. ■

—by Chris Meehan,
CRC Communications

You add.
God multiplies.



Church Order Available in Chinese

A first-ever Chinese translation of the Christian Reformed Church's Church Order is now available on the synodical services page of the denomination's website.

The Chinese Church Order 2013 is available alongside the English, Korean, and Spanish versions of the Church Order, said Rev. David Koll, director of the CRC's candidacy committee who worked with the translators to make the church order available.

David Cheung, editor of the Chinese Church Order 2013, says the translation was a "team effort" involving several translators from a Sustaining Pastoral Excellence peer group that began meeting in 2012. ■

—CRC Communications

Bertha's Change of Heart

Bertha is a happy wife and mother who rejoices in the Lord. But she has a confession to make.

"I was a rude and hot-tempered person," she says of her life before Christ. "I was often cursing and sometimes abusive."

Until she met Mimie.

Mimie is a listener community coordinator for Back to God Ministries International's Indonesian outreach—one of hundreds of volunteers at work in remote regions.

"I didn't care about Mimie at first," said Bertha. "But in the course of time, I became more and more curious about her."

"I found out that Mimie and a small group of friends had formed a radio listener community and routinely listened to Suara Nusa Bahagia (Happy Sound of the Island) radio."

The next time Mimie visited the village, Bertha asked to join and was welcomed into the group.

Six months later, Bertha received the gift of a radio. Now she listens to programs every day.

"I like your Rencana Agung (Majestic Plan) program the most, because in addition to the many lovely songs, the program helps me grow my faith in Jesus," says Bertha. ■

—by Claudia Elzinga, Back to God Ministries International



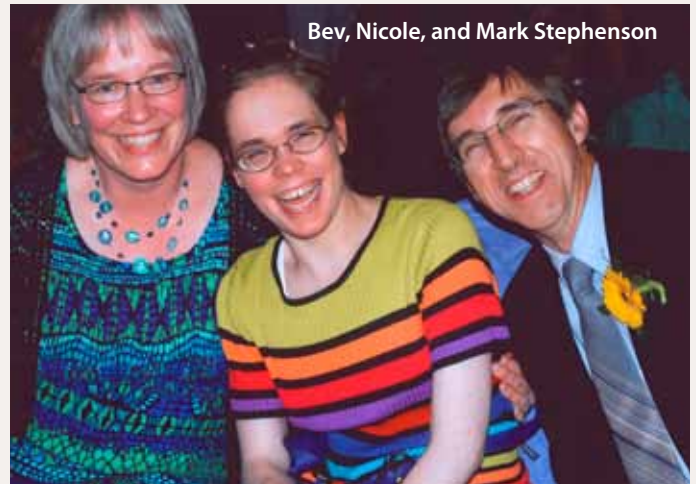
Bertha listens to her radio every day.

A Mission of Advocacy

When God brought our first child, Nicole, into our lives with multiple disabilities, my wife and I advocated on her behalf with medical and therapy staff, teachers, social workers, and even with friends and family. For example, because Nicole was extremely fragile in her early years, anyone with the sniffles was not allowed inside our house.

Now advocacy has become part of my identity.

As director of the Christian Reformed Church Office of Disabilities Concerns, along with RCA Disability Concerns ministries, I advocate for people who have disabilities so that churches can grow toward true Christian com-



Bev, Nicole, and Mark Stephenson

munity in which people with and without disabilities equally belong and engage their gifts in ministry.

Advocacy is needed with local, state and provincial, and federal governments so that people with disabilities can participate meaningfully in

society and in the church. People with disabilities cannot participate in church life if they are without support in the rest of their lives. ■

—by Rev. Mark Stephenson, Disability Concerns

Follow That Star

"After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, 'Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him.'"

—Matthew 2:1-2

Imagine that you are one of those wise Magi who saw a bright, beautiful star leading the way to Jesus. Not much is known about these mysterious travelers. They may have traveled thousands of miles to look for Jesus, the newborn king—and they found him! They followed the star God put in the sky to guide them. If you were a

traveling visitor from a faraway land, what do you think you would have seen? Can you imagine the excitement the Magi must have felt when the star finally led them to Jesus? Wow!

Many people include stars in their celebration of Christmas. We eat star-shaped Christmas cookies, put shiny stars at the top of Christmas trees, or hang star-shaped ornaments around our homes. The star that led the Magi to Jesus must have been a marvelous sight. Ever wondered where stars come from? Let's take a closer look at some of the most incredible twinkling lights—and these won't go out after your Christmas tree is put away!

What Is a Star?

A star is a gigantic sphere (ball) of hot gas in outer space that is held together by its own gravity. Stars form over time from clouds of dust. The dust and gases from space begin to pull together to form a huge ball of heat that becomes transformed into an amazing star.

Cool Star Facts

- The star closest to the Earth is the **sun**. (Yes, the sun is a star!)
- Stars can be **different colors**. Depending on how hot the star is, they can be brown, red, orange, yellow, white, or even blue!
- Stars shine brightly, but **do not actually twinkle**. They only appear to be twinkling because of the Earth's atmosphere.

Mom! You need to dust under my bed... I think there is a star forming!



Star-iffic Christmas Activities

Star Cookies

Make a plate of delicious Christmas cookies—using your star cookie cutter!—and decorate them with colorful frosting and sprinkles. Deliver the cookies to a neighbor, friend, or relative, and explain how the Magi followed a star to Jesus.

Star Party

Have an “Outta This World” star Christmas party. Decorate your house with lots of glittery paper stars, Christmas lights, and candles (with an adult’s help). Serve foods like sandwiches shaped like stars (use a metal cookie cutter), star cookies, star cereal, star fruit, starburst candies, or anything else that’s star-iffic. Invite all your friends and have a great time! Read the story of the Magi following the star in Matthew 2:1-12. Then have fun acting out the story!

Star Ornaments

Make salt dough ornaments using the recipe below. Once the ornaments are hardened, use tempera or acrylic paints and glitter to decorate your ornaments. Give them to friends and relatives as Christmas gifts.

What you’ll need:

- Christmas cookie cutters
- Cookie sheet
- Small straw
- Yarn
- Rolling pin
- 1 cup flour
- ½ cup salt
- 1 tbsp oil
- 1 cup water
- tempera or acrylic paints
- glitter (optional)

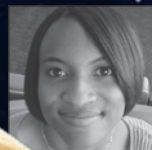


Mix flour, salt, oil, and water together in a bowl. Knead and roll out dough with a rolling pin (use extra flour as necessary) until the dough is about ¼ inch (1 cm) thick. Use cookie cutters to cut out your ornaments, then place them on a cookie sheet. Use a straw to poke a small hole at the top of each ornament (this is where you will string the yarn). Bake the ornaments at 250 degrees F (120 C) for 15 minutes or until the dough is hardened. (Or you could set ornaments out to dry overnight instead.) Decorate your ornaments with paint and glitter. When the paint is dry, string yarn through the hole of each ornament and hang them all on your Christmas tree!



