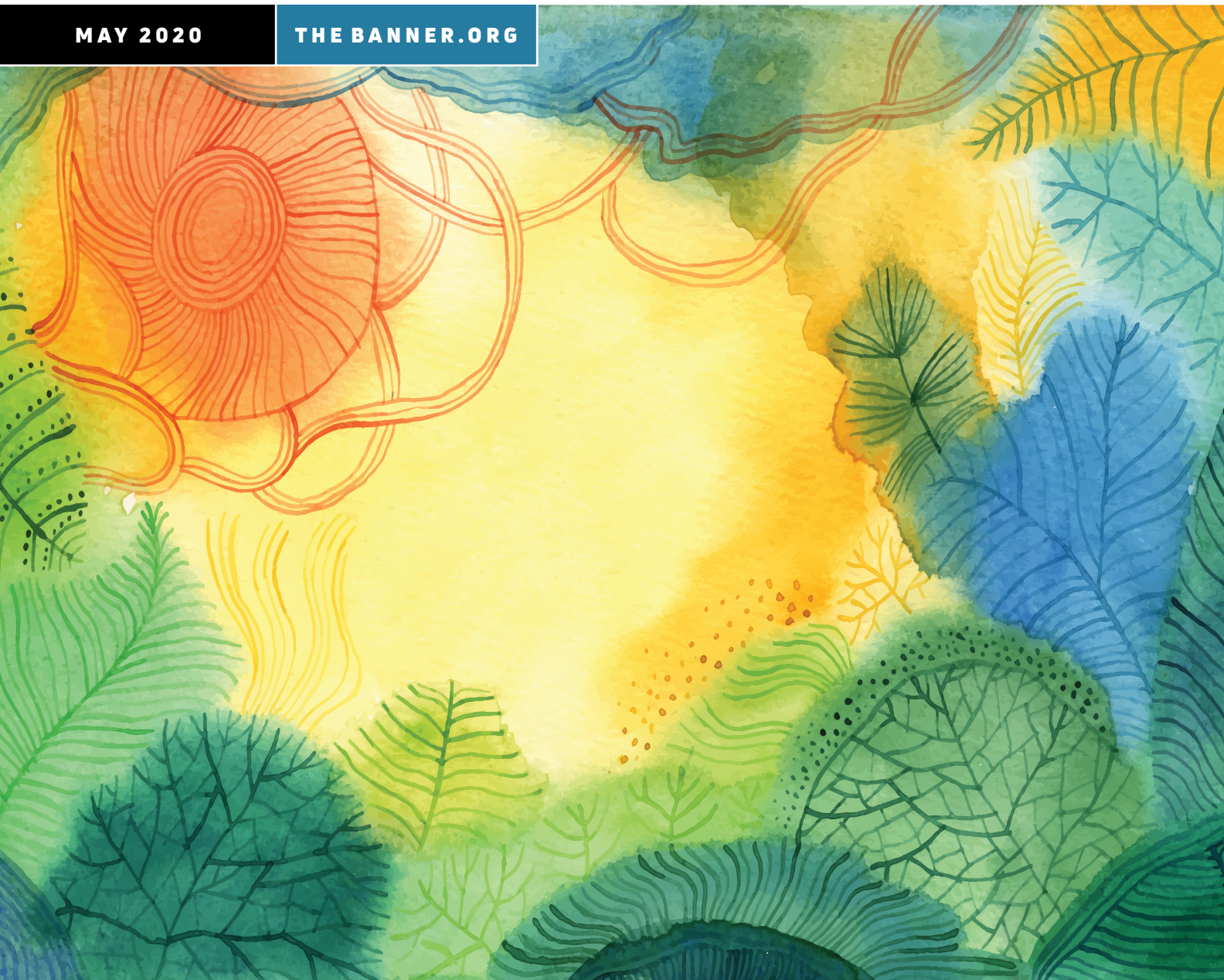


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BY THE NUMBERS

Every three years or so, *The Banner* distributes a survey to its readers. Almost 800 of you responded this year. Thank you! One of the first questions: Overall, how satisfied are you with *The Banner*? Almost 70% were somewhat to very satisfied, with 21% suggesting we have some work to do.



The survey was conducted in January and February 2020 by the Calvin University Center for Social Research. A total of 769 participants completed the survey.



Cover: From Genesis to Revelation, trees are present at every important event in the Bible.

WHAT'S ONLINE

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

- » Behind *The Banner* blog —*The Banner* During the COVID-19 Pandemic —A Story from Another Time
- » Churches and Schools Adjust Mission Trips
- » Cardus Gives Canadian Millennials a Forum for Public Faith
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BANNER

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Editor Shiao Chong

Associate Editor Sarah Delia Heth

News Editors Alissa Vernon, Gayla R. Postma

Mixed Media Editor Lorilee Craker

Art Director Dean R. Heetderks

Designer Pete Euwema

Contact Us 1700 28th Street SE, Grand Rapids MI 49508-1407 info@TheBanner.org

Address Changes and Subscriptions 800-777-7270 or visit TheBanner.org

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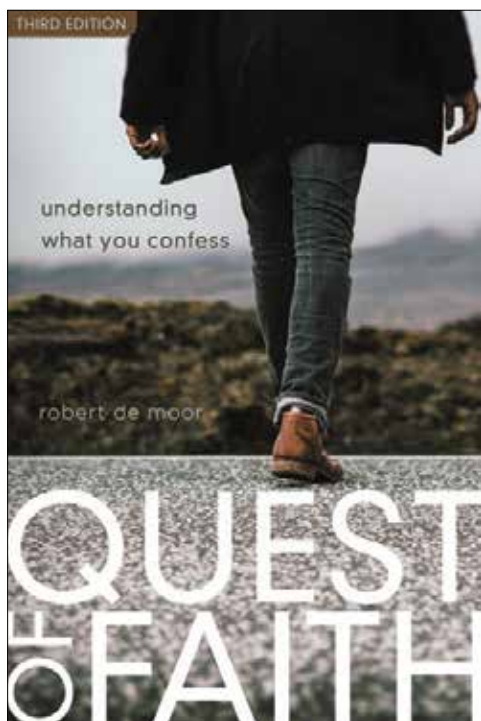
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Pandemic Reflections

As Christians, our response to this pandemic should be driven not by fear but by love for our neighbors.



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

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

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

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

THE COVID-19 GLOBAL PANDEMIC

has dramatically affected everybody's lives. We at *The Banner* are praying for all, especially frontline health care workers, in this difficult time.

I would be lying if I said I am not worried or stressed by this pandemic and its social and economic consequences. But I am not panicking because I trust in God. However, I also follow my local public health authority's guidelines for physical distancing and other precautions. There is a line between trusting God and testing God to protect us. Jesus refused to recklessly endanger his life to prove God's promise of protection (Matt. 4:5-7).

I am being careful not only for my own life, but for love of others, especially for my family. As Christians, our response to this pandemic should be driven not by fear but by love for our neighbors, especially those among us who are more vulnerable.

If we act out of love, we would not try to scapegoat others for this pandemic. Racist acts toward Asian Americans have risen since March as many blame them for the virus. When asked by his disciples whose sin was to blame for a man born blind, Jesus refused to play the blame game but emphasized doing God's work (John 9:1-7). This virus respects no ethnicities or boundaries. We must work in solidarity to combat this common threat.

Given the disruptions caused by physical distancing restrictions, this crisis might actually offer us opportunities to learn and grow.

The church might need to relearn what it means to *be* church rather than simply to *do* church. Is this time to shift away from our overreliance on the church building? Can we

recapture the New Testament's household church ethos? Can Christian households reimagine themselves, rather than church buildings, as the focal points of God's mission in their neighborhoods?

Technology, especially the internet and video, is a blessing to many of us at this time. But we must be cautious to not overly rely on technology, because not everyone has equal access to it.

In these uncertain times, individual Christians might need to relearn what it means to trust God instead of trusting our economic or social achievements. Physical distancing gives us an opportunity to examine ourselves to see if we love God more than we love going to church.

One lesson we can all learn from this pandemic is how much we lack control. This tiny virus has unmasked our delusions in this regard. We are losing control of our jobs, our social life, even our church. Our best laid plans are undone. Our normal control mechanisms are not working. And that is why we are afraid.

In the Bible, God often tells us not to be afraid because, even though we are not in control, God is. Jesus, who loves us so much that he died for us, is in control. And as he promised us: "And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matt. 28:20). B

Our annual appeal campaign was disrupted by the pandemic. Please consider giving online at TheBanner.org/Donate to help us make up some lost time. Thank you!

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REPLY ALL

Political Tribalism

Thank you to Shiao Chong for your insightful editorial ("Political Tribalism," March 2020). Political tribalism is a real threat to Christian unity.

"How can you vote for HIM/HER if you are a Christian?"

"How can you be aligned with the Democratic Party if you are a Christian?"

"How can you be aligned with the Republican Party if you are a Christian?"

And the tribal drums beat. ...

I wonder if the more effective prayer is for ourselves in the Lord's requirement that we act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with him (Mic. 6:8). Imagine what justice, mercy, and humility would look like in the great political divide. As tribe members, we can't extend those attributes, but only in surrendering our pride, derision, and division to Christ.

I wonder if our concern is more for political "correctness" than in being Christ-like.
» Barb Clouse // Battle Creek, Mich.

Thank you for this article. It is critically important that we see our loyalties in the proper perspective. In addition, we need to focus on how we can find common ground to solve the most pressing needs of our communities and our world.
» Daryl Sieplinga // Online comment

Hospice Unit

Thank you, Rev. Eric Verhulst, for your honest, sobering, faith-filled realism in "A Day on the Hospice Unit" (March 2020).

You elegantly capture the spirit of Ecclesiastes and show why "it is better to go to a house of mourning than to a house of feasting" (Eccles. 7:2).

Facing and embracing God-held reality makes us wise as we live every good day and every day to the good.

» Bob De Moor // Edmonton, Alta.

No Mistakes

Thank you for publishing "God Does Not Make Mistakes" (March 2020). It is all too easy to discuss issues of gender identity in a dispassionate, doctrinal, theological framework in an attempt to claim the "right" position and, of course, judging others to be wrong.

Our hearts go out to Lisa Schulz in her struggles to come to grips with an issue that is suddenly very personal. She came to a conclusion that we all need to reach: that is, in her effort to "enlighten (her) son," she "missed what he really needed: love, a listening ear, and acknowledgment of his struggle and pain." Are we listening, church?

So, thank you for publishing this cry from a loving mother.

» Ted and Corrie Bootsma // Burlington, Ont.

Binational Split

"Neither is this done with the intention of splitting the denomination along national boundaries. I believe Canadian legislation made this restructuring necessary, not optional" ("Change Is Not Easy," April 2020).

I accept that these statements are entirely true. But while separate national denominations may not be the intention, I believe it is likely to be the inevitable result. There is no way that the difference between "ecclesiastical" and "operational" can be cleanly delineated. ...

This can be a good thing. We could create the kind of close relationship we have with the Reformed Church in America, with provisions for the orderly exchange of clergy and (with) shared offices like Disability Concerns and Safe Church and Faith Alive Resources. And each national denomination could then actively pursue ministry adapted to their different cultures without impediment.

Rather than spend a lot of effort to prevent the separation by jury-rigging systems, perhaps we should embrace and even celebrate this separation and spend our effort making it as smooth and pain-free as possible.

» Bill Vis // Online comment

The Eucharist and the Weary

Sabbath

I am disappointed that in all the years we spend going to church and studying the Bible and its application for our life we still have such a misunderstanding of the purpose of something as simple as the Sabbath (“Remember the Sabbath,” February 2020). If nothing else, we know the Sabbath is a recreation of the creation. Six days labor and one of rest. However, this rest is not about recovery; it’s about sufficiency. God rested because he was done with creation. And so we too should labor for six days and rest on the seventh in the knowledge and trust that God will sustain us through the seventh.

» Jason Stob // Online comment

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As I Was Saying

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- » With Open Eyes: God used a street woman to show me something important.
- » Community Is Action: A perspective from my jail cell.
- » Zero-Waste Lent: Another way to do it.
- » A Uniquely Christian Grammar: Can there be a theology to the structure of language?

EARLY IN THE 1980s, I began to experience chronic fatigue. It came to affect not only much of my life but my experience of the Lord’s Supper as well. At the table, usually the emphasis was placed on the assurance of forgiveness of sins, but I often asked myself whether, through his Supper, our Lord also spoke to other burdens we might carry to the table, such as limited health, grief associated with the death of a spouse, or marriage difficulties.

Our denomination, through synodical reports on the Supper (1994 and 2016), has not addressed this question, but one can find passages in the gospels that suggest our Lord, at his Supper, does speak to such burdens. The night before his death, Jesus instructed his disciples, and us as well, to “remember him” (Luke 22; 1 Cor. 11), and the gospels make clear that all our burdens, not only our need to be forgiven and reconciled to God, are important to him. Consider these passages:


In his first sermon in the synagogue of Nazareth (Luke 4), Jesus announces he will fulfill the messianic prophecies of Isaiah: he will preach good news to the poor, bring freedom to prisoners, and give recovery of sight to the blind.

In Jesus’ parable of the great banquet (Luke 14), the banquet’s host tells his servants: “Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame” so they could attend his lavish banquet.

Finally, in his parable of the sheep and the goats (Matt. 25), Jesus emphatically asserts that when we feed the hungry, give a drink to the thirsty, invite the stranger to our house, and look after the sick, we do it as unto Jesus himself.

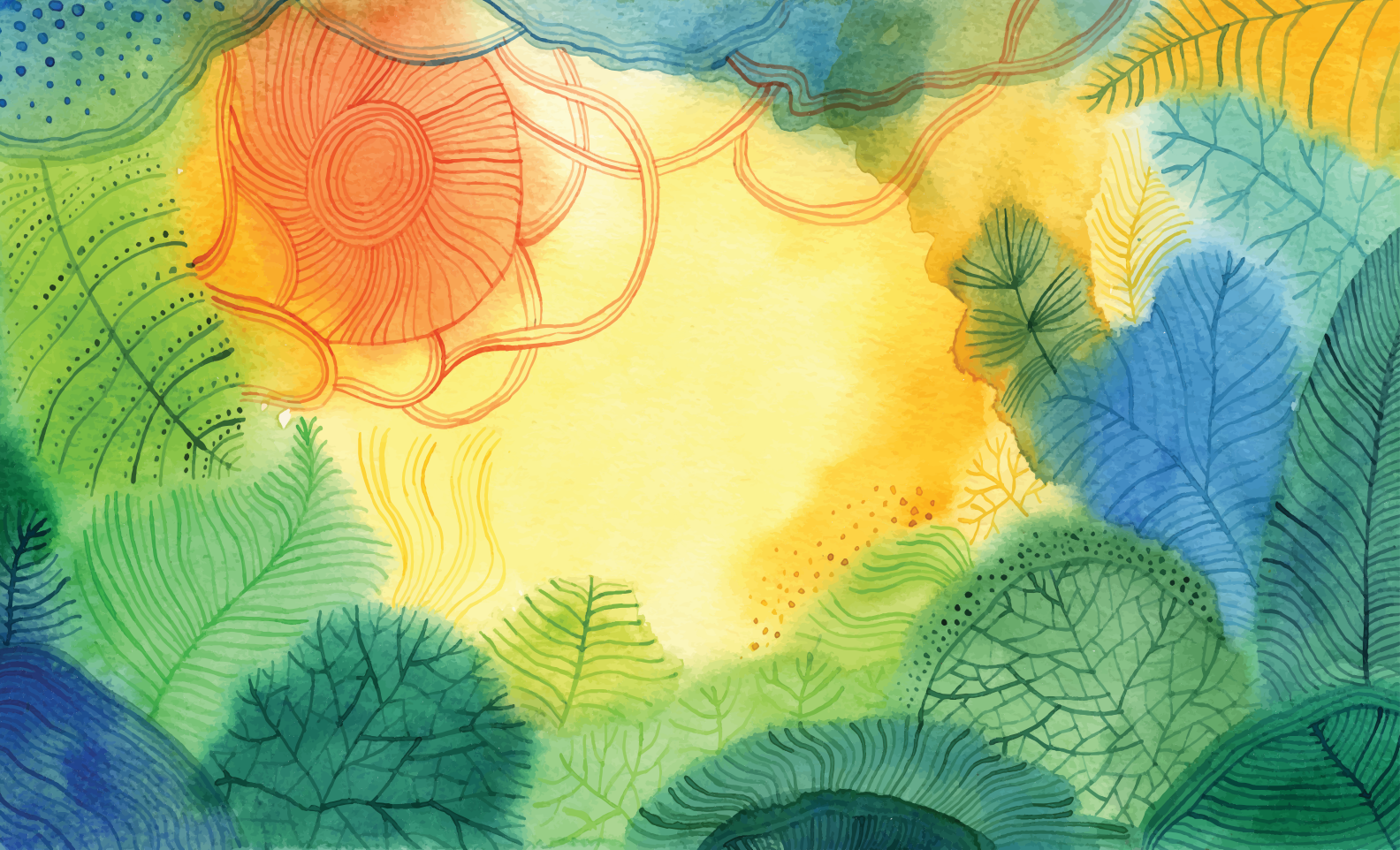
The gospels clearly reveal Jesus’ solidarity not only with those who seek his forgiveness, but with all those who are burdened in other ways. In his suffering, in life and in death, Jesus embraced all such persons, and this is how we may remember him at his table. This is the new covenant in his blood that Jesus extends to us by defeating all powers of evil. He is *Christus Victor*.

The Lord’s Supper is truly a feast for the “weary and burdened” (Matt. 11). This should give all of us great joy and hope.

In his book *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, Jürgen Moltmann writes about this and adds that at the table of the Lord’s Supper, we should on occasion remember our Lord’s compassion for all the afflicted worldwide. 



John Cook became involved in disability ministry after his retirement as a research scientist in physics. He is a member of Calvary Christian Reformed Church in Ottawa, Ont.



The Spiritual Significance of Trees

By Mac Wiener

When all of my neighbor's trees, the "forest next door," were chopped down about 20 years ago, something changed within me: without warning or intention, I became somewhat obsessed with trees. I read the nonfiction book *Trees of the Northern United States and Canada* like it was a novel. I had to identify every tree I walked by, and I began planning family vacations around trees I wanted to see (bald cypress swamp forest in southern Illinois, anyone?).

New scientific research on trees fascinated me. Forest trees, I learned, communicate through an amazing network of fungal and root connections. Precision dendrometers measure the expansion and

contraction of trunks down to fractions of a millimeter to show how trees respond to their environment. There is even science to back up what we know just by experience: there is a calming effect from walking in a forest.

As a Bible teacher, I was drawn to the prominence trees have in God's Word. When I read the Bible, every tree reference jumped out at me. The spiritual significance of trees is deeply rooted in Scripture.

God's Plan and Trees

Trees provide a framework for the biblical story. Admittedly, it's not the only way to understand the Bible; however, trees are present at every important stage. At creation, humans were blessed to live in the Garden of Eden. Central to this paradise were trees described as "pleasing to the eye and good for food" (Gen. 2:9). Believe

it or not, nothing else is described as "pleasing to the eye" in the creation account! What stood at the center of the garden? Trees—the tree of life with its life-giving fruit, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, from which humans were not to eat.

We read in Genesis 3 that Adam and Eve sinned by eating from this second tree. They brought sin to humanity and to the rest of creation. They were banished from the garden and, significantly, from the tree of life. The ensuing story of salvation is to bring humanity back to the tree of life in a setting of perfect harmony with God and one another in a restored creation. Jesus pays the price for our sin on a tree, another word for the cross. This dead tree becomes a symbol of salvation, pointing to the flourishing tree of life in the new heavens and new earth in Revelation 22.

Trees in the Bible

Within this grand story of redemption, trees figure prominently in many other ways. Benefits of trees are numerous and varied. Because trees are essential for human life and flourishing, tree metaphors appear frequently in the Biblical message. Between the tree of life in Genesis and in Revelation, how are we to live? Like a tree!

Psalm 1:2-3 tells us that drawing nourishment from God's Word makes one like a strong tree. The path toward success from God's perspective is best understood by delighting in the law of the Lord and observing a thriving tree. In Proverbs 3:18, wisdom is a tree of life that will lead to blessing. The righteous are compared to palm trees and cedars of Lebanon in Psalm 92:12. The palm tree refers to the date palm, a desert tree, while the cedars of Lebanon were the tallest and most massive trees in the region, located in the mountains north of Israel. Despite their differences, both trees were picturesque, strong, and long-lived—a fitting metaphor for a godly life.

When it comes to the New Testament, there is more to trees than Zacchaeus, the tax collector who climbed a tree related to the fig, (not a sycamore). Jesus used the mustard seed and tree to speak of the growth of his kingdom (Matt. 13), and Jesus used a fig tree to describe his second coming (Mark 13). In Romans 11, the apostle Paul uses an olive tree to explain salvation and the people of God. Both Jew and Gentile, separate people for millennia, come together now as one in Christ. The ability to graft branches into olive trees illustrates how two diverse groups become united.

When you are amazed at the beauty of the forest or the shape and stature of a majestic tree, what should you do? Worship. Trees lift their limbs in praise to their creator and in so doing point us to God. Psalm 96:12 states, "Let all the trees of the forest sing for joy." Isaiah 55:12 concurs: "All the trees

Trees lift their
limbs in praise to
their creator and
in so doing point
us to God.

of the field will clap their hands." And speaking of the prophet Isaiah ...

The Bible Tree Guy


Which biblical author mentions trees most frequently and seems to have the most arboreal knowledge? The prophet Isaiah. Which Bible verse lists the most species of trees and how many? Isaiah 41:19: "I will put in the desert the cedar and the acacia, the myrtle and the olive. I will set junipers in the wasteland, the fir and the cypress together." Just as God will supply trees that signal water sources and provide shade in the desert, God will abundantly bless God's people.

Isaiah prophesied the Messiah using a tree: "A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse" (Isa. 11:1). The stump represents God's judgment because of sin. A fruitful tree was chopped down and appears dead. But the tree, likely an olive tree, is very much alive underground. There is hope! From the stump comes a shoot that becomes a new tree. Despite present destruction and despair, God is faithful and at work. Jesus will come to bring hope to the world. Additionally, the Messiah's arrival is described with a tree: "He grew up before him like a tender shoot" (Isa. 53:2). And when Jesus comes, what will his people be like? "Oaks of righteousness" (Isa. 61:3). For people around the world, oaks are a tree of strength, long life, and numerous benefits.

Trees and You

I find myself talking about trees with people. An elderly man from church told me how, after the loss of his wife, he would sit among the trees at the edge of a lake in a forest preserve. He would pray and process the loss. As he lingered under the trees, God's peace bathed his wounded heart.

Take time to notice trees as you read God's Word and as you explore God's world. There is something special about them. Trees frame God's redemptive plan. How do they frame your life? I like to refer to the forest as the cathedral of God's creation. So when you need to pray, when thoughts are dominated by hurt and anxiety, go for a walk. Stroll among the silent sentinels that declare God's faithfulness, the towering trees that point to the heavens in worship.

As you plant trees, consider their benefits and count your blessings from God. As you witness trees grow year after year, as new life appears each spring, consider the hope we have in Jesus Christ. This hope gives us peace in the present and great expectation for the future as we look forward to the eternal tree of life. 



Mac Wiener is a middle and high school Bible teacher at Timothy Christian Schools in Elmhurst, Ill. He has digitally mapped all the trees on Timothy's campus and received national arboretum accreditation for the school. Mac attends

Lombard Christian Reformed Church.

BIG QUESTIONS

Missional Living

What might shift if a church were to become more missional?

In order to become “the personal Presence of Christ in the world by the Spirit,” as seminary professor Craig Van Gelder defines the missional church, there are indeed a number of shifts that need to happen in a congregation. Here are a few:

- » From doing outreach events to connecting with people where they are (maybe even right next door!)
- » From evangelism as a one-time presentation to bearing witness as we are, where we are, in our ordinary, everyday lives
- » From investing in buildings to inhabiting the ones that are already there as we join in with the daily and weekly rhythms of our neighbors
- » From seeing Sunday worship as an evangelistic (or attractional) event to gathering for engagement and formation as we together encounter the living God, who equips and empowers us to be his people where God has sent us
- » From assuming we have the right answers and know what others need to taking a posture of humility and attentiveness as we listen to our neighbors and discern how all are image-bearers of their Creator
- » From being the host with the resources and the control to entering the spaces of the other to share our peace (Luke 10)

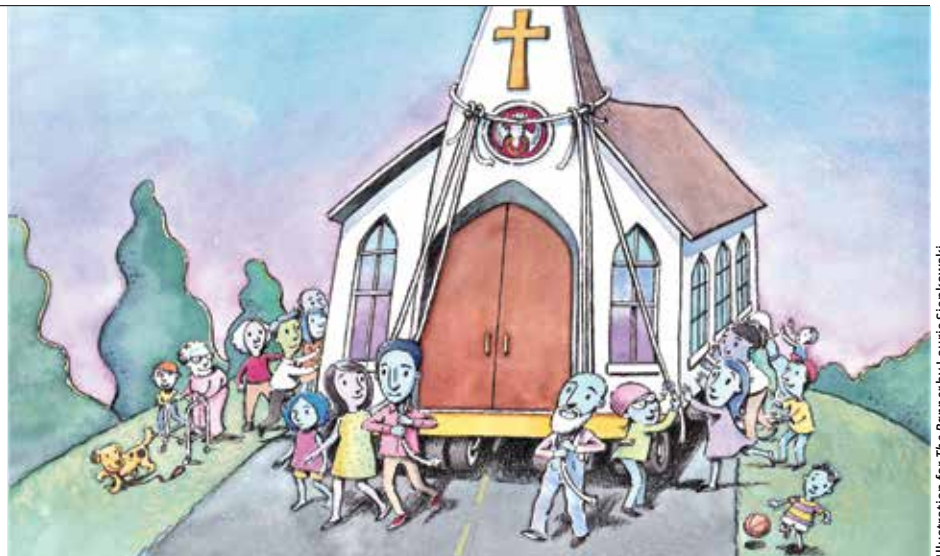


Illustration for The Banner by Laurie Sienkowski

- » From surveying our neighborhood to living among and connecting with our neighbors— and, in so doing, rejoicing with those who rejoice and mourning with those who mourn
- » From strategic planning and problem solving to trusting and following the Spirit when we don't have all the answers (yet still pointing to the kingdom of God come near)
- » From assuming that the “P's” of church—professionals, programs, and pews—will take care of us and any visitors who show up to instead being the church, every one of us, in person and in place through our postures and practices, and becoming who we are already called and made to be: the light of the world (Matt. 5:14) bearing witness to the Light of the World (John 8:12)

What will it take for us to make these shifts? Perhaps the faith of a mustard seed.