Stars in the Bible

The Bible has a lot to say about stars. Genesis 1:16 tells us that God created two great lights—the sun and moon—and the stars. God also told Abraham that his family would be as numerous as the stars in the sky (Genesis 15:5)—now that’s a lot of children! Stars are even commanded to worship God: “Praise him, sun and moon, praise him, all you shining stars” (Psalm 148:3). God’s Word also tells us that we who belong to God’s family ought to let the light of our faith shine like stars in the universe—holding out the word of life to others living in a dark world (Philippians 2:15). Just as the Magi followed the shining star that led them to Jesus, our lives should shine brightly and lead others to meet Jesus. So let your light shine brightly this Christmas season.



Christin Baker is a full-time stay-at-home mom. She is a member of Resurrection Fellowship Church in Grand Rapids, Mich.

Equally Shared Parenting

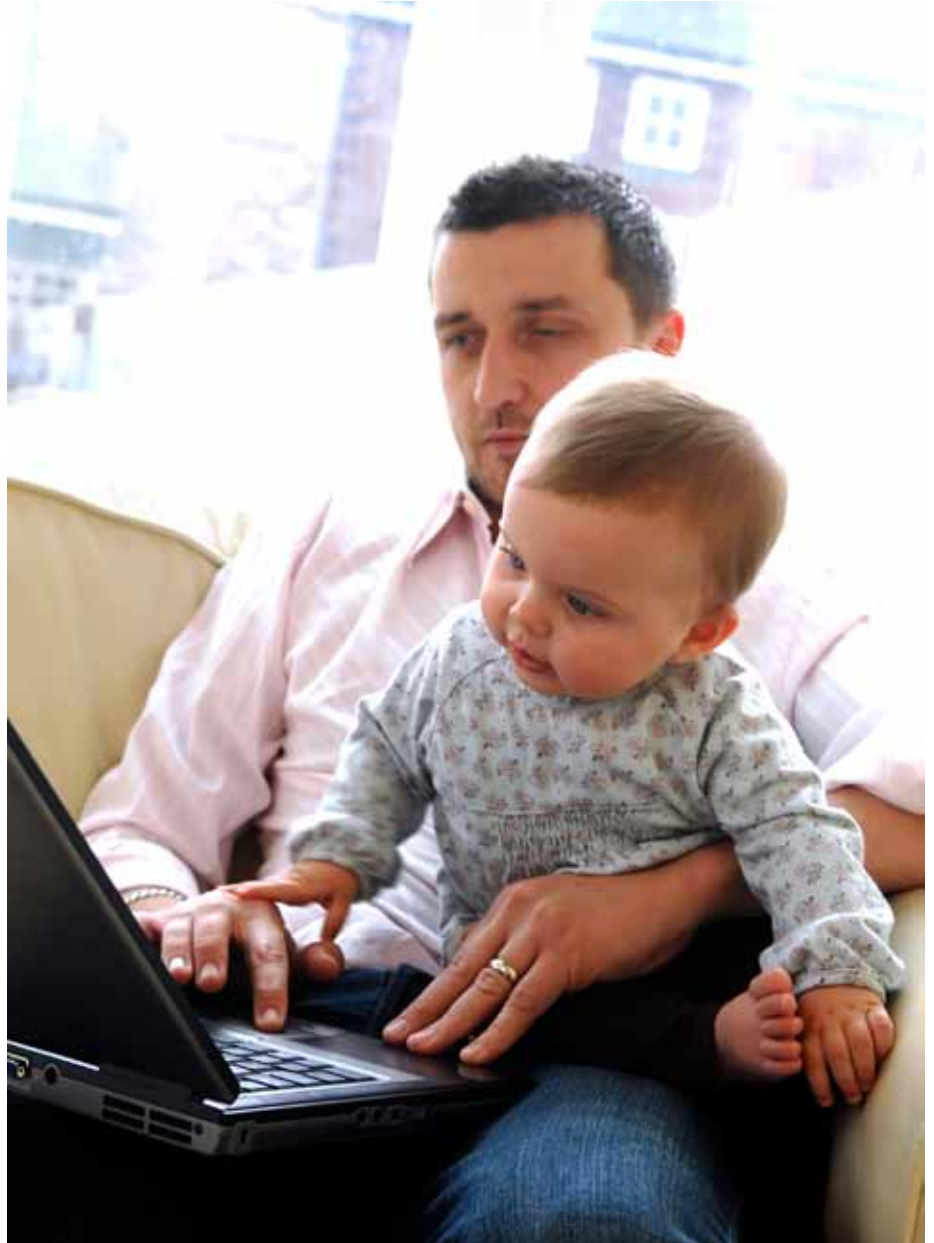
IN THE PAST TWO YEARS I've heard three stories from former students that have made me smile, laugh, and grimace in empathy. A firefighter told me that he had recently switched his schedule to two 24-hour shifts a week so that he would have more time in the "ordinary daily life" of his newborn son. A lawyer mother regaled a group of us with her internal struggle to hold herself back from rebraiding her daughter's hair because it was "Daddy's turn." And one of *Christianity Today's* "33 under 33" wrote a blog post called "Time Out" after returning to her position from post-maternity leave. She spoke honestly of the pressure and difficulty of caring for a new baby while doing the work she is certain God has called her to do.

These young parents are all trying to figure out what it means to balance public and private life through the eyes of faith. This struggle often occurs with most intensity when advancement in a career competes for time with raising children. Some couples both have full-time professional pursuits, using different forms of child care. Some parents, mostly women but not always, take on the home responsibilities while the other parent pursues a career. But there is a third way.

Shared Parenting

I was raised in the 1970s Christian Reformed community of the Chicago suburbs. My friends and I would have said that our dads were involved in our lives, but the moms raised children. Some of the moms had other jobs that accommodated their families, but their main job was their children.

Times changed. And as mentors encouraged me to consider becoming a lawyer, I spent a lot of time thinking about whether I could balance being a mom and an attorney. When my son was born,



I left the practice of law and became a college professor to have more flexible time. Not every lawyer mom makes that decision, but it was necessary for me.

Then my husband made a huge professional sacrifice to support my career. He quit his job as a historic preservation

architect in Washington D.C. to come to the Netherlands with me. I did the work for a Fulbright while Charles vacuumed, shopped, and biked all over Leiden with our little boy. That year was transformational. Our work lives and relationship with our child were changed by this new

pattern, which continued in different ways over time. Charles returned to work as an architect, but we both scaled back our jobs. Neither of us would achieve the professional success of our graduate school peers, but we shared being parents and running a home in a way that brought both of us fulfillment.

We didn't know it then, but we were starting to practice something called "equally shared parenting" (ESP), described by Mark and Amy Vachon in their book *Equally Shared Parenting*.

In ESP, both parents have paid employment, but it is unlikely to be full time. Both run the home, and they both are responsible for the daily lives of their children. In the home, children are equally likely to turn to either parent when they need comfort. In the public world, both parents have a chance to stay engaged in the tasks to which they feel called. Fathers experience the joys of knowing their children more fully, and mothers avoid having large gaps in their resume.

Some would say this is an inefficient life. Perhaps. But for Christians, a shared parenting model allows both parents to respond to God's call in all different aspects of their lives.

The Role of the Church

When I talk to people about ESP, the response across gender, race, and age is the same: their faces light up. But then they say it would be impossible; their jobs would not allow for it. Clearly the work world must change to allow for this model—and it is here that the body of Christ could make a significant contribution.

Digging Deeper

For more on shared parenting, check out the website equallysharedparenting.com.

How can the church begin to help people explore creative ways of parenting?

The church is well suited to challenge employers to see their responsibility and culpability in creating a culture that limits the work of parents, both male and female. It can encourage business owners, hospital and university administrators, and everyone who shapes the work culture to rethink the structure of the jobs they create. Most of our current work model assumes that one parent takes responsibility for the family's daily life, but that isn't the only way to respond to God's call.

So how can the church begin to help people explore other creative ways of parenting such as ESP?

First, the church can help by highlighting the success of creative work arrangements. Twenty years ago, husband and wife Mark and Karen Muyskens approached Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Mich., with a unique proposal. They suggested that they share a faculty position in biology, allowing them to pursue a work/life balance that worked for them. They held this shared position while raising three children until Karen's too-early death in 2008. Employers sometimes offer paid family leave or make room for a parent to take time off to attend soccer games and so forth. But this example shows that more radical creativity can be successful for everyone.

Second, churches can develop non-gendered ways to help us learn from other parents. Highlighting creativity here is important also. Furthermore, too often we have often ignored the gifts of single parents in our midst—many of whom have raised wonderful children, often making use of community in ways other families can learn from.

There are other ways for the church to emphasize how important it is for all parents to be directly involved in raising their children, whether or not they choose the ESP model of parenting. We can be more helpful to young parents by excusing them from certain church duties or by making sure that we structure programs and ministries in ways that recognize the challenges faced by employed parents. Involvement of retired church members in the lives of children through faith-based after-school care could also benefit everyone. Intergenerational programs demonstrate that through baptism we have all made a commitment to the children of our church and that we serve the church in different ways through the seasons of our lives.

There are many ways to raise children well. Single parenting, traditional parenting, and equally shared parenting are just some of the ways parents faithfully live out their calling. But given the longing expressed by many people, both male and female, for more fully shared parenting, let's encourage our churches to consider it as one way to help Christians answer God's call to transform culture. ■



Julia K. Stronks holds the Edward B. Lindaman Chair at Whitworth University in Spokane, Washington. With her mother, Gloria Goris

Stronks, she is the coauthor of the forthcoming book *Teaching to Justice, Citizenship and Civic Virtue: The Character of a High School Through the Eyes of Faith* (Wipf and Stock, 2015).

Book Club Bonanza: *Banner* Readers Report on Their Book Clubs

My Favorite Book Club



LAST YEAR A FRIEND AND I DECIDED to start a new book club to read and study the greatest book of all, the Bible. A group of seven women read it from cover to cover in chronological order.

We all used *The Daily Bible in Chronological Order: 365 Daily Readings* (Harvest House).

Each of us took a day of the week to study. I would read the segments for every Tuesday and make a presentation about them. If I was not going to be present at our every-other-Thursday meeting, I would email my findings to another person in the group, and she would read them. Each presentation was 10 minutes or less, getting us through the information within the three-hour session. We always spent time in prayer and sharing, and served refreshments as well.

It was a remarkable group. Five of us are Christian Reformed, one Baptist, and one Bible Chapel. One is a fairly new Christian, and we were all

blessed to hear how she responded to some brand-new stories and concepts.

The year was an absolute success. We not only read the Bible from cover to cover, we also learned so much from each other's individual understanding of certain passages. A few times we were stumped, which led to further studies. We felt the awe of each other's discoveries. While we did not always agree, we never argued, nor did we push our point. We treated each other with great respect. We struggled through Job, sang through Psalms, and wondered through Revelation.

I loved this way of studying the Bible, as it seemed that history came alive. When I read about David hiding from Saul, I would also be reading the psalms he wrote at the time. The Bible became such an interesting story. Our book included some helpful devotional insights at the start of the chapters. God blessed each one of us over and over again. ■



Hetty Stuart and her husband own a fireplace business near Kincardine, Ontario, and they are members of Lucknow CRC.

History came alive.

The River CRC; Redlands, California

contributed by **Eileen Vander Linde**

Here are some recent reads from our group of about 12 people who have been meeting monthly for eight years:

- *Sycamore Row* by John Grisham
- *Call the Midwife* by Jennifer Worth
- *The Dressmaker of Khair Khana* by Gayle Tzemach Lemmon
- *The Longest Ride* by Nicholas Sparks
- *Escaping North Korea* by Mike Kim
- *The Housemaid's Daughter* by Barbara Mutch

Calvary CRC; Pella, Iowa

contributed by **Dorothy Van Kooten**

Our group reads seven books a year. Members take turns leading the discussion. We also invite guest speakers such as retired college professors or high school English teachers to add some variety. Here are some of the books we enjoyed:

- *The Last Lecture* by Randy Pausch
- *Killing Lincoln* by Bill O'Reilly
- *The Art of Forgiving* by Lewis B. Smedes
- *The Hotel on the Corner of Bitter and Sweet* by Jamie Ford
- *The Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck
- *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini
- *The Worst Hard Time* by Timothy Egan
- *Night* by Elie Wiesel
- *Invisible Wall* by Harry Bernstein
- *Still Alice* by Lisa Genova

Calvin College Women's Book Club; Grand Rapids, Michigan

contributed by **Kathy DeMey**

Our book club has been going strong for 15 years now; of the four who founded the club, three are still with it. Currently there are seven members. Here are some of our favorites titles:

- *Middlemarch* by George Eliot
- *The Master and Margarita* by Mikhail Bulgakov
- *The Summer Book* by Tove Jansson
- *An Interrupted Life: The Diaries of Etty Hillesum 1941-1943* by Etty Hillesum
- *Wolf Hall* by Hilary Mantel
- *The History of Love* by Nicole Krauss
- *Olive Kitteridge* by Elizabeth Strout
- *The Corrections* by Jonathan Franzen

Shalom CRC; Sioux Falls, South Dakota

contributed by **Julie Ledebor**

Our book club started about 11 years ago when our congregation was studying *40 Days of Purpose*, and it's still going strong. We even have a "daughter" club that formed in Grand Rapids when four of our members moved there!

South Dakota has a "One Book South Dakota" program, and our book group has read every selection since the program started in 2003. A Festival of Books is held every September, and we try to coordinate attending some of the author talks and events. Here are some favorite "One Book" selections:

- *Peace Like a River* by Leif Enger
- *The Work of Wolves* by Kent Meyers
- *The Whistling Season* by Ivan Doig
- *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* by Sherman Alexie.

A few members attended the Festival of Faith and Writing in Grand Rapids, Mich., this past April and were able to check on our daughter club. Recently our group met at Khorasan's Kabob House to discuss *And the Mountains Echoed* by Khaled Hosseini.

A comment we often hear is, "I would never have read that book if it wasn't for book club." After reading more than 120 books over the years, only a handful have been given two thumbs down. It's a great way to combine love of literature, learning, and enjoyment.