Karen Wilk is a Go Local catalyzer with Resonate Global Mission and Forge Canada. She is a pastor of Neighborhood Life, a home church movement in Edmonton, Alta., where she also enjoys being a wife, mom, and neighbor.

Relationships

How does a person know whether something is God's will? For instance, whom should I marry? Which job

should I take? Even though I pray, I don't know.

Like you, I used to feel that if I prayed about important decisions it should be clear where God was leading me. But it wasn't clear, and that was very frustrating. It felt as if God was playing a game with me in which I had to guess what God wanted, but where there would be serious and hurtful consequences if I guessed wrong.

But my understanding of God-led decision making has changed over time, and yours can, too. Here are some suggestions that might help you gain a new perspective:

First, get to know Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit who lives within you. Learn to trust that you are chosen if you want Jesus to be in your life. Then trust Jesus' promise that the Holy Spirit, who is called our comforter, our teacher, and more, was sent by Jesus to “parent” us so we would not feel abandoned (or left as orphans, as Scripture says).

Second, get to know yourself. Know your interests and passions, and let these motivate your pursuit of a career and a possible relationship. Don't be motivated by guilt (shoulds), or anxiety (fears and doubts). Instead, be motivated by the knowledge that the parent/child relationship you are learning to accept by faith is real and strong.

Third, treat every open door toward a desired job or new relationship as an invitation. Bathe all opportunities in prayer. Pray that your trust in our God will become stronger as you learn to accept that a loving Father, a faithful Savior, and an equipping Spirit—the God we serve—“has your back,” as it were.

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

Ethics

In the Bible, God gave Samson back his power, and Samson used that power to kill himself. Does this mean that sometimes it's OK to commit suicide?

Few would dispute that the creators or originators of a given thing or person have some right or claim—even if it's limited—over the thing produced or created. For example, as the author of *The Guardians*, John Grisham has some claim on that novel—a claim he can relinquish or sell, but still a claim he has or had. Likewise, parents have a right to say how they'd like their children to be educated—which is why there is the occasional outburst among parents over things taught in schools.

Because God created human beings, God has some right to guide how they act and are acted upon. Unlike inanimate things, such as books, human beings have been given free will, but the free will of a creature is still partly bound to its Creator. Therefore, because humans have an obligation to God, they can't kill themselves out of purely selfish reasons and expect this to be morally OK. In such a case, God's right or claim over the individual will have been ignored, which is unjust or sinful (this would be an instance of unjust killing or murder—something forbidden by the sixth commandment). While Paul's the-body-is-the-temple-of-the-Holy-Spirit line of argument (1 Cor. 3:16-17) isn't entirely appropriate here (i.e., it's not about suicide), we

can still see that what is set apart for God is something that God has a claim on, and God will be justly angry if that claim is disregarded.

Nevertheless, is there such a thing as the just or right killing of oneself? In *The Republic*, Socrates argues that it is possible that a good man could kill himself for the sake of others. Is it possible that Samson's moral duty to oppose the enemies of God (a duty he was consecrated for) was morally more significant than the general moral duty not to kill oneself? I think it is plausible. Indeed, if the distinction between “killing oneself” and “allowing oneself to be killed” is not as clear as some have suggested it is, then in some ways, Jesus himself does this very thing: he could have prevented his own death, but still chose death to save us.

Adam Barkman is a professor of philosophy at Redeemer University College in Hamilton, Ont.

Faith Formation

How do you explain in terms young children can understand what it means to 'bless' someone in the name of God?

The word “blessing” can be difficult for children to understand. One reason we struggle is because there is a lot going on with that word. We remember that when Jacob tricked his father, Isaac, into giving Jacob his brother's blessing, Isaac couldn't just “take it back.”

David Stubbs writes in *A More Profound Alleluia* that a blessing is “a calling for the Holy Spirit to come and transform us.” Being blessed by God means “that we become holy, reflective of God and the purposes of God.”

Our understanding of a blessing seems to have been diluted somewhat over the years. We don't really expect God to transform us because someone speaks certain words over us. But blessings given in the Bible suggest that these words are more than just

something nice to say. On *Renovare.org*, Dallas Willard wrote, “Blessing is the projection of good into the life of another. It isn't just words. It's the actual putting forth of your will for the good of another person. It always involves God, because when you will the good of another person, you realize only God is capable of bringing that.”

When we are blessed, God is working in our lives to transform us. We aren't blessed just so we'll be happier. We are blessed so that we can bless others. Because being blessed carries with it a responsibility, the words of blessing at the end of our worship are often coupled with a charge, calling us to go out into the world as God's servants. God commands us to go out into the world, but also to know that God goes with us. Just as God calls us and welcomes us into worship, God also sends us forth ready and able to do God's work.

So how do we explain all that to children? Sometimes for young children, definitions of complex words will lose some of their nuance. We're OK with that. The nuance will come later. A simple definition for blessing won't explain all the things wrapped up in that word. With that in mind, we might say, “When we bless each other, we are praying that God will walk along with that person and be right next to them, protecting them, and helping them to do God's work.”

Laura Keeley is a regional catalyzer for Faith Formation Ministries and director of children's ministries at 14th St. Christian Reformed Church in Holland, Mich. Robert J. Keeley is a professor of education at Calvin College and director of distance education at Calvin Seminary.



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

Church Marks Lent With Art on Instagram

NEWS

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Erica Eisses's painting from Day 32 of Lent 2020.

Even before community gathering restrictions (instituted in many states and provinces in mid-March) caused churches to move worship and other forms of connection online, First Christian Reformed Church in Barrie, Ont., was sharing a Lenten art project with followers on Instagram, @1stcrrbarrie. First CRC members Erica Eisses and Kristen Parker collaborated on a series of paintings and poetry, each contributing a new daily creation over the 40 days of Lent.

“This is my fourth year doing a Lenten project,” said Eisses, who started with pencil and charcoal drawings the first year and for 2020 used a mix of oil and acrylic paint for the second year in a row.

Eisses and Parker, who live in different cities, collectively come up with a series of prompts to guide their creativity two weeks at a time. The resulting images varied from geometric mixed grays and

colors to landscapes and plantlife, and the poetry used words recalling Ash Wednesday to verses referencing hope.

Parker’s poem from day seven reads, “the rain stops/and the sun peeks through/as mist clears/a hushed wind coaxes them/ and the pathway becomes visible.” It accompanied Eisses’ painting of a deeply clouded yet lightening sky above a forest of evergreen trees.

Eisses said sharing the work in community enhances the experience and prevents the loneliness that can characterize artistic pursuits.

“Many people choose to give something up for Lent, and I find this project quite similar to that practice. I offer my time and my interests to focus on this pivotal moment of our liturgical year,” Eisses said.

—Alissa Vernon

CRC Churches Enrich Worship with Dance



In the weeks leading up to Easter, a group at Zion Christian Reformed Church in Oshawa, Ont., prepared for worship by learning and practicing messianic dance, a tradition that sets Israeli folk dance to contemporary worship music. They got three weeks into their six-week workshop before restrictions on gathering put in place to slow the spread of COVID-19 caused them to stop meeting. (See more stories of churches and reactions to COVID-19 on pages 16-17.)

Still, workshop leader Maaïke Vandermeer sent dance step recordings to her participants and to other members at Zion CRC so they could continue to practice worshipping God through dance.

Vandermeer first learned messianic dance while she was a student in Texas, and though she had never seen dance at Zion CRC before, several people from the congregation have told her that Zion CRC included liturgical dance in their services decades ago.

Vandermeer said, "As Christians, we are called to live with our hearts, bodies, minds, and souls unified in worship, but we often leave our bodies out of it. To me, dance is like fasting, in the sense that your whole body is joining you in prayer."

Joann Wynia, a member at Zion CRC, was one of the 10 workshop participants. "Participating and learning the steps and

A screenshot of a dance tutorial video Maaïke Vandermeer provided to members of Zion CRC.

then putting that to the music while focusing on your whole body being involved is such a beautiful way to worship," she said.

Zion CRC is not alone in exploring the tradition of liturgical dance. Dorette Pronk has been dancing at All Nations CRC in Halifax, N.S., since 2002.

The children at All Nations CRC use flags during the beginning of most services, Pronk said. "The children know that it is more important to worship Jesus through the songs and tell him they love him than that they make the right dance movements." Later in the service, Pronk and some of the older girls will often worship together through dance. They use movements from ballet, jazz, and modern dance, and they also use flags, ribbons, and fans when it seems fit.

Pronk said, "I hope that dance, like the visual arts, can paint a prophetic picture to go with our (worship) songs. It can be a declaration or a petition—directed at God or at his people or the world: one more way to express our worship together."

—Kristen Parker

IN MEMORIAM



*Rev. Robert
'Bob' L. Jipping*

1937-2020

Robert Jipping, pastor, missionary and teacher, died Feb. 10 at the age of 82.

After graduating from Calvin College, Jipping taught at Calvin Christian School in South Holland, Ill., where he met his future wife. After marriage they taught together at Zuni Christian School in New Mexico. They later returned to Grand Rapids so Jipping could study at Calvin Theological Seminary.

After ordination in 1969, the Jippings spent a year in Costa Rica learning Spanish before moving to Argentina, where he served with Christian Reformed World Missions (now Resonate Global Mission) in Tres Arroyos and Chascomús. He went on to serve the following congregations: Christian Reformed Church of Cedar (Iowa); Prairie Lane CRC, Omaha, Neb.; Greene Road CRC, Goshen, Ind.; and Crownpoint (N.M.) CRC. "The last was a Christian Reformed Home Missions Navajo church where he was very happy," said his daughter.

Jipping loved to be around children and to sing, and he was an avid Detroit Tigers baseball fan. After retirement in 2002, he volunteered in prison ministry in the South Holland area and at Sauk Village Food Pantry.

Predeceased by his wife, Ann, he will be lovingly remembered by his daughter, Mary, and son, Timothy.

—Janet A. Greidanus

Noteworthy

Photo by Saul Carvajal



Micah Centre program director Jonathan Nicolai-deKoning (wearing the hat) works with two mason assistants to mix concrete for the base of a latrine.

The Honduras Water Project, a program of **The King's University in Edmonton, Alta.**, celebrated **25 years** March 7. Alumni, current students, local Christian Reformed Church members, and friends and supporters from World Renew and the Northern Alberta Diaconal Conference (an organization of deacons within Classis Alberta North) gathered for the event. Participants from King's travel each May to work alongside Hondurans to construct simple, effective, and low-maintenance gravity water systems, as well as pilas (water reservoirs) and latrines, while at the same time experiencing and learning from the local culture. "It's been 25 years of transforming the lives of Hondurans, but also 25 years of letting Hondurans transform you," said Rolando Pinzon, a constituency bridger for World Renew in Honduras.

Colin Watson, acting executive director of the Christian Reformed Church, **participated in a video-based summit gathering practical and spiritual wisdom to equip churches ministering during the pandemic of COVID-19.** The summit was hosted by the National Association of Evangelicals and the Humanitarian Disaster Institute at Wheaton College on March 26 and 27.

Darren Roorda, Canadian Ministries Director of the Christian Reformed Church, **was one of more than 80 Canadian religious leaders to sign a joint statement to Canadians** on March 30 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The "**message of hope, gratitude and solidarity to all people who call Canada home**" was initiated by the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops and The Canadian Rabbinic Caucus and was prepared with the support and coordination of The Canadian Council of Churches, to which the CRC belongs.

[READ MORE ONLINE](#)

Synod 2020 Canceled

Synod 2020, the annual leadership meeting of the Christian Reformed Church, has been canceled because of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is the first time in the history of the CRC that a synod has been canceled. Synod won't convene again until June 2021.

The CRC's Council of Delegates will host a special virtual meeting in June 2020 to deal with items that cannot wait until June 2021. It is granted that authority by Church Order Article 33-b, which reads, "... synod shall appoint the Council of Delegates of the CRCNA, to act for them in matters which cannot await action by the (assembly itself)."

Synod 2020 was to have taken place June 12-18 at Calvin University in Grand Rapids, Mich. The event brings together more than 200 people, including four delegates from each of 49 classes (regional groups of churches), advisers, seminary faculty, and denominational staff leaders.

CRC director of synodical services, Dee Recker, said the primary concern was the safety of delegates and their families. "Other factors played a role," she said, "including current stay-at-home orders in Michigan and Ontario and closed borders."

Recker said hosting the synod virtually was considered, but she noted it would be almost impossible to host a deliberative assembly remotely.