Riverside CRC; Wellandport, Ontario

contributed by **Tina Van Tuyl**

Sixteen years and 96 books after our first meeting, this reading club is still going strong with about 15 members. Here are some of our favorite book experiences:

The Homecoming Man by Hugh Cook. For our 10th anniversary, Mr. Cook graciously agreed to meet with us and read some excerpts from the book he was writing at the time.

The night we discussed *The Girl with the Pearl Earring*, we also had to hand in an assignment. Another painting by Vermeer is called "Woman in Blue Reading a Letter." Our assignment was to write the letter that the lady was reading.

After we read *The Great Divide* by T. Davis Bunn, a member of our group wrote the author a letter. He responded, and the reply was read at our next meeting.

The night we discussed *Sisters in the Wilderness*, we were all encouraged to bring along an antique and share its story.

On a few occasions, we watched the movie version together after the book was read and discussed. We watched *The Little Prince* and *Seabiscuit* as well as *The Color of Paradise*.

The next challenge will be to come up with an idea, book, or event to celebrate when we get to book 100!

Maine Charitable Mechanics Association Book Club; Portland, Maine

contributed by **Nancy Noble**

Our book group meets the first Tuesday of the month at noon. Tea and pastries are provided, but we bring our own lunch. We try to alternate fiction with non-fiction and throw in a classic here and there. Here are our latest choices:

- *Death Comes to Pemberley* by P.D. James
- *The End of Your Life Book Club* by Will Schwalbe
- *Ali and Nino* by Kurban Said
- *Blue Plate Special* by Kate Christensen
- *1776* by David McCullough
- *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* by Maya Angelou

FIND REVIEWS
ONLINE

PUSHING, PUSHING, PUSHING:

WHY CHURCH
KEEPS ON
CHANGING



IN 1559 the Spanish Conquistadors tore down the Incan temple known as Kiswarkancha in the city of Cusco, Peru, and began building the Cathedral Basilica of the Assumption of the Virgin—a massive, Gothic-Renaissance building in the heart of the ancient Incan Empire.

The cathedral has the usual sorts of Catholic icons—crucifixes and saints and ornate altars. But if you look closely, all around you'll find the unmistakable imprint of the Inca people. There's a painting of Jesus riding into Jerusalem—but instead of camels in the background, the artist has painted llamas. The crucified Christ is wearing an Incan warrior's skirt.

Try as they might, the Spanish never really erased the Incan civilization. Instead, Roman Catholicism and Incan culture joined together to form something unique to the central highlands of Peru. Echoes of Incan civilization—though not its gods—remain a part of worship.

From the age of the apostles through today, worship has always been a complex expression of the interplay between the Christian community and the surrounding community—and a reflection of the worshipers' time and culture.

When I was a kid in the early 1980s, church was serious business. My church was in a farming community in southern Ontario. The people in the pews were Dutch immigrants who had arrived just a couple of decades before. Their Canadian-born kids sat beside them.

We walked up the broad front steps in our Sunday suits slowly and somberly, putting our coats in the cloakroom on the right-hand side of the foyer. You could see the organist's bald head shining just behind the pulpit, bobbing along to interludes based on hymns from the *Psalter*. The litany was sparse—a few announcements and a congregational prayer, some enthusiastic singing. The sermon had three points and was punctuated by the discreet crunching of King peppermints.

There was no evening service. Instead we had an afternoon service at 2:30. That's because an evening service would have interfered with the cows' milking schedule. So we would drive home, have soup and buns for lunch, argue about the finer points of the sermon, and return before the oak pews had a chance to cool off.

This was brutal for a teenager. Especially in the summer when there were pools to swim in and baseball games to be played—neither of which was allowed. Swimming was out because you had to pay to get into the pool, and that meant making someone work on Sunday. Baseball was out because that was competition, and competition counted as work. I found these distinctions legalistic, arbitrary, and dumb.

I remember asking my dad if I could buy a Coke from a vending machine because it would have been filled days before. I also pointed out that if he bought the Monday paper, he was making someone work on Sunday. He replied with

some choice words in Amsterdam street slang that don't bear repeating.

Over time, all this changed. It had to. What made sense in Holland in the 1950s didn't make sense in Canada in the 80s and 90s. As kids left the farms and the economy forced farms to change, it mattered less what time the cows thought we should worship. Gradually guitars and microphones and even drums made their way into the church. I remember the organist standing up in a huff one Sunday, annoyed that we were singing faster than he was playing. He yelled, "You people are always pushing, pushing, pushing!"

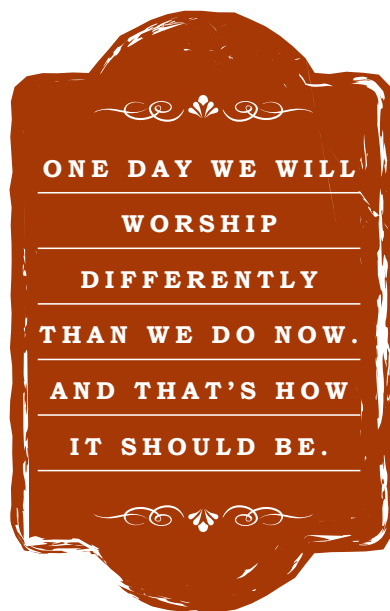
The point is that our ideas about worship—and even our ideas about what it means to be a community of believers—change over time. The world doesn't end at the top of the church steps. It flows through the sanctuary like a swirling, invisible mist surrounding worshipers who come through the doors with doubts, fears, and thoughts informed by their experiences on the other six days.

These days, getting a congregation to sit still and listen to a 20-minute sermon requires a feat of oratorical skill most pastors never trained for. In a world where people—not just young people—multi-task on their smartphones while watching a movie, we are no longer a captive audience. Our world is social and interactive. We want to participate in a conversation, not sit still for a lecture. The days of church as a place where an expert dispenses knowledge about theology and families debate it afterwards over soup and buns is over. As social media guru Don Tapscott points out, we are "bathed in bits"; how we receive and process knowledge has been forever changed.

Many churches have realized this. They have become a social hub—a kind of flesh-and-blood Facebook where people come together to find out what's going on in their community. Sermons have gotten shorter; announcements are longer. Church bulletins are filled with reminders to attend church and community events. When the youth group comes back from a service project, we expect to see a video with an appropriate contemporary Christian music soundtrack the following

Sunday. If someone bikes across Canada for charity or participates in a run for the local homeless shelter or has a new idea for an outreach program, we want to hear about it. I know of one church where members Tweet questions to the pastor during the service, and he answers them at the end of his message. It's no longer the pastor who "owns" the pulpit—it's a time-share arrangement.

This makes some folks uneasy. There are always some who think church should not evolve, people who feel that the community they grew up in is the best—and only—expression of how worship ought to be. And then there are those who feel the church is never doing enough: the more bake sales and community events



we organize, the more active we are, the more "Christian" we are. Even if that means events and activities overlap and compete with each other. If we're not reaching out, they fear, we are not doing our job.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer once wrote: "Those who love their dream of a Christian community more than the Christian community itself become destroyers of that Christian community even though their personal intentions may be ever so honest, earnest, and sacrificial." Our intentions—whether to preserve a community or take it in a new direction—need to be more than well-intentioned. They need to be purposeful.

Some feel church needs to change to attract new followers. But if we're honest, that's not really the point. Church needs to change—as it has in this and in every generation—to remain relevant to the people who are already in the pews. Our worship communities need to feel like a living part of our week, not something altogether different from our everyday lives. Otherwise, the act of worship feels alien and false.

When the Spanish built the Cathedral Basilica of the Assumption of the Virgin, they wanted to destroy the Inca culture and rebuild Spain in the highlands of Peru. Instead, they were spiritually and physically transformed by the experience.

Today, 80 percent of all Peruvians share a mixed Incan and Spanish heritage. Their worship is syncretic—mixing the ancient Quechua and 16th-century Spanish traditions together with a dash of the modern.

In the Christian church, we bring our world into our worship so that we can make sense of it together through our shared faith. These days, instead of spending our time in the pew worrying about how the herd of dairy cows is feeding, we may be thinking about an argument we had on our Facebook wall. And over the course of that hour spent as a community, we hope to hear God speaking to us about those very real concerns.

And when we leave the church afterward, we are also transformed. Instead of heading home for soup and serious theological debate, we may get together with some church friends to pick up litter in the park.

Both are a response to what we have learned about God and our relationship to him in the time we have spent together. Neither is forever. One day we will worship differently than we do now. And that's how it should be. Pursuing our relationship as a community is the point of Christian community—and doing so with love and understanding for one another should always be our goal. ■



Lloyd Rang is the communications director for the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Toronto and a member of Rehoboth CRC in Bowmanville.

Planting Corn in Straight Rows

SPRINGTIME IN THE FARMING COMMUNITY of Iron Springs, Alberta, is always an exciting but nerve-racking time of year. Crop farmers eagerly anticipate the season as they prepare the earth for seedlings and then begin the journey of faith, trusting that the seeds will germinate and will receive enough moisture, nutrients, and sunshine to produce a crop of “50- or 100- or 200-fold.”

I recall, some 34 years ago, listening to my father read from Sietze Buning’s *Purpleanerie and Other Permutations*, his Christmas present from my three siblings. The poet mused tongue-in-cheek about our good solid Reformed roots and nudged us to question whether we were being too conservative and traditional by contentiously sticking to the “true basis” of the Christian faith. As a 12-year-old, I listened to poetry that did not rhyme on purpose—to show that a break from convention could be written by a solid CRCer.

Buning’s farmer mused about planting corn the Reformed way, as compared to the Arminian, Presbyterian, or Roman Catholic way. People of those other traditions could plant corn following the contour of the land. Not we Reformed folk! No way! We planted corn in perfectly straight rows. “No one who puts his hand to the plowshare and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”

One reason crops were not planted perfectly straight in the past was the challenge of lining up with a point of reference in the distance. If a hill impeded the farmer’s ability to keep sight of his reference point, he would wander to the left or right of his intended target.

Enter 21st-century technology—GPS and auto-steer in the corn planter’s tractor—which allows every farmer, regardless of religious or denominational background, the ability to drive perfectly straight within a precision of millimeters. The problem is, how can passersby know the difference between my beliefs and my Roman Catholic neighbor’s? They certainly won’t be able to tell by how much straighter my crop is planted.

Like our corn rows, perhaps our theological differences are less than they once were. We work together with our Roman Catholic neighbors and six other denominations (Mennonite, Netherlands Reformed, Christian Reformed, United, Catholic, United Reformed, Evangelical Free) on running the local food bank, preparing Christmas hampers for the needy in our community, and supporting the Canadian Food Grains Bank, a

communal project that raised over a million dollars in the past 12 years by growing crops for global food aid. I am skeptical that this would have happened 50 years ago.

Did technology help narrow that gap? In part, I think so. We now sing many of the same songs in our respective worship services. We use iPad Bibles (I love my Gateway daily Bible-in-a-year app); we look online for Sunday school crafts, daily devotionals, or information on what it means to serve Christ and love our neighbor. So some credit for tearing down walls goes to the Internet, to Christian radio stations, and to iPad apps, GPS, and smart phones.

We Reformed folk planted corn in perfectly straight rows.

The bigger change may come from gathering together in Bible studies, church school, Cadets, GEMs, and Christian schools and universities where opportunities for community and faith to intersect have allowed people from many denominations to jointly learn, read, and hear about Jesus’ walk on earth. Together we learn how he loved, served, and welcomed the tax collector, the prostitute, the thief, the soldier—and even the odd Calvinist farmer who thinks his crops are straighter than his neighbor’s.

So in the spirit of Seitze Buning’s prose poetry, let’s embrace our Christian Reformed heritage and our rich doctrines; let’s teach our youth about the dangers of technology but also embrace the good in technology and move one step closer to working with our fellow Christians—not just to make straighter rows of corn, but to work together toward feeding the hungry, protecting the weak, and helping every person on earth know the Lord our God. ■

STUDY QUESTIONS ONLINE



Leighton Kolk owns and operates a grain- and seed-producing farm and a cattle ranch and feedlot with his wife and three children. They attend Iron Springs Christian Reformed Church in Alberta.

An Advent Prayer

DEAR GOD of Mary and Joseph
of Elizabeth and Zachariah
and Jesus born in a manger

we've entered the season
of hope & peace & joy & love
when you seem bent on showing us
your willingness to do the impossible
when we read again
the lion lying down with the lamb
led by a child
when we sing with Mary
the lowly lifted up
the hungry filled with good things
the rich sent empty away

and we feel these things resonate
with the deepest part of our being
as being true, true
so absolutely incontrovertibly true
although we have yet to see them take place

Our belief in you
our willingness to continue along this path
keeps us on the very edge
of the joy
that is in the vision of the prophets
and the gospel writers
even as present realities
might seem to say we are fools

There are so many people who hurt, O Lord
There are so many who grieve
There is war. Corruption. Greed. Calamity

The rich are lying down with the wolf
The lowly are being sent empty away
and the little child is hungry

We have no words
for all the ways
things are wrong in the world

What we have
are people quietly helping
doing the impossible
in your name

and places in the world, where
without fanfare
the impossible has taken place
and is

What we have is a faith
that does not prevent us from walking into walls
or keep us from troubles
faith that is not certainty
but trust
trust
that has well-springs in Scripture
and is born of our experience
of your love and benevolence
toward us

trust that keeps us
putting one foot in front of the other
as we continue this slow trek to Bethlehem
to enter again the peace and profoundness
and impossibility
of your stable birth

with nothing but the clothes on our backs
and our hearts split wide open ■



John Terpstra
is a poet and
carpenter who
lives in Hamilton,
Ontario. His

latest (non-fiction) book is called
The House with the Parapet Wall.

ADS

Deadlines: Jan. 2015 issue is 12/4/2014; Feb. issue is 1/5/2015. Details online.

Prices: Most ads are \$0.33^{US} per character (min. 150 characters including punctuation and spaces). A discounted rate of \$0.26^{US} per character applies to Anniversaries, Birthdays, Obituaries, Denominational and Classical Announcements, and Congregational Announcements. Photos are \$22^{US} extra.