"We discussed potentially having synodical advisory committees meet to consider the agenda for synod and present to a smaller group of delegates or the COD, but mixing synod delegates and the COD seemed unwise," she said. "COD members are not necessarily officebearers as are synod delegates, and how would you begin to select a smaller group of synod delegates when many classes do not meet in the spring? . . . Not to mention that synod is an assembly of ministers, elders, and deacon officebearers. We would have lost the parity of office in that scenario."

The proposal to cancel was made by the synod program committee (made up of last year's synod officers), the executive committee of the CRC's Council of Delegates, Rev. Kathy Smith (CRCNA polity adviser), and Rev. Dirk Van Eyk, pastor of the church that was to convene Synod 2020. The full Council of Delegates voted electronically April 8 in favor of the move.

This is the first time in the more than 160-year history of the Christian Reformed Church that synod has been canceled.

Acting executive director Colin Watson said in a statement that while this is disappointing news that joins the other losses that we grieve, we remember that God's church will and does go on despite COVID-19.

"We do not need to have a denomination-wide meeting in order for God's kingdom work to continue," he said. "What a blessing this is to acknowledge."

—Gayla Postma, news editor

COVID-19 News Digest

On March 11, the World Health Organization officially categorized the outbreak of COVID-19 (novel coronavirus) as a global pandemic. COVID-19 has resulted in events being postponed, schools moving online, people being quarantined, and churches left trying to navigate the continuing shift. This is a digest of stories written by Kristen Parker, Elizabeth Drummond, Maia VanderMeer, and news editors Gayla Postma and Alissa Vernon.

Denominational Offices Closed

The Christian Reformed Church set up COVID-19 security monitoring teams for domestic and international staff, first issuing guidelines and restrictions for staff March 13.

All staff in the U.S. and Canada were asked to work remotely whenever possible and were encouraged not to attend any external meetings, including classis meetings, conferences, and training events. Staff and volunteers placed internationally were encouraged to remain in their host country until the conclusion of their terms.

As of March 24, the offices in Burlington, Ont., and Grand Rapids, Mich., closed in line with orders articulated by state and provincial leaders. Only minimal essential services continued to be carried out on site, such as financial processing and mail pickup.

The Council of Delegates meeting scheduled for the first week of May was to take place by video conferencing.

Congregations Show Love Without Gathering

Mark and Summer Morlang, pastors at Sanctuary CRC in Seattle, which hosts worship services in a rented theater, halted their services as of March 8. "I think this is a good opportunity to equip folks to embody the gospel that could have a long-term positive impact," Summer Morlang said.

Sang-Hyun An, pastor of Hana Seed Church, a Korean congregation in Palo Alto, Calif., that also meets in a public venue, ended in-person meetings in early March as well. "Everyone is worried and anxious. However, in the midst of



Photo by Mark Hilbelink

Volunteers at Sunrise Community Church's Navigation Center in early March.

this, I shared the feeling that those who are marginalized will face greater financial hardships. Through a special donation, we donated to Korea's free food service ministry and the World Vision Coronavirus Emergency Relief Team," An told Charles Kim, diversity leader at Resonate Global Mission, who provided English translation to *The Banner* March 13.

"The virus has created opportunities for us to love and serve each other in ways that perhaps we've neglected because of busy schedules," said Jeff Dykstra, an elder at Trinity CRC in Sparta, Mich. In that congregation Pastor C.J. den Dulk is recording and uploading a sermon and prayer to YouTube each week. For households without internet, Trinity is delivering CD recordings.

Pastor Tim Sheridan of Maple Ridge (B.C.) CRC, called on families to adopt "vulnerable and isolated people" (VIPs) to check on. Ninety-four-year-old Corry de Haan said during this pandemic, she and other older people are "learning to accept help for things we'd rather do on our own. ... (A) phone call once in a while is really nice."

In Austin, Texas, in early April, Sunrise Community Church's Navigation Center was one of the few still-operating services to homeless people in the city. "If we shut down, our clients would very likely not have food to eat and not be able to connect to services they need," said volunteer coordinator Sarah Combs.

IN MEMORIAM



Rev. Jacob W. Uitvlugt

1929-2020

Jacob Uitvlugt, 91, died on March 4.

After ordination in 1955, Uitvlugt served Bauer Christian Reformed Church, Hudsonville, Mich.; Calvary CRC, Wyoming, Mich.; Second CRC, Edmonton, Alta.; Creston CRC, Grand Rapids, Mich.; and Beverly CRC, Wyoming, Mich. For 11 years while at Beverly he was also chaplain for the Wyoming Police Department, where it is said his story of the gospel and forgiveness changed many lives and gave hope to those who felt they had none. While at Beverly he also led a two-month missionary expedition to Nigeria to influence and guide the building of new churches there. He then accepted a call to Central Avenue CRC, Holland, Mich., and then Beaverdam (Mich.) CRC. He retired in 1994 but returned to Beaverdam from 2004-2005 while that church's pastor served as a chaplain in Iraq.

Uitvlugt loved to read books on theology and history, especially about WWII, the Navy, and the Air Force. One of his hobbies was assembling model airplanes. He water-skied until he was 75.

Uitvlugt will be missed by Ruth, his wife of 65 years; their three children and spouses; nine grandchildren; and 12 great-grandchildren. He was preceded in death by his grandson, Andrew.

—Janet A. Greidanus

Classis Watch: Winter 2020

Two or three times each year, Christian Reformed churches send representatives to their classis, a regional group of churches. Many of the actions taken by classes are governed by the CRC's Church Order, the rules that govern denominational life. Here are some of the actions by classes in the past few months.

Those **welcomed into ministry in the Christian Reformed Church** include seminary graduates Luke Carrig, Jungseong (Samuel) Kim, Marcel Kuiper, Tim McHugh, Nathan Groenewold, Anthony Matias, and Kathy Vana (Church Order Arts. 6 and 10).

Those welcomed into ministry in the CRC **from other denominations**, following a satisfactory colloquium doctum (doctrinal conversation) establishing soundness of doctrine, sanctity of life, and knowledge and appreciation of Christian Reformed practice, include Revs. Minsoon Kim, John Lee, Doug Nieuwstraten, Josh Schatzle, and Justin Bailey (Church Order Art. 8).

Ministers **loaned**: Tim McHugh to First Reformed Church of Lincoln Park, N.J. (Church Order Art. 13b).

Ministers released from a congregation: Rev. Bryan Van Soelen, from Providence CRC (Holland, Mich.); Rev. Greg Fluit, from Fellowship CRC (St. Thomas, Ont.); Rev. Marc Van Berkum, from Central Avenue CRC (Holland, Mich.); Rev. Daniel Munchul Kim, from East Bay Korean CRC of El Cerrito (Calif.); Rev. Paul Birnbaum, from Hope CRC (Rapid City, S.D.); Rev. Seung Jun Lee, from Hanaro Community CRC (La Puente, Calif.); and Rev. Stephen Eckersley, from Immanuel CRC (Cornwall, Ont.) (Church Order Art. 17a).

Leaving ministry in the CRC

Churches and classes make a declaration reflecting a resigned minister's status that is appropriate to the way and spirit in which the minister acted during the time leading

up to and including resignation from office. Those designations are honorably released, released, dismissed, or in the status of one deposed (Church Order Art. 14).

Simon Ko, Carols Lezameta, and Mwaya wa Kitavi were released in the status of one **deposed**.

Tom Groelsema was **honorably released**.

Len Meinema and Raymond Coffey were **released**.

Ministers granted emeritus status (retired): Revs. Daniel Brink, Chris Kostelansky, Mark Douglas, Jack Dik, Nick Overduin, Carel Geleynse, James Chiang, Bruce Persenaire, Christian Oh, and Manny Bersach (Church Order Art. 18).

Commissioned Pastors

Approved as **commissioned pastors called to specific roles within their classis** were Brian Myers (Classis Grand Rapids North), Ron Boersema (Classis Zeeland), Nick Lang (Classis Arizona), Moises Pacheco (Classis Chicago South), Lorraine Rong Li (Classis Grand Rapids East), and Justin Halbersma (Classis Eastern Canada) (Church Order Art. 23).

Jason Romine (Classis Hudson), Mike Collins (Classis Hamilton), Bruce Dykstra (Classis Atlantic Northeast), and Mike Sarkissian (Classis California South) **ended their service as commissioned pastors**.

Socheth Ha (Classis Holland), Francisco Golon (Classis Wisconsin), Helen Chew (Classis Central California), and Ron Geerlings (Classis Grand Rapids South) were granted **commissioned pastor emeritus status**.

New Ministries and Ministry Changes

An emerging (unorganized) church does not have its own council and is under the care of a council of a neighboring CRC. An organized church has its own council (Church Order Art. 38).

New Life Prison Church, located inside the Newton (Iowa) Correctional Facility, was declared **organized**. The church will have an inside congregation and council along with an outside council. The outside congregation will be made up of commissioned members approved by their home church for investing themselves in the ministries of the New Life Prison Church. (See "Prison Church Receives Organized Status," p. 20.)

Also declared **organized**: Hasarang Family Church (Chandler, Ariz.) and Missions Church (Tucson, Ariz.).

Southside Christian Church Burmese ministry (Indianapolis, Ind.) and Living Hope CRC (Metcalfe, Ont.) **closed**.

Synod 2020

Any change to the Church Order requires one synod to *propose the change* and a subsequent synod to *adopt* the change before it takes effect (Church Order Article 47).

Several classes sent requests (**overtures**) to be considered by Synod 2020 before synod was canceled. (See story p. 16.)

Classis Grand Rapids East asks that synod **revise Church Order Articles 12, 13, and 14**, using the **word position instead of work**, and **implement a signed covenant of joint supervision** for ministers called to specialized ministries.

Classis Muskegon asks that Synod 2020 **revise Church Order Article 45, changing synod delegations to one minister, one elder, and one deacon**, eliminating the need for a fourth delegate. Classis Chicago South also asks for a revision to the same article, allowing a classis to **send an at-large delegate as an alternate** in synod delegations. (Currently, all delegates must be current officebearers.)

Classis Zeeland asks Synod 2020 to **adopt a supplement to Church Order Articles 82-84, allowing a church or a classis to appeal** to a broader assembly if it deems

Church Hosts Multilingual Worship Fest

an officebearer in another church (or classis) to be in violation of the Covenant for Officebearers.

Classis Grand Rapids East asks Synod 2020 for a revision of Church Order Article 17-a to **allow the release of a minister from a congregation to occur without concurrence of synodical deputies** unless the request for release results in a need for evaluation and assistance before accepting another call.

Classis Columbia would like Synod 2020 to appoint a study committee to consider a revision of Church Order Article 17 and several related articles in order to **guide pastors and churches in times of conflict as well as provide assistance for positive pastoral transitions.**

Classis Zeeland sent a **communication** to Synod 2020 and the synodical **Study Committee on Human Sexuality**, declaring “that those lusting or engaging in homosexual relations are living in sin, and are called to repent, and find forgiveness at the cross.”

Classis Illiana asks Synod 2020 to **declare that denial of the penal substitutionary atonement doctrine** “is a **grievous deviation from sound doctrine**, a heresy: to in any way deny that Jesus Christ’s life, death, and resurrection is a substitutionary work of bearing God’s wrath on our behalf because of the just punishment we deserve for our sin.”

—Gayla R. Postma, news editor



The “Santo, Santo, Santo Festival,” hosted March 8 at Fairlawn Christian Reformed Church in Whitinsville, Mass., made use of a new bilingual (Spanish/English) hymnal, *Santo, Santo, Santo/Holy, Holy, Holy*, released by the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship last summer. The Institute, part of Calvin University in Grand Rapids, Mich., offered churches free hymnals and other support to host a local festival and provide congregational feedback.

The event “reminded all of us that God is a big God who loves to see the world’s unity reflected in worship,” said Kelly Penning, a planning team member at Fairlawn CRC.

The number of Spanish and Portuguese speakers has grown in the past year at Fairlawn CRC, reflective of changes in Whitinsville’s population. While the church had incorporated some multilingual songs into their services, a full multilingual event was new ground. Music included various instruments, and people from multiple generations led hymns, Scripture, and responsive readings in English, Portuguese, and Spanish.

Fifty to 60 people gathered for the festival. The planning team had hoped for larger attendance from the community,

(From left, at the podium) Pamela Araujo Garcia, Joel Vande Werken, and Kelly Penning lead in worship at the Santo, Santo, Santo Festival.

but Penning said the event was still valuable. “I think that the members of our congregation that speak other languages felt valued and appreciated.” As for the English-speaking church members, Pastor Joel Vande Werken said the event stretched the church to consider “what it means to be part of the wider church who worship God and celebrate Christ’s salvation in words and expressions that might be a bit different than ours.”

—Maia VanderMeer

Prison Church Receives Organized Status



New Life pastors Rose and Rick Admiraal.

New Life Prison Community Church in Newton, Iowa, became an organized congregation of the Christian Reformed Church in February. Classis Central Plains (a regional group of CRCs) affirmed the request for a change of status at its regular meeting. The ministry serves the inmates of Newton Prison and Release Center.

New Life, which began as a church plant nine years ago, is the third prison church to successfully apply for and receive organized status. Cornerstone Prison Church in Sioux Falls, S.D., was organized in 2013, and Celebration Fellowship in Ionia, Mich., was organized in 2016.