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Announcements

Announcement of Candidacy

We are pleased to announce that **DAVID SHIN** has now completed his academic requirements and is eligible for call as a candidate for the ministry of the Word. Steven Timmermans, Executive Director

We are pleased to announce that **PAULA SEALES** has now completed her academic requirements and is eligible for call as a candidate for the ministry of the Word. Dr. Steven Timmermans, Executive Director

Calls Accepted

REV. JOEL ZUIDEMA has accepted a call to pastor at Pathway Church in St. John, IN. He previously served Community CRC in Roselawn, IN for 16 1/2 years.

Meetings of Classis

CLASSIS ZEELAND will meet on Thursday, January 15, 2015, at 4PM, at the Lamont CRC. Agenda deadline is December 3.

Rev. Ronald J. Meyer, S. C

CLASSIS OF THE HEARTLAND will meet in regular session March 7, 2015, 8:00 AM, at Immanuel CRC, Orange City, IA. Agenda materials must be in the hands of the stated clerk by January 17, 2015. Rev. Robert Drenten, SC; 1405 Albany Ave NE; Orange City, IA 51041.

Financial Aid

STUDENTS PREPARING FOR MINISTRY in the Christian Reformed Church from Classis Heartland may apply for aid to assist them in their study by contacting Rev. Loren Kotman; 1111 5th Street, Hull, IA 51239; (712) 439-1123; pastor@hull1stcrrc.com. The deadline is February 1, 2015.

General

LK ALFRED MINISTRY 140 Mallard Rd 33850 near Winter Haven & Orlando Rt 17/92. www.lakealfredministry.org, phone 863-422-6442. Preachers: Jan 2015 Rev Dale Cooper; Feb Rev Terry Genzink; Mar 1-15 Dr George Kroeze; Mar 22-Apr 12 Rev Eldert Zwart.

Birthdays

100th Birthday



JULIUS H. VANDER SLIK, formerly of Kalamazoo, will celebrate his 100th birthday at a reception with his children, grandchildren and friends on Saturday, January 24, 2015. Clear in mind and happy in disposition, he is a joyful witness regarding God's grace. Greetings to him are

welcome at Lake Forest Park 2909 S. 25th St., Apt 115, Fort Pierce, FL 34981

95th Birthday

LAVERNE VAN ZYL celebrated her 95th birthday on November 29. Beloved mother, grandmother, and great grandmother. Send greetings to Village Woods, 2681 Hwy 394, #516, Crete, IL 60417.

90th Birthday

REV. LOUIS F. BAKER will celebrate his 90th birthday on December 21, 2014. His wife, Trudy, and his children, grandchildren and great grandchildren give thanks for his steadfast faith, his devotion to the Word in his preaching, his gifts as a pastoral counselor, and his delightful sense of humor. He lives at 11833 James St., Apt. A-12, Holland, Michigan, 49424.



KEN BEELEN, 907 Harvest Dr. Holland, MI 49423 will celebrate his 90th birthday on Dec 26th. Friends and family are invited to celebrate with his wife, Aggie, children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren at an open house at Holland Heights CRC on Sat, Dec 27, 2014 from 1 to 4PM.



NANCY CHAPEL The Lord willing Nancy Chapel will celebrate her 90th birthday on December 31, 2014. Her address is: 5330 Kalamazoo Ave. SE Kentwood, MI 49508. She appreciates cards and phone calls - 616-827-0372.

CHRISTINE (LOBBES) DEKKER plans to have an open house celebrating her 90th birthday at the Raybrook Manor friendship room Dec. 31st 2-4 pm. What an awesome 90 years.

GEORGIA (VANDER WEIT) JONKMAN and family will celebrate her 90th birthday, January 20. She resides at 1600 Westbook Avenue, Apt. 452, Richmond, VA 23227. Her family gives thanks for her life of faith and love.

WAYNE LEMMEN 633 Center Street, Coopersville, MI will celebrate his 90th birthday on December 19. His family and friends give thanks to God for the gift he has been to us



ELEANOR (WIERSMA) SLAGTER will celebrate her 90th birthday on December 26. We, her children, grandchildren and great grandchildren give thanks for her steadfast faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, her Christian example of love to extend the olive branch and bridge relationships, and her humble example to always teach Christ's love in, "The last shall be first". We thank her for passing on her love for travel - we all got the wanderlust! To God be the glory! Mom LOVES cards! She and Dad reside at Maple Creek, 2000 29th St., SE, Box 407, Grand Rapids, MI 49508.



CLARA (BUMA) SONKE celebrated her 90th birthday on July 22. Her children, Harry Sonke, Cathy Pott, Jeanne Rempel, Jack Sonke, Mike Sonke, Virginia Hoftiezer, their spouses, grandchildren and great grandchildren thank God for her life of faith and God's faithfulness to her and the next generations. Clara resides at Beth Haven, Memory Care B House, 368 S. Wilma Ave., Ripon, CA 95366.

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Church Position Announcements

PASTOR Luctor CRC and Prairie View RCA, two small, rural congregations in Prairie View, KS, are seeking a pastor who will lead them in a joint effort to develop a kingdom vision and a plan for reaching their communities. Contact Harlan Ponstein at 785-854-7605 or ponstein@ruraltel.net

LEAD PASTOR Georgetown CRC, located in beautiful Halton Hills, Ontario, Canada is seeking a lead Pastor for our 160 family congregation. We are a well established, caring congregation that has just completed a mission / visioning process and are looking for a Pastor to help us grow in our Reformed faith, provide Pastoral care and guide us as we seek to implement our ministry initiatives. For more information or to submit a profile please email: search_committee@gcrc.on.ca

YOUTH PASTOR Comstock CRC in Kalamazoo, MI, is seeking a part-time Youth Pastor (15-20 hrs per wk) to promote the spiritual development of middle and high school youth. Candidates should have a degree in related field or commensurate experience. Job description available upon request. Contact dejoling@hotmail.com.

CHURCH PLANTER/CAMPUS PASTOR: The Harbor Churches (formerly Fairhaven Ministries), a collegiate church serving the greater Grand Rapids, MI area, has begun a search for a Campus Pastor to plant a church in Walker, MI, just northwest of Grand Rapids. For more information on this exciting opportunity, email info@chapter-next.com.

CHURCH MISSION CATALYST Crossroads CRC in San Marcos, CA is reopening applications for a full time Church Mission Catalyst to help us live out our mission of being "bold Jesus-proclaimers and active world-changers." For more information email Catalyst@crossroadscrc.com.

DIRECTOR OF COMMUNITY LIFE: Mountainview Christian Reformed Church in Grimsby, ON is seeking a full-time Director of Community Life who will support and assist the Senior Pastor in providing effective leadership to the Small Group and Pastoral Care Ministries of Mountainview Church. The Director of Community Life will be responsible for the growth of small groups and for shepherding and enfolding people into the Small Group Ministry. The Director of Community Life will also provide leadership to the Pastoral Care Ministry and direct pastoral care which is most often delivered through the pastors, elders, deacons and Pastoral Care workers. For more information please refer to the Job Summary posted at www.mountainviewcrc.org/directorofcommunitylifesearch

SENIOR PASTOR Fellowship CRC, Brighton, ON, is a large multi-generational congregation searching for a Senior Pastor with a servant heart. Providing spiritual leadership for our staff ministry, equipping and training leaders for service in God's kingdom, and preaching God's Word in a relevant and dynamic manner are among the gifts we are seeking to find. For more information, please contact us at bfcrc@nexicom.net (www.brightoncrc.org)

PASTOR - KANATA COMMUNITY CRC Kanata Community Christian Reformed Church located in Kanata, Ontario, part of the greater city of Ottawa, has begun a search for a full-time pastor. We are in a redevelopment stage seeking to reignite the flame of hospitality, acceptance and belonging. The successful candidate will share in our desire to be a Christ-centred community, seeking to meet the physical, social and spiritual needs of those inside our community and, through this core strength, enable the congregation to be attractive, accepting, loving, caring and welcoming to those outside the church community. Interested pastors can visit our website at www.kccrc.com and can also request a church profile from office@kccrc.com.

FULL-TIME YOUTH DIRECTOR position available in beautiful Central California. Escalon CRC is looking for someone qualified to lead our Middle School, High School and Young Adult ministries. Interested applicants who are ordained or not may view a job description and contact the search committee at our website: escaloncrc.org.

PASTOR South Kendall Community Church in Miami, FL seeks a spiritual leader who is gifted in preaching and can powerfully lead us in bringing many to know God's redeeming grace and transforming love. For information on being part of our multi-cultural ministry, please contact SandyW@southkendallcc.org.

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Anniversaries

65th Anniversary

TIMMER Ed & Jeanette (Dewit) 2500 Breton Woods Dr. SE, Unit 1053, Grand Rapids, MI 49512. Will celebrate 65 years of marriage on Dec. 1, 2014. Their children are Terry & Sharon Dykstra, Edwin & Kris Timmer, Jerry & Marcia Niewiek & Charlene Timmer. They have 16 grandchildren, 10 great grandchildren. Thanks be to God!

VANRHEE Theron (Toby) & Janice (Janie) of 4187- 147th ave. Holland, MI 49423 & also 508 - 44th Ave E, RC-2 Bradenton, FL 43203 will celebrate their 65 yrs of marriage on Nov. 10, 2014. They and their daughter Rick & Laurie Cook & 3 grandsons Adam, Tim & Mitch & Jena Cook share their joy. God be praised.

Obituaries

DIEKMAN Petronella "Pat" Diekman, nee Dykema, age 97, of South Holland, IL, went home to be with the Lord on November 2, 2014. Beloved wife of the late James C. Diekman (2004). Loving mother of Marian (Lee) Kickert and James P. (Karen) Diekman. Cherished grandmother of four and great-grandmother of six. Fond sister of Alita Peerbolte and the late Herman and Chester.

DUTHLER Harvey Albert, age 88, passed away on October 28, 2014; survived by his wife, Edna (nee Masselink); daughter and son-in-law, Mary and John Leese; son and daughter-in-law, Robert and Vicki Duthler; grandchildren, Jonathon, Aubrey and Jordan Leese, Robert and Garrett Duthler, and Lindsey and Rachael Walski; sisters-in-law and brothers-in-law, Ann Duthler-Maring, Dorothy Duthler, Kay Duthler, William and Glenda Masselink; and numerous nieces and nephews.

HOOGSTRAATEN Bastiaan(Bob) of 8629 141st Way N Seminole Fl 33776 went to be with his Lord Oct. 4, 2014. Bob was the beloved husband of wife, Jennie Munk for 63 years. Father of John (Sue) and daughters, Anita Boonstra(Ken) and Nancy Nickel(Brian). Grandfather of 6 grandchildren: Erin, Tim, Jesse, Joel, Beth & Caitlin. Psalm 23.

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Myanmar (Photo by Bruce Menning)



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Let us not become weary in doing good, for in the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Galatians 6:9

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KASTELEIN Dirk Jan, 1935-2014 of Surrey, B. C. was called by our Heavenly Father to Himself on Aug. 18th. Beloved husband of Clara (nee-Wigboldus). Father of children Audrey, Heidi, Jacqueline, Paul and their families. Survived by brothers Maarten (Helen) John, Bill, Jack and Harry. Sister

Diane Praamsma (Herman), brother-in-law: Kees van Driel, sister-in-law Olena Kastelein. Pre-deceased by parents Cornelis and Bets Kastelein and siblings, Bastiaan, Anna, Adriaan and Cornelis. Memorial service was held at New Westminster CRC, on Aug. 21/14 Rev. Andrew Beunk officiating.

KNOPPERS Jan M., of Allendale, MI, formerly of Newtown Square, PA, went to be with his Lord and Savior on Oct. 15, 2014. Born in Zeist, the Netherlands on Oct. 13, 1931. Preceded in death by his wife, Ali. Survived by children and grandchildren, Brent and Jane Cottingham

(Mike, Rob), Maria Knoppers, Jim and Rebecca Ver Hoef (Kyle and Marissa, Chris, Erik, and Luke), John and Sherry Knoppers (Landon, Logan), and many family members in the Netherlands.



KONING Lee Allen, age 67, passed away Saturday, October 4, 2014; survived by wife, Patricia (Buteyn), 2624 Village Circle Ct. SW, Byron Center 49315; children, David (Desirae) and Susan (Brian) Isenhoff; grandchildren, Reese, Madeline, and Anna Koning, and Cade, Elise, Tyce, and Brandon

Isenhoff; sister Marsha (Jim) Vanderveen sister, Marsha (Jim) Vanderveen; and in-laws Ron and Iris Pothoven, Tom and Cindy Buteyn.

SCHAAP John F. - Worthington, MN, went home to be with the Lord on September 24, 2014 at age 89. He is survived by his wife of 69 years, Helen Snieder, 1801 Collegeway, Worthington, MN 56187, son Ronald (Diane) Schaap, Rochester, MN and Pastor Verlyn (Carol) Schaap, Sioux

City, IA. Grandfather of seven, Great-grandfather of fifteen. His faith and generosity will be an example to all those who knew him.

VAN ANTWERPEN Berdela, age 87, of Grand Rapids, MI passed away Wednesday, October 22, 2014. Berdie was preceded in death by her husband, Rev. Willard Van Antwerpen, is survived by Nancy and James Mulder of Holland, MI, Laura Nydam of London, Ontario, Russell and Patricia Van Antwerpen of Hatboro, PA, Kristin and Mark Gort of Wyoming, MI, Inge van de Cruysse and David Hamilton of Bloomington, IN, 14 grandchildren and 19 great-grandchildren, sisters-in-law and brother-in-law.

VANDER WALL Rev. Douglas, entered his eternal home on October 18, 2014. He is preceded in death by his first wife, Leanne. Survived by his wife, Helen and children Pam (Earl) Wiersma, Debi (Michael) Zacharia, Carla (Steve) Hendriks, Laury Vander Wall, Dale (Kristine) Vander Wall, Ed (Janese) Vermeulen, Laura (Bill) Van Nieuwenhuyzen and David (Karin) Vermeulen 23 grandchildren and 23 great grandchildren.