Rick and Rose Admiraal, pastors of New Life, said the status update won't change a lot in terms of how the church functions on a day-to-day basis, but it will change some things externally. For example, New Life's external board of directors, which consists of volunteers from several churches in Classis Central Plains, will now become a council who will partner with the church's existing inside council, made up of its prison congregants. Many of the outside mentors and volunteers who work with the prison congregants have decided to become Commission Members of New Life, making them no longer simply volunteers. Commission members continue to be members of their original churches and hold membership status in New Life as well.

At the time of the February classis meeting, New Life had 35 commission members. They were a key part of the congregation's application for organized status. Admiraal said the denomination has set 30 commission members as a minimum for success, as that number would provide a good core group that would have a high degree of sustainability.

Being recognized as organized also helps to solidify New Life's belonging within their classis.

Rick Admiraal said, "One of our inside council members, Brad, described it this way. He said, 'This would be validation for us.' I think what he meant is it would confirm from the outside what we are already doing on the inside. That the greater church community would say, 'What is happening there within the correctional facility is real. There's authentic discipleship training. And they're moving forward in their faith, and we believe in these guys, that they really can change their lives.'"

—Krista dela Rosa

Following Matt. 25:36 in a North Carolina Church

Bill Van Staalduinin, a member of Terra Ceia Christian Reformed Church in North Carolina, has been volunteering with Yokefellow Prison Ministry for more than 20 years. His service takes to heart Matt. 25:36, which says visiting the sick or in prison is like ministering to Jesus. "I do what I do because of what Christ did for me," the 86-year-old told *The Banner* in a March 11 phone interview.

Van Staalduinin began volunteering with the prison ministry shortly after retiring from farming, and he has encouraged others at Terra Ceia to participate. In a letter he wrote on behalf of Yokefellow, he explained that inmates at the Hyde County Correctional Facility where he ministers, want to be "recognized as a community of believers" and have set up services to pray, sing, and study the Bible. "We pray that the Lord of the harvest will send more volunteers," Van Staalduinin wrote.

Garrett Saul, the pastor at Terra Ceia, described the Yokefellow meeting he sat in on as "wonderful."

"Around 50 inmates came to study Scripture for about an hour and a half followed by a short time of singing. There was also a time of sharing about what the inmates hope to do with their lives after they get out of prison."

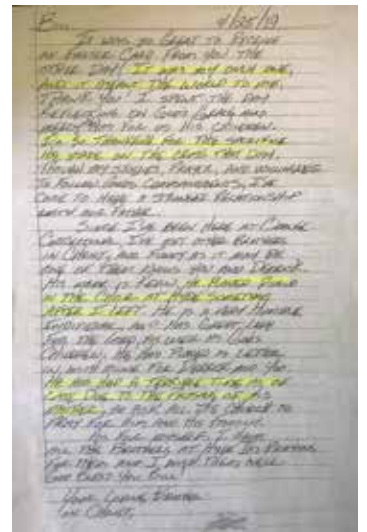
Van Staalduinin has connected with at least one returning citizen after incarceration. He said he hoped to find work for the 40-year-old man, who attended church services along with Van Staalduinin and his wife and joined them several Sundays for meals. "This is the third time he's starting over again," Van Staalduinin said.

The Yokefellow volunteer work started for Van Staalduinin at the encouragement of a neighbor. He said he also had a long-time interest in prison ministry after reading the *Sugar Creek Gang* books as a boy. "Little (Jim) always inspired me about going to preach at the jail."

The biggest part of the work is listening to the inmates, Van Staalduinin said. "They don't get too much say in prison, so they can talk here. We're here to comfort and support them."

—Callie Feyen

Read more online on our Behind *The Banner* blog: A Story from Another Time.



Last April, Bill Van Staalduinin received a thank-you note from one of his incarcerated friends.

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The View from Here

Better Together

Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their labor: If either of them falls down, one can help the other up. But pity anyone who falls and has no one to help them up.

—Ecclesiastes 4:9-10

LAST YEAR, MY WIFE, FREIDA, and I celebrated 40 years of marriage. All through these decades, we both fully embraced God's command to love him and obeyed God's call to ministry. Working side by side in partnership for God's glory enabled us to strengthen each other and build each other up in love. The Bible is replete with examples of partnerships and exhortations to work together in all things. For Freida and me, our life is better because we lived it together.

I know that not all of *The Banner's* readers are married. I pray, though, that all of you have experienced this lesson in your life. Whether it is with family members, roommates, friends, or colleagues, I hope that you have had the blessing of being able to share your burdens with another, to have a partner in tackling something challenging,

While our individual faith is important, our membership in the body of Christ is also essential.

and to have had someone to celebrate successes with.

I believe these same lessons apply to our church families. In fact, I think this is one of the key reasons the Bible urges Christians to "not give up meeting together." Our churches are where we worship, disciple each other, discipline each other, and discern God's will. While our individual faith is important, our membership in the body of Christ is also essential.

One way the Christian Reformed Church in North America lives out this principle is through an innovative program known as ministry shares. Over the years, as our denomination recognized certain needs or identified different priorities, we decided to start ministries together as a way of working in partnership. We fund these initiatives—whether they are related to global missions, Sunday school curriculum, pastor training, or any

other CRCNA ministry—by pooling our resources.

In this way, no one person or church needs to cover the full amount of any ministry. At the same time, every member of every church in the CRCNA is able to say that these ministries are part of how they are individually living out their faith.

In these pages are a few examples of ministry shares at work. To tell the stories in a fun and interesting way, we've decided to share them in graphic novel form, but they depict very real ministry taking place all around the globe thanks to support like yours. Thank you for being part of this partnership.



Colin P. Watson Sr. is acting executive director of the Christian Reformed Church in North America.

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

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Blessed Are the Persecuted



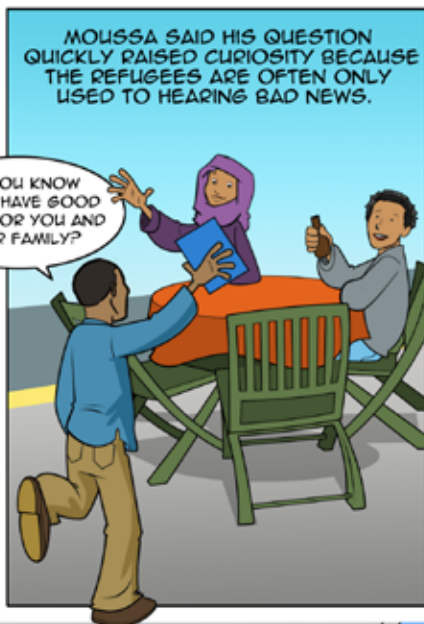


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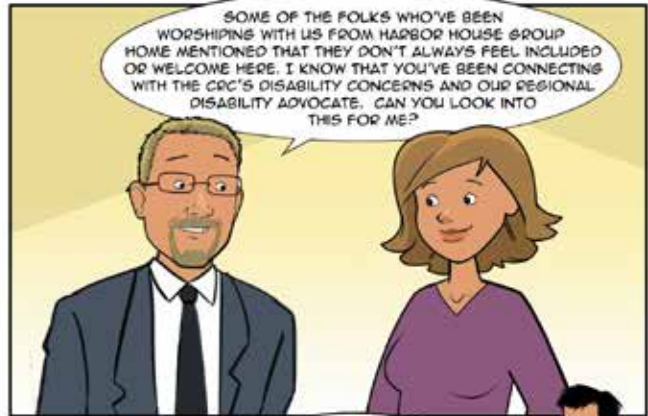
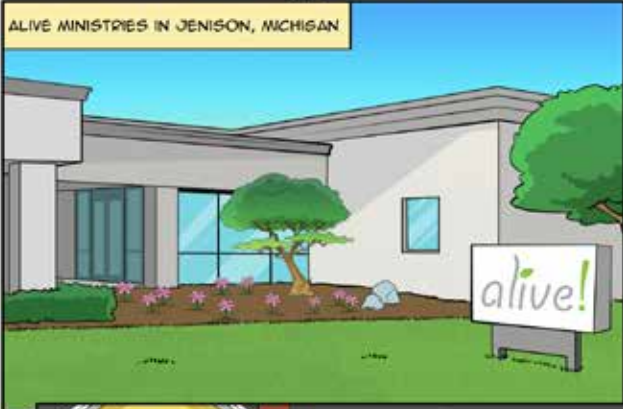
A God Who Loves Our Language





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Bridging Pop Culture and Christianity

HOW DO WE HAVE meaningful discussions with people who have different opinions than our own?

For Joey Jackson, this question became especially frustrating when he tried to find common ground with fellow Christians who had different political leanings.

“I thought that telling others that my opinions were rooted in my faith—just as theirs are—could humanize what was perceived as ‘the other side,’” said Jackson, “but it rarely led to reasonable discussions.”

This polarization, especially among Christians, was taking a toll on Jackson’s spiritual well-being.

“I was definitely struggling with my faith,” Jackson said. “I felt as though Christianity didn’t have a place for me.”

Discovering *Think Christian*

Seeing Jackson’s struggle, a friend gave Jackson a book written by Josh Larsen, editor of *Think Christian*, a website and podcast offering a Christian perspective on pop culture. *Think Christian* is part of Back to God Ministries International’s English-language ministry, ReFrame Media.

Larsen’s book and *Think Christian* articles have helped Jackson learn new ways to have productive conversations across the political aisle—even though neither the book nor *Think Christian* addresses politics directly.

“It pushed me to think more analytically about films and helped me move past an ‘us-versus-them’ mentality



Building on what he’d learned about faith and pop culture from *Think Christian*, Joey Jackson (far right) began a monthly Bible study using movies.

within the faith,” said Jackson. “I was able to use films and music as a springboard into numerous conversations about God and faith.”

Reframing the Discussion

Inspired by these conversations, Jackson recently began a Bible study using movies as topical springboards. The group meets monthly to watch a film, read a Scripture passage associated with the film’s message, and have a discussion.

After watching the 1980 film *The Blues Brothers*, the group connected the film to 1 Peter 4 and discussed the concept of undeserved grace.

These conversations inevitably lead to political discussions, but by using pop culture as a lens, the group can have meaningful discussions despite political differences.

“We try not to be an echo chamber for our beliefs,” Jackson said. “We have some close friends who rarely see eye to eye on many subjects, which makes the discussions worthwhile.”

In a note to Larsen, Jackson thanked him for the encouragement he has received through Larsen’s writing and other *Think Christian* pieces. As supporters of *Think Christian* and its partner programs, may his words of thanks also encourage you.

“Again, I can’t thank you enough for bridging that gap between movies and God,” Jackson said.

—Brian Clark,
Back to God Ministries International

Peer Learning Grant Helps Pastors Share Their Challenges

HEATHER STROOBOSSCHER

has been very grateful for the chance to step away from her hectic schedule as associate pastor at Calvary Christian Reformed Church in Wyoming, Mich., to meet and share her ministry challenges with other pastors.

At her church, there are several ministries ranging from support groups for those battling various addictions to a Wednesday evening meal for people in their neighborhood. There also are counseling sessions and Bible studies as well as a community clothing exchange. Strooboscher plays a role in several of these in addition to her preaching and pastoral care.

In 2019 she had the chance to connect regularly with a few other area pastors to talk about her work thanks in part to a Peer Learning Group Grant from the Pastor Church Resources office.

Funded by the Lilly Endowment Inc., the Peer Learning Grants began in 2003, and so far 319 have been awarded to 917 Christian Reformed pastors. The grants offer pastors an opportunity to gather for learning, support, prayer, encouragement, and fellowship.

Although her group had been meeting before they received the grant, Strooboscher said, it could meet more often with help from the grant.

The group had the chance to gather regularly for coffee as well as get away for retreats.

One retreat at the Christian Reformed Conference Grounds along Lake Michigan in Grand Haven, Mich.,



Photo by Chris Meehan

Aided by a Peer Learning Group Grant, pastors gather for mutual encouragement and renewal. From left: James Jones, Ben Ritter, Tom DeVries, Susan LaClear, Robert Van Zanen, Heather Strooboscher, and Steve Hull.

especially sticks in Strooboscher's mind and illustrates the value pastors can get from a Peer Learning Group Grant.

The night before the pastors were to hear from Mark Nelesen, a CRC pastor and frequent retreat leader, they met in one of the cottages on the conference grounds to plan songs for worship the next morning. But Strooboscher didn't want to go.

"I was ministry-battered, had a terrible headache, and was not in a good place emotionally or spiritually, but I felt I needed to make a showing—it was a group gig, after all," she said.

Once the group settled in, two of the pastors picked up guitars, and the group began singing songs—"some new, some familiar, in several-part harmony," Strooboscher said.

She kept thinking she would leave after the next song, but she stayed. "I didn't talk about my stuff. I just worshiped with my people," she said.

"And eventually, my spirits had lifted and my heart had been nurtured, and I felt the Lord's care for me. And I knew I would be OK."

Meeting as they did, she added, gave her and other pastors the chance to care for themselves and their souls. "Investing in soul care is valuable for the big picture of our ministries," said Strooboscher.

Even without the grant, the pastors plan to continue gathering. "Meeting with this group has become a healthy spiritual rhythm for me," Strooboscher said.

Other pastors in the group include Tom DeVries, a retired pastor/missionary; Steven Hull from Princeton CRC in Grand Rapids; James Jones from Oakdale Park Church in Grand Rapids; Susan LaClear from Alive Ministries in Jenison; Ben Ridder from Harvest Community Church in Lake Odessa; and Robert Van Zanen from Middleville CRC in Middleville.

Being part of the group was especially beneficial for Hull, who was just starting out in ministry. "As a younger pastor," he said, "I have appreciated the relationship this group has provided as the other pastors are great to bounce ideas off of."

Jones said that being part of the group "has been a great encouragement to me, and I have been deeply blessed by our meetings and learnings (and by) our strengthening one another to continue to practice the spiritual disciplines in our daily lives."

—Chris Meehan,
CRC Communications

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Backyard Birds

TAKE A PEEK through a window to your backyard. What kinds of animals do you see? Do you notice any feathered friends? Birdwatching is a fun activity that you can do just about anywhere—at a nature preserve, in a park, or even in your back yard! Scientists believe there are about 10,000 different kinds of birds in the world today. Let's take a look at a few of them to see which ones might take a trip to your back yard.

Birds of North America

There are at least 2,000 types of birds in North America. Of those many birds, you might spot some of these in your backyard:

American Robin: You might see a robin early in the morning hunting for earthworms in your yard. These birds are brownish-gray with an orange chest. They eat berries, insects, and caterpillars.

Mourning Dove: This dove's call sounds as if the bird is singing a song! Mourning doves are part of the pigeon family. They eat mostly seeds and will even swallow sand and small rocks to help break down their food!

Blue Jay: These blue beauties like to snack on acorns, nuts, fruits, and insects, and they're even known to eat small animals such as mice or frogs.

Cardinal: Male cardinals are bright red. The color attracts female cardinals, which are more tan and gray. Cardinals also eat seeds, fruit, and insects.

Song Sparrow: These birds are very common in North America. They are only about six inches (15.24 cm) long and enjoy eating seeds. There are also about 140 different kinds of sparrows that live all over the world.

Birds in the Bible

Can you guess which Bible passages talk about these birds? Look up the verses below to find out, and draw a line to match the verse to the correct bird!

Eagles	Job 38:41
Ravens	Matthew 10:29
Doves	Isaiah 40:31
Sparrows	Matthew 10:16

Build a Backyard Birdhouse

Spring is a great time to get outside and to get creative by making a homemade birdhouse for your backyard friends.

Here's what you'll need:

- » empty milk carton (washed and dried)
- » acrylic paints
- » scissors
- » sturdy string or twine
- » hole puncher
- » bird seed (optional)

What to do:

1. Have an adult help you cut holes in the milk carton so the birds can enter the house. It's easier to cut a square or rectangular hole.
2. Decorate your birdhouse with paint.
3. Let your birdhouse dry. Then ask an adult to punch a hole near the top of the birdhouse. Tie a string through the hole so you can hang your birdhouse on a tree branch.
4. Add bird seed to the bottom of your birdhouse to attract birds.
5. Hang your birdhouse in your back yard. **B**



Christin Baker is a full-time stay-at-home mom who also writes for Faith Alive. She is a member of Resurrection Fellowship Church in Grand Rapids, Mich.

Illustration for
The Banner by
Anita Barghigiani



The Heresy of Individualism

By Wes Granberg-Michaelson

Researchers have studied veterans from the war in Afghanistan who have had trouble readjusting upon returning home. Many face depression, substance abuse, or even thoughts of suicide. Often, when questioned, they express a desire to return to the war. But that's not because they were fervent believers in war's purpose. Instead, they missed deeply their belonging to their platoon.

Being bound together with others in a commitment so strong that one's life could be sacrificed for another's gave their lives a compelling purpose. Moreover, this came through participating in a shared mission together. Back in the United States, for those finding adjustment difficult, life seemed to offer nothing comparable. They missed and even longed for the bonds of their platoon in ways hard to rationally understand.

A yearning for community seems implanted deep within the human heart. Yet so much in modern society pushes us in the opposite direction.

We worship individualism. Society is constructed as if "I" is at the center of everything. The bottom line is that my rights, my prerogatives, my desires, my fulfillment, and my wishes come first. Apps on social media often reinforce this. I've got "MyATT," a health plan with "MyPres," National Car Rental's Emerald Club advertised as "The Power of Me," and countless more.

A more serious philosophical foundation lies beneath all this. Since the Enlightenment, Western culture has been constructed around the rights of the individual. Political life, economic systems, and social arrangements begin with the primacy of the self. That's where we start from, and we build from there. Without even realizing it, the assumed baseline for life in modern society is the trinity of "me, myself, and I."

You might be wondering if all this is bad. Of course not. None of us would want to give up the liberating advances of political systems that threw off the tyranny of the divine right of kings. The movement for human rights around the world

has opened space to free millions from oppression. We've witnessed the punishing effects of collectivist economic systems. And anyone studying psychology knows the essential need for pathways of self-actualization in the journey toward emotional maturity.

Yet life that places the self solely at the center ultimately becomes self-destructive. That's a theological truth, but one also evidenced sociologically, politically, economically, and psychologically. We may not like to admit it, but many of our lives are bound by the heresy of individualism.

Biblical wisdom has a different starting point. God's saving work always moves toward creating a faithful community of God's people. The inspiring stories of the Old Testament are framed around calling, liberating, and leading the people of Israel as a covenant community. The fulcrum of God's justice always falls on the side of shaping the shared life of a people whose hospitality and faithfulness reflect the covenantal love of God. It's not about me; it's about the "we."

Jesus always called people not only to follow him, but to join with other disciples in doing so. On his last night with them before his crucifixion, he washed the feet of those closest to him, yearning for his love to bind them to one another. On the day of Pentecost, the outpouring of the Spirit came to create the community of God's people as the body of Christ, the church. As the church's emerging life is recorded in Acts and the epistles, this continuing story describes the work of God's Spirit to form a community of those bound together as one in Christ's love. Paul's declaration in 1 Corinthians 12 that we are parts of one body and members of one another is as sharp a rebuke to the heresy of individualism that one can find.

Our contemporary congregations, whether in the Christian Reformed Church, the Reformed Church in America, or beyond, often don't live that way. Implicitly, members assume the church is really all about their individual fulfillment. We talk about what one "got out of the sermon." Church staff work feverishly to figure out how to meet the needs and expectations of individuals with special interests. When looking for a congregation to join, we commonly refer to the practice of "church shopping." It becomes another consumer activity with the sole goal of self-gratification.

Obviously one expects that the grace of God, through the ministry and sacraments of a local congregation, should meet the needs of the human heart. One wants congregational life to be fulfilling. But such fulfillment should come primarily not through the satisfaction of isolated, individual needs but through the transformation of one's life to share and give as a member of God's community of people.

Early in our marriage, my wife, Kaarin, and I were part of efforts to form intentional Christian community. We longed for church shaped by the community described in Acts, where believers were deeply bonded to one another, as an alternative to

Jesus always
called people
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in doing so.

the self-centered individualism sanctioned by secular society. But it was hard work, often subject to frailty and failure.

We searched for wisdom. One book helping those of us on this journey was Jean Vanier's *Community and Growth*. Despite the recent disquieting reports about Vanier abusing staff members, his words made an impact then that still holds today. In a phrase I've never forgotten, Vanier says that in any church or Christian group, there must be more people who can say "me for the community" than those who say "the community for me." In all the years since, and in all my experiences of local congregations and denominational structures, I've found this to ring true. When a majority of people put "me" at the center—their own prerogatives, judgments, and desires—the congregation or even the denomination will wither and eventually implode. The gospel calls us to a different way.

Christian faith is deeply personal. It draws the person into a saving, transforming relationship with God through Jesus Christ. But Christian faith is never individualistic. That's where we've gotten confused. We've allowed society's idolatry of the

individual to infuse and distort our understanding of the gospel. Our personal relationship to God must be expressed and experienced through our belonging to God's people. There can be no Robinson Crusoe Christians.

Furthermore, we can't underestimate the insidious pressures of selfish individualism in our society. It seeks to shape our lives in so many ways. And those pressures can't be resisted alone. It takes a community of brothers and sisters called by the transforming vision of life together as Christ's body to nurture a spiritual journey toward freedom from the heresy of individualism.

This isn't just a smart strategy. Rather, it puts us in touch with God's nature, the heart of all reality. We've all been taught about the Trinity consisting of three separate persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. But often we haven't grasped the deeper truth that the Trinity is a holy community of relationships. Church fathers in the fourth century came up with a name for this: perichoresis. It comes from a term describing rotation, as in a circle dance, and means the indwelling of one person of the Trinity with another. Recent theologians like Jürgen Moltmann, Miroslav Volf, and many others have built on this truth. Simply put, the Trinity is a community of mutual love, resting at the heart of all reality and inviting us into its life.

Early in my career I was part of Church of the Saviour in Washington, D.C. No church has had a greater impact on my life. Begun by Gordon and Mary Cosby shortly after World War II, this church placed a radical commitment to community and mission at the heart of its life. The church was structured entirely around small "mission groups." Each was based on an outward call shared by those choosing to join, such as health care and healing for the poor, shelter for the homeless, outreach and hospitality through a coffee house, a retreat center ministry, and many more.

Each mission group, however, was also the place of accountability and nurture for the members' inward spiritual lives. This included agreed-to disciplines such as Bible reading, prayer, journal writing, and similar practices for 50 minutes every day. Thus mission groups became the heart of the church, where one's inward journey with Christ and one's outward journey to join in God's mission were intrinsically linked. One could only join the church as an intern member, and then a full member, through belonging to a mission group.

Theologically, this meant that *koinonia*, the fellowship of brothers and sisters in Christ, and *diakonia*, the service to the needs of others, were bound together for each member of this church. With the church I deepened my inward journey, learning how to dwell in God's love as I engaged in my outward journey of striving to work for God's peace, justice, and generous hospitality. My gifts, nurtured through the life of my mission group, were deeply valued but were not held individually, for my own sake. This was an experience of "me for the community" rather than a church that simply sanctioned the rampant individualism of the culture.

The past 50 years have witnessed the rise of the small-group movement within U.S. congregations. Most churches now offer various small fellowship groups to render support and nurture for one another. This is a welcome trend. Yet my concern is that most of these groups are based only on *koinonia*. They easily can turn inward and become self-absorbed. I've never forgotten the imperative of linking together our inward and outward journeys of faith at every level of Christian life. If congregations are to be the antidote to the heresy of individualism, that model offers a way forward.

A secular example might help. In 2008, Doc Rivers was the coach of the Boston Celtics basketball team. He worried about how to work with a group of superstars and get them to play not as individuals, but as a team. Rivers had

heard about Desmond Tutu, the Nobel Prize-winning Anglican archbishop from South Africa. Tutu often talked about *ubuntu*, an African philosophy meaning one could only be a person through one's relationship with others, bound intrinsically in community. Put simply, "I am because we are." Tutu liked to apply this to the church and to society.

Rivers, however, wanted to apply this to his team. Before the season started, Rivers read collections of Tutu's sermons. At the first team meeting, Rivers began simply by sharing the word *ubuntu*. On a preseason trip to Rome, the team nurtured *ubuntu*'s meaning and qualities. When the season was underway, they broke their team huddles chanting *Ubuntu!*—and then they played that way. That year the Celtics won the league championship. "Ubuntu" is inscribed on their championship rings.

How much more should the church live as such a community! We are not to find our meaning as solitary individuals. None of the best-selling self-help books will change that. For the Christian, striving to be an individual superstar gets in the way of the church's life and mission. We're meant to live as one. Together is better. And that togetherness is not for its own sake, but for the purpose of joining God's mission in the world.

Sometimes we are tempted to just stay in the huddle. The fellowship, support, and comfort really feel good. The late John Hesselink, professor of theology at Western Theological Seminary, once told me a story. He was a tackle on a football team in Iowa, facing a tough foe. The opposing line was winning the battle in the trenches, decisively. Hesselink's battered team gathered back in the huddle after a play, and one teammate said, "Couldn't we just stay here?" But the church lives to break the huddle. We are gathered, nurtured into a community, and then sent to join God's mission in the world. The Boston Celtics didn't chant *ubuntu* when they came into the huddle, but when they returned to the court.

Many in the church today are worried about various heresies. Usually this relates to conflicting theological interpretations of Scripture or departures from the church's confessions. Those discussions have their place. But I'm more worried about the heresies we don't commonly recognize. Chief among them is the heresy of individualism, and its pernicious effects on our lives and in our churches.

Those soldiers returning from Afghanistan who had difficulties adjusting to civilian life missed the community of their platoon. Individualism was overcome in an experience of being bonded together with others in life and death. They shared a common mission that gave them a sense of purpose and meaning. But for those soldiers, of course, their mission was carried out in the violence of a brutal war.

What would our congregations look like if we learned to overcome the individualism so ingrained in our culture? What if we lived by the words we say we believe: "Just as the body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ" (1 Cor. 12:12)? And what if we then lived and worked together in the common mission of extending God's peace, justice, and saving love into the world? **B**



Wes Granberg-Michaelson served as general secretary of the Reformed Church in America from 1994 to 2011. He's the author of eight books, including *Future Faith: Ten Challenges Reshaping Christianity in the 21st Century* (Fortress) and

most recently *How Change Comes to Your Church* (Eerdmans). He and his wife now live in Santa Fe, N. Mex.

1. What other examples of the "I" being the center of everything in our society can you name?
2. How else has individualism affected our understanding and practice of Christianity?

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All Things to All People

(T)hey couldn't even imagine what the world would be like and what that would mean for these kids in maintaining, let alone practicing, their Christian faith.



Rob Braun is a former commissioned pastor at Bethel Christian Reformed Church in Princeton, Minn. He currently is a licensed exhorter in Classis Lake Superior and a freelance writer.

I WAS TALKING with some senior members of my church the other day. They had been asked to give a talk to our high school youth group about their faith journeys. I pointed out that all of the youth they were talking to were born after Sept. 11, 2001, in a time of the internet, social media, Netflix, and cellphones. I suggested that they compare their own teenage years to those of today's youth, explaining similarities and differences.

Immediately this generated a lot of discussion. Almost all the seniors had grown up in rural areas in the 1940s and '50s. The discussion turned to their lives without running water, electricity, or phones, and to one-room schoolhouses, outhouses, and riding to church and school in horse-drawn wagons.

I asked them what they thought of the differences they witnessed in the practice of their own Christian faith over the past 50 years and how that might compare with the practice of the Christian faith these young people will face 50 years from now.

This brought about a sobering silence. Many of them actually shook their heads at the very thought of it. Several said they couldn't even imagine what the world would be like and what that would mean for these kids in maintaining, let alone practicing, their Christian faith in the future.

I mentioned that the apostle Paul had a similar experience in his apostolic ministry to the Gentiles. After all, he did practice his faith in a Greek world that was very different from his own Jewish background and mostly hostile to what he preached and believed. Paul explained his ministry strategy in 1 Corinthians 9:22-23: "I have become all things to all people so that by all

possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings."

On the other hand, in John 17:14-19, Jesus says his disciples are to be in the world but not of the world. In other words, even though we need to be all things to all people, relevant to the world around us, we are nevertheless called to be different from the world. Our job is to influence or season it with the light of the gospel while not becoming a mirror of its darkness.

Later, I caught up with these fellow seniors after their talk with the youth. They said the young people were amazed at the differences in technology and culture between themselves and these living witnesses of another time who lived in the same geographical space as them. The seniors all said they laid out the challenges their faith faced as the culture around them changed and encouraged these youth in the challenges they are about to face in their own futures as practicing Christians.

As Christians, we are all called to be all things to all people, as Paul said; nevertheless, Jesus said that although we are in the world, we are not to be of the world. This is the common challenge every generation of Christianity has faced in the past 2,000 years. It is the exact same challenge every future generation will face until the Lord returns. **B**

1. What do you think are some challenges Christians in your country faced 50 years ago?

2. Which challenges from 50 years ago are similar to today's, and which are different?

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Farmers' Perspective on Sustainable Food Production

Changes are happening all across dairy farms in the name of sustainability.

DURING THE PAST FEW YEARS in my role as a ventilation specialist for dairy barns, I have talked with dairy farmers around the globe. I've noticed that few topics get dairy farmers talking more than that of sustainable farming.

It's been a hot-button topic for a few years now. Dairy farmers have a lot to say about it, but are not often given a seat at the table when discussions or debates about sustainable dairy farming occur. Often it is scientists, politicians, and activists who appear at these events. They speak about dairy farming, but they rarely speak for dairy farmers.

Merriam-Webster's online dictionary defines "sustainable" as "of, relating to, or being a method of harvesting or using a resource so that the resource is not depleted or permanently damaged," or "maintained at length without interruption or weakening."

But how does this apply to dairy farmers as they care for their animals? How does this make a difference for farm operators milking their cows at 3 a.m.? Are we any further ahead in our thought process around sustainable dairy farming and what it means?

Many of today's discussions around sustainability are focused on environmental sustainability, but I think there is more to be unpacked from the definition of sustainability. Most of us would agree that God calls farmers to be stewards of creation and to strive for environmental sustainability. But what about financial sustainability? Shouldn't farmers also make sure their farms are financially viable? What about operating the farm with a mind to the future so that in 50 years the farm still exists to provide

income to the operators and food for the world?

All farmers have been given a special task by God to feed the world. Dairy farmers are no exception. They are living in the promise God gave in Genesis 9:3: "Everything that lives and moves about will be food for you. Just as I gave you the green plants, I now give you everything." Farming was one of the first tasks assigned to humans in the Garden of Eden (Gen. 2:15). We are reminded throughout the psalms that it is God who created the world, and it is God alone who makes the grass grow. We are but stewards of God's great creation (Ps. 104). Psalm 24 reminds us directly that the earth and everything in it belong to God. Farmers have a special daily calling to care for God's creation. Working with the land and animals, farmers are reminded to "work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord" (Col. 3:23).

It must be noted that it is not only farmers who are focused on the sustainability of the dairy industry. Consumers are asking questions about where the products they purchase are coming from. They are looking for transparency from their food producers. They want quality products produced in sustainable ways. These consumer demands are pushing dairy farmers to look at innovative agricultural technologies.

But a dairy farmer must also consider how new technology will affect the balance sheet. Dairy farms exist to make a profit, and new technology cannot be adopted if it does not make financial sense. Risking the future of one's farm to add new technology is not a wise move. Many dairy farms are still family businesses and will be passed on to the next generation. Dairy



Dan Veeneman works in the dairy industry as a ventilation specialist. He lives in Abbotsford, B.C., with his wife and three children. He is a member of Gateway Community Church.



Photo by Shironosov/iStock

farms must be financially sustainable to continue to exist.

While the picturesque family farms of the 1950s have all but disappeared, there still remains a draw to the simple lifestyle associated with farming. Keeping that way of life alive and well is often a high priority for many dairy operators. Many farms give tours and talk about what they do. Dairy farmers are proud of their jobs and proud of what they produce. They are proud to be on the front lines of technological advancement and the fight for sustainability. But all choices and changes must be weighed against how they might change the farmer's lifestyle.

Changes are happening all across dairy farms in the name of sustainability. One example is how waste is handled. Traditionally a dairy farm's waste is spread onto the fields as an effective fertilizer. But if this is done incorrectly, excess nitrogen and phosphates can damage the local groundwater and environment. Some farms now use dryers to extract moisture from the waste. The dry manure solids are then turned into bedding material

for the animals. Other farmers use digesters to compost manure waste and use the methane to produce electricity. While this technology is still in its infancy, there is work being done to bring it to the mainstream.

New technology is also rapidly changing how dairy cows are milked. Many farms are looking at robotic milking systems. Not only are these systems more labor-efficient, but studies have shown them to be more comfortable and less stressful for the animals.

Technology has also changed how dairy farmers house their animals. Farmers can adapt much of their equipment to be more energy-efficient, using tools such as variable frequency drives. Decreasing electricity consumption not only reduces costs, but also allows dairy operations to reduce the amount of resources they use. The University of Minnesota Extension Dairy Team notes, "Dairy farms will continue to become more automated with sensors and robotics. Integrated sensors and the use of artificial intelligence are rapidly developing. Sensors will be integrated in a cloud-based system with farm-based

algorithms that will be used to monitor and improve crop and soil health, animal welfare, and water and air quality."

So what does all of this mean for you and me as we stand in the dairy aisle staring at the vast assortment of cheeses and yogurts? What does this mean for us as we pour milk into our breakfast cereal or add cream to our post-church coffee? We can start by being thankful for the dairy industry and the changes it is making to become more sustainable. We can be thankful to know that the dairy products we consume today are made by farmers who choose to live out sustainability every day.

We can also continue to call for more progress on this front. Consumers can respectfully and responsibly remind farmers of the calling they have received from God. But most of all, consumers must switch from talking *about* dairy farmers to talking *with* them. **B**

Confessions of a Parasite

LIKE A BOULDER rushing down a mountainside, Bong Joon-Ho's 2019 film *Parasite* has gained momentum. It won the Palme d'Or at Cannes, received critical acclaim in South Korea, and captured the Academy Award for Best Picture.

The plot follows the Kims, a poor family of four in Seoul who scrape by in their semi-basement dwelling until the son, Ki-woo, lands a tutoring job for the wealthy Park family. As the story unfolds, each of the Kims worms their way into the lives of the Parks. The interconnected series of events is tightly woven, mischievous, and riveting. It is also graphic, warranting an R rating.

Why has such a story captured imaginations from East to West? The acting is laudable. The look of disgust from Mr. Park (Lee Sun-kyun) at the musty odor of his chauffeur sums up class prejudice in one look. There are thoughtful allusions: In the opening scene, a stink bug crawls on the kitchen table. Director Bong welcomes the comparison to the Kims, and when they open the window to allow an exterminator's fumes to waft into their apartment, the comparison is complete.

Visual juxtapositions in the film fascinate. An attractive young woman lighting up a cigarette with rising sewage swirling around her shows peril and peace simultaneously.

Mainly, people relate to it. Might they dare to see themselves as parasites?

Like the Kims insinuating themselves into the lives of the Parks, a parasite is an organism that lives on and benefits from a host at the host's expense. That definition sums up many transactions in society. A salesperson massages

a potential buyer to make the sale. A banker plays with numbers to look better to get the year-end bonus, even at the expense of clients. A teacher offers glowing comments to an influential family to gain favor, and that family tacitly ensures preferential treatment. Politicians master the art of rhetoric to live off the support of their base.

Even social media can be parasitical. The high and mighty can only be high and mighty if they live off their hosts—fingers that click.

The movie begs a question: Who is the parasite? Who is the host? We don't like to think about it, but we all use others for our gain.

Bong's movie does not glamorize parasitism but shows its destructive outcome. The movie sits heavily on viewers because there is no redemption, no solution, no prescription. Viewers draw their own conclusions.

What can we Christians conclude? Christ is the opposite of a parasite. Christ loses his life so we can find ours. He becomes sin so we can become righteous. He embraces poverty so we can become rich.

John Calvin once said knowledge of God and of humanity are related. If Calvin was right, then Bong and his viewers might be getting closer to God because they see what we are like apart from God. Lord, help us be the opposite of a parasite; help us to be more like Christ! **B**



John Lee is the head of the Upper School at The Geneva School of Manhattan, a Christian classical school. He also serves with Ben Spalink at City Grace Church in the East Village of New York City.



Don't Overthink It

By Anne Bogel

Reviewed by Sonya VanderVeen Feddema

In this useful, real-world book geared to a female audience, author Anne Bogel defines the process of overthinking and offers strategies to “literally rewire your brain.” Bogel is “talking about those times when we lavish mental energy on things that don't deserve it. ... Whether the concern elbowing into our thoughts is big or small, we recognize the common thread: these thoughts are repetitive, unhealthy, and unhelpful. Our brains are hard at work but accomplishing nothing.” A self-declared overthinker, Bogel shows how people's values can help them avoid the snare of overthinking decisions by clarifying objectives, influencing how they spend their time and money, and shaping where they focus their attention and energy. (Baker Books)



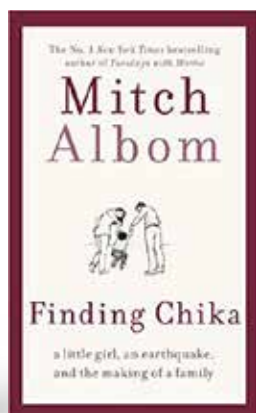
Neighbor Songs

By The Porter's Gate

Reviewed by Robert J. Keeley

In ancient monasteries, a porter was someone who assisted travelers both inside and outside the church gates. In that spirit, The Porter's Gate gathered a group of diverse songwriters in 2019 to spend time studying and writing about the concept of being neighbors.

The result of that meeting is the album *Neighbor Songs*, a delightful mix of styles and even languages—two songs are sung in Spanish, including the first verse and chorus of the beautiful “Let Us Be Known.” This album sounds like it was written and performed in community. What a great way to practice the message of what it means to be neighbors! (Integrity Music)



Finding Chika: A Little Girl, an Earthquake, and the Making of a Family

By Mitch Albom

Reviewed by Jenny deGroot

Invited to join an orphanage owner to assess the damage in Haiti after the 2011 earthquake, Mitch Albom had no idea how much that trip would transform his life. He and his wife take over the orphanage and informally adopt a sprightly little girl named Chika, who has an aggressive brain tumor. The previously childless couple searches out the best hospitals and alternative treatments in the United States and beyond. Albom shares not only their story of joy and pain but also their struggle as a couple as they seek to find peace amid the anger and frustration of this senseless illness. Sure to join Albom's *Tuesdays with Morrie* on the bestseller lists, *Finding Chika* will surely touch every reader's heart. (Harper Collins)



A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood

Reviewed by Lorilee Craker

In a film based on real events, cynical journalist Lloyd Vogel (Matthew Rhys) heartily resists Fred Rogers and his glowing kindness when he is assigned a puff piece on the children's television host. Vogel is the protagonist here, a suffering soul who is barely keeping himself above water emotionally. Kindness by kindness, Rogers whittles away at Vogel's defenses. No matter what walls Vogel throws up, Rogers's mercy and peace disarm him. Directed by Marielle Heller, the movie is a more effective Christian witness than many faith-based films. It's a grace-filled reminder that God is working in all our lives, perhaps especially in the lives of those who run from him the hardest. (Sony Pictures Entertainment)

The Lowdown

The Bible's Generosity Toward Immigrants: With so many people migrating around the globe, how should Christians and the church respond? Leading Latin American biblical scholar M. Daniel Carroll Rodas explores the surprising amount of material on migration in both the Old Testament and the New in *The Bible and Borders*. (Brazos Press)

Such News from Miss Woodhouse: Anya Taylor-Joy and Johnny Flynn boast crackling chemistry in their roles as matchmaker Emma Woodhouse and wise Mr. Knightley in this vibrant, warm, and funny retelling of Jane Austen's *Emma*. (Working Title Films, now streaming)

Did Soccer Begin as a Privileged Sport?: *The English Game*, a richly detailed ensemble drama about the beginnings of football (soccer), comes from *Downton Abbey* creator Julian Fellowes and once again explores the class divide. (Netflix)

A Granddaughter Remembers: In *Everything Beautiful in Its Time*, Jenna Bush Hager shares stories from her beloved grandparents, President George Bush and first lady Barbara Bush, that shaped her into the person she is today. Moving and bitter-sweet, these essays celebrate family and teach lessons about life, humanity, and kindness. (William Morrow)

Why Does God Care About My Sex Life?

Believers have been purchased, and our bodies now belong to Jesus Christ.

GOD CARES ABOUT OUR SEX LIFE

because God cares about us. God wants what's best for us, and God wants us to live in victory. It is helpful to think of sex as a fire in a fireplace. As long as the fire stays in the fireplace, the heat emanating from the fireplace is able to warm up the home. But the moment the fire is removed from the fireplace and is placed anywhere else, it threatens to burn down the entire home. God gave sex as a gift so that we can give expression to the desires he has given to us within the context of marriage. This is why the Bible warns us of the dangers of taking sexual intimacy outside of the fireplace of marriage (compare Gen. 1:28 and Ex. 20:14).

Licensed psychologist and professor Dr. James Coffield once said, "We live in a society where sex is everything and sex is nothing." Considering the fact that parents today are being asked to vaccinate their children as early as 11 years old against the sexually transmitted human papillomavirus, Coffield's assessment awakens us to an even greater problem that has reached epidemic proportions. From the Sexual Revolution of the 1960s to the disturbing revelations of abuse brought to light by the #MeToo movement of the 2010s, we live in a world where we are bombarded with sexual messages filled with warning labels and click-bait at every turn. The old marketing adage is "sex sells," and by the looks of it, our society is consuming sexuality at a rate that threatens to push everyone past the point of sexual bankruptcy. So how are believers to live a holy and blameless life unto God in a hook-up culture that promotes having sex with anyone, anywhere?

The first thing God wants us to do is to run: 1 Corinthians 6:18 demands

that we "flee from sexual immorality." The word "flee" in the original language conveys the idea of a country under siege. The image here is that of an invading army approaching the city gates of a weaker opponent unable to defend itself. This foreign power of sexual immorality will enslave and devour anyone who does not heed the warning of Scripture to run. Your only hope for survival is to retreat!

In other words, the apostle Paul was teaching these believers in Corinth that they were completely powerless in their own strength to stand up to the avalanche of sexual temptations flooding their city. In the first century, Corinth was one of the most sexually immoral cities in the world. This port city had developed such a promiscuous reputation in the Roman Empire that whenever someone said "to Corinth," it meant to be sexually immoral.

God's call in 1 Corinthians to retreat is really a call for believers to reposition themselves. In the face of the temptations that plague this world, God calls God's people to reposition themselves. After commanding the Corinthian Christians to run for their lives, Paul shows them to where they can run in 1 Corinthians 6:19-20. He says, "You are not your own; you were bought at a price." Paul was pointing them to higher ground by reminding them that Jesus laid down his life to set them free from the power of this sin.

Believers have been purchased, and our bodies now belong to Jesus Christ. This is why he teaches us that the only way we can take our stand against sexual immorality is by retreating and repositioning ourselves behind the cross of Jesus Christ. **B**



Felix Fernandez is pastor of South Kendall Community Church in Miami, Florida.

Virtual Church in a Time of Vulnerability

In this time of social isolation, church has become the one dependable, regular event in our family's schedule.



Melissa Kuipers writes fiction and non-fiction. She is also director of discipleship ministries at Central Presbyterian Church in Hamilton, Ont.

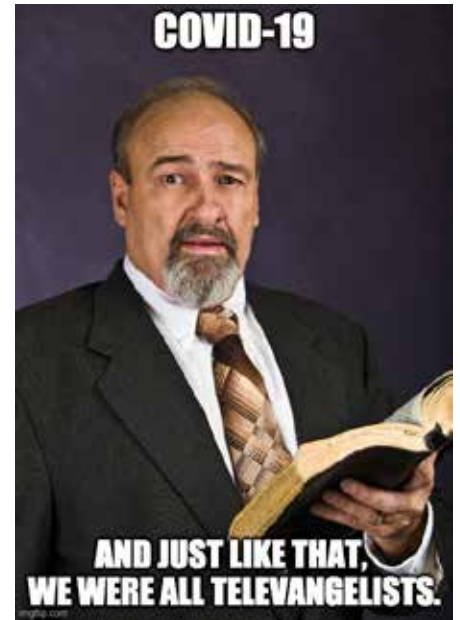
As I Was Saying is a forum for a variety of perspectives to foster faith-related conversations among our readers with the goal of mutual learning, even in disagreement. These perspectives do not necessarily reflect the views of The Banner. A longer version of this article was first published online April 7.

"AND JUST LIKE THAT, we were all televangelists." Thus says a meme I've seen posted by a number of my ministry friends. This pandemic has forced many religious leaders into the strange and awkward world of the virtual worship service, of preaching to an empty sanctuary, of meeting together without seeing each others' faces.

Just a few weeks ago at church we naively shook hands during the passing of the peace. Now we are offering messages of peace through a chat feature while viewing our minister through our computer screens as he leads a service before vacant pews.

In this time of social isolation, church has become the one dependable, regular event in our family's schedule. On Sunday mornings, we've traded our pew for the couch, the lectern for a laptop propped up on the ottoman. I mourn so much of what we are losing. As I click the YouTube link and see the minister open the Bible on the pulpit, I miss this time of watching friends and newcomers gather in the pews. I miss the opportunity to look each other in the eye.

Nevertheless, it is reassuring to know that people we care for and know are gathering remotely and sharing this experience. We are meeting God together while apart. We sense this great cloud of witnesses in a new way.



I've seen some thoughtful blog posts floating around about whether worship services should be recorded. Can we really emulate this sacred moment virtually, and are we doing it a disservice to try? While I think it is important to critically engage with technology and consider its implications for our lives, Jesus' ministry again and again put accessibility before religious propriety. Allowing our congregants to virtually participate in worship, however flawed the medium is, can provide spiritual connection, reflection, and refreshment in this time of isolation.


I've been part of congregations that have televised their humble services since my childhood. This was an act of service for the shut-ins, sick, and elderly who could no longer attend our services. While nothing can replace the in-person meeting together of Christ's family, I've always found this relaying of the service to people's homes to be an important ministry

for the people in our community we don't see.

It's important to recognize that technology is not a neutral medium. Televising Sunday worship comes with great risks: conveying a sense of the congregation as a passive audience, trivializing the importance of collective in-person worship, losing the sense of sacredness around prayer and Scripture reading. But it's also important to ask what our purpose is in televising, recording, or live-streaming a service. Is it to nurture people who are in need who physically can't be present?

Now we have all become those who can't, or shouldn't be, physically present. This is an opportunity for us to empathize with the vulnerable in our community, with those who would love to be with us but cannot. It is also an opportunity to set aside our preferred methods of worship in order to collectively protect the vulnerable in our church community and society as a whole.

We need to reflect on what we are missing when we meet virtually. The online worship service isn't a substitute for entering church in body and soul. It's a new and different, flawed and yet beautiful, way for us to meet

with God and each other. For now, let us thank God for technology in this time of pandemic, and let us creatively reach past its limits to encounter each other and God in new ways. Let us also not give up on meeting together, to encourage each other in whatever ways possible. We cannot do this alone. 



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Announcement of Candidacy

We are pleased to announce that **SHAWN RICHARDSON** has now completed his academic requirements and is eligible for call as a candidate for the ministry of the Word. Colin P. Watson, Sr., Acting Executive Director

We are pleased to announce that **KISEOK KANG** has now completed his academic requirements and is eligible for call as a candidate for the ministry of the Word. Colin P. Watson, Sr., Acting Executive Director

Church Positions Available

FULL TIME PASTOR Good News CRC, London ON seeking pastor to lead our church spiritually and in service to our greater community. Contact clarencewassink@gmail.com

FULL TIME YOUTH DIRECTOR Christian Reformed Church of York, ON has an opening for a full-time Youth Director. York is located along the Grand River just 15-20 minutes south of Hamilton, ON. Maranatha is a church

that will have approximately 160 youth under the age of 17 in 2021. If God is calling you to work in Youth Ministry than we invite you to explore that with us. To learn more or request a job description, please email office@maranathayorkcrc.ca or call (289) 757 4114 or visit our website at www.maranathacrcyork.ca

LEAD PASTOR River Rock CRC in Folsom, CA is looking for a full-time Lead Pastor to passionately lead our church in the gospel of Christ and to transform our lives through Reformed teaching. To also help us expand our connections within our Folsom community, the world, extend our hospitality and minister to those in need. The Lead Pastor will have a great level of support from our current Associate Pastor and our church Elders. If this is a position the Lord may be calling you to, please contact Mike Cox at 916-792-2832 or email sdfanmike.cox@gmail.com. Our church profile and information about our church can be found at www.riverrockchurch.org.

PASTOR First CRC in beautiful Thunder Bay, ON is seeking a full-time pastor to lead our congregation. Please email your resume or inquiries to search@fcrctbay.ca.

PASTOR Wolf Creek Community Church is located in beautiful Lacombe, Alberta. We are seeking a pastor who will join us in our mission to reach out and enfold people for Jesus. Visit wolfcreekchurch.ca or Email searchteamwccc@gmail.com

WORSHIP DIRECTOR Sunnyside CRC in Sunnyside, WA is seeking a full-time Worship Director to lead and develop the worship ministry of the congregation. For a job description or more info email pastor@sunnysidecrc.org

YOUTH AND DISCIPLESHIP DIRECTOR Midland Park CRC, Midland Park, NJ is seeking a full time relational candidate who has a passion for discipleship and outreach and enjoys connecting with children, youth and their families. Email: searchcommittee@mpcrc.org

Retirement

CASCADE FELLOWSHIP expresses thanks to God for 24 years of faithful service. Pastor Milton Doornbos and his wife Jeanne have served many roles and done so with great love and tender compassion. In their 64 years of ministry, they have blessed Calvin CRC-Rock Valley, IA, Immanuel CRC-Hudsonville, MI, Mayfair Church-GR, MI, Home Missions Board, Ridgewood CRC-Jenison, MI, Home Missions, and Cascade Fellowship-GR, MI. As

Pastor Milt celebrates his 90th birthday and retirement from ministry, join us in a prayer of thanksgiving for these gracious servants of Jesus Christ.

Birthday

BIRTHDAY 95 YEARS



HERMAN MOLL celebrates his 95th birthday on May 24. Originally from Celeryville, OH, he also raised his family in Naples, FL and Cashiers, NC. Husband of the late Esther (Shaarda) and the late Sylvia (Topping), father to 6, grandfather to 28, great-grandfather to 11. God is able to do far more than we would ever dare to ask or even dream of (Eph 3:20)! Congratulations and much love from your family!

BIRTHDAY 90 YEARS

JOHN BUURSM celebrates his 90th birthday on June 1! His wife, Barbara, and children Sue & Dick, Kathy & Greg, Randy & Debra; along with 14 grandchildren and 8 great-grandchildren (plus 1 on the way!) are thankful for life with God's dear man! "and may you live to see your children's children." Ps.128:6 PTL!

NORMAN B. DEGRAAF, of Grand Rapids, MI, celebrates his 90th birthday on May 19. Happy birthday with love from your children Jan and Paul, Ben and Denise, MaryLynn and Brad, Julie and Art, your 16 grandchildren and 20 great-grandchildren.

Anniversary

BAKKER, John and Helen celebrate 60 yrs of marriage May 20. Thanks mom & dad/grandma & grandpa for your Christ-like example & love.

BUSS, The family of Ken and Marlys (Droogsm) Buss thank God for 65 years of marriage on April 15, 2020. We are blessed by their loving and Christian example of a life well lived.



ROLFFS, John & Shirley will be celebrating 65 years of marriage on June 8, 2020 God has blessed them with three children Cindy & Roger Groen, Rick & Deb Rolffs, Barb & Tom Leenstra. They have nine grandchildren & spouses, 19 great grandchildren. They praise God for His goodness. 1425 SW 20th Ave Apt C10 Willmar, Mn. 56201

Scholarship Funds Available

Elim Christian Services is pleased to announce that \$1,000 - \$2,000 Euwema Memorial Scholarships are now available for special education professionals doing their student teaching or professional internship placements at Elim.

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Obituaries

DOORN, Geraldynne "Gerry