VOGEL Cornelius, 90, of Grand Rapids peacefully passed away on October 27, 2014. He was preceded in death by his wife of 52 years, Rayda (Dykstra). His children, Ted and Bethany Vogel, Laura and Roger Monsma, Steve and Jane Vogel, and Ron Vogel; his six grandchildren and three

great-grandchildren; and his special friend in recent years, Ann Boermans, thank God for his 90 years of blessings. Neil grew up on a farm near Sibley, Iowa, served in the Army during WWII, earned degrees from Calvin College and DePaul University, and taught at West Side Christian School in Grand Rapids for most of his 38-year teaching career. A quiet and gentle man, Neil's life reflected his deep faith in God and devotion to his family.

WILSON James B. (Jim) age 85, passed away Sept 11, 2014. Survived by his wife Shirley (Konyndyk) Wilson, son Douglas and wife Lorraine, grandchildren, Erika and Jennifer Wilson Foster (Glenn) and great grandson George Foster.

For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given,
and the government will be
on his shoulders.
And he will be called
Wonderful Counselor,
Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince
of Peace.
— ISAIAH 9:6

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during the Christmas
season and in the
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ZAAGMAN (NEE VERDUIN) Vera G., peacefully passed away Thursday, October 23, 2014. She was predeceased by her husband, Kenneth Zaagman. She is lovingly remembered by her children, Robert and Marybeth Zaagman, Kathleen and Mark Johnson, Richard and Joyce Zaagman, and Sharon and Mark Osterhouse; grandchildren, Vickie and Leroy Kopf, Christine and James Koops, David Zaagman, Tamara and Corey Michael, Brenda and Brandon Baar, Elliott and Emily Zaagman, Bryton Zaagman and Graham Zaagman, Christopher Osterhouse, David Osterhouse, and Kyria Osterhouse; 13 great grandchildren; her sister Ruth De Witt of AZ; her brothers-in-law and sister-in-law Rev. Marvin Beelen, Philip and Nancy Zaagman all of Grand Rapids; many nieces and nephews; and their adopted family Anh and Peter Choi.

Employment

CAREGIVERS NEEDED Are you interested in working for the best living assistance services company in West Michigan? Visiting Angels is looking for people who can be excellent, not average; make a connection with our clients; be perfectly dependable; practice compassion and work with integrity. Contact Heather at 616-243-7080 or heather@vangels.com. www.vangels.com

GENEVA CAMPUS MINISTER The Board of Geneva Campus Ministry (GCM) announces its search for a new Director. GCM is a vibrant ministry of the CRC and the RCA at The University of Iowa. The Board encourages those interested in campus ministry to apply. It will review applications on receipt and begin interviews by 1/1/15. We plan to have the new Director in place July 1 to work with the current Director through July. For more information contact Cary Covington at 319-331-5830 or cary-covington@uiowa.edu

INTERIM PASTOR AVAILABLE Dr. James C. Busscher has been serving congregations within the CRC as an Interim Pastor for the past 12 years. If you are looking for pastoral leadership during your time of vacancy then feel free to contact Pastor Busscher at 616-460-1811 or e-mail him at jcbusscher@gmail.com. References available.

Real Estate: Sales and Rentals

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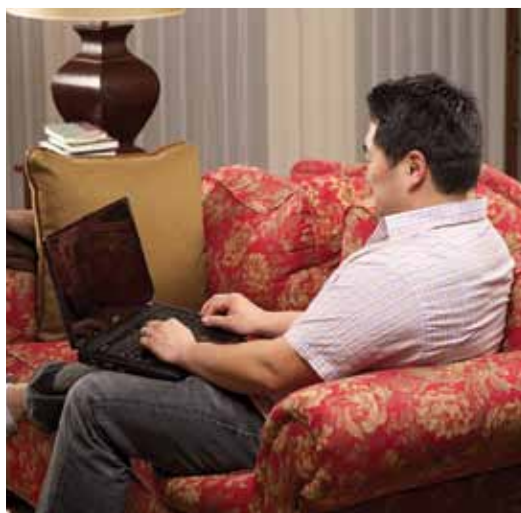
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Punch Lines

What has made *you* smile lately? Got a joke or funny incident you'd care to share with your wider church family? Please send it to *The Banner* at 1700 28th Street SE, Grand Rapids, MI 49508-1407; or email it to editorial@thebanner.org. Thanks!

After setting up the nativity for the Christmas celebration, our then 3-year-old granddaughter, Paige, loved to play with the figurines of baby Jesus, Mary, Joseph, and the wise men. One day, while preparing dinner, Paige's mother heard her say, "Hurry and clean your room, baby Jesus! The wise men are coming for a visit!"

—Lana Oosterhouse

Our 2-year-old granddaughter, Claire, loves to sing while she plays. Her mother taught her the song "Bless the Lord, O my soul." Afterward, when we spoke on the phone, Claire would say "Hi, Oma," followed immediately by "Bless the Lord, Oma soul." I received her blessing!

—Pauline Prins

Our 5-year-old son, Matthew, was excited to start kindergarten in a few days. I reminded him that he should raise his hand if he needed to ask his teacher a question during class.

He replied, "And if I have to ask our pastor a question in church, I can only raise my hand if we're singing, right?" Then he thought for a moment and said, disappointed, "But he never calls on us anyways."

—Sue Schilthuis

My brother was driving along the highway with his wife and kids. For several miles, another car had been following too closely. When it eventually passed, my brother said, "Finally! He was hot on my tail!"

A short time later, a little voice from the back seat piped up, "Mommy, I didn't think Daddy had a tail."

—Cornelius Leugs

Recently I visited my 94-year-old former neighbor in a nursing home. She was in the middle of telling me something when she forgot where she was going with the conversation. She stopped and said, "What am I going to do when I get old?"

—Donna Schoenwetter

An Iowa farmer called his neighbor about the bad storm during the night. "Did the big wind damage your barn last night?" he asked.

"I don't know," his neighbor replied. "Haven't found it yet."

—Dick Bylsma

The sole purpose of a child's middle name is so she can tell when she's really in trouble.

—Cornelius Peters

When my daughter said her bedtime prayers, she would bless every family member, every friend, and every animal—current and past.

For several weeks, after we had finished the nightly prayer, she would say, "And all girls." This clos-

ing became part of her nightly routine.

Curious, I asked her, "Why do you always add the part about all girls?" "Because everybody else always finishes their prayers by saying 'All men.'"

—Edith Vander Veen

A father was approached by his small son, who told him proudly, "I know what the Bible means!"

His father smiled and replied, "What do you mean, you know what the Bible means?"

The son replied, "I *do* know!" "OK," said his father. "What does the Bible mean?"

"That's easy, Daddy," he replied. "It stands for 'Basic Information Before Leaving Earth.'"

—Peter Haagen



"Not only is this asteroid hurtling toward Earth, but computer-enhanced photos indicate there's a note tied to it."



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**—Kohima Daring,
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*Data found in the 2014 Gates Annual Letter.



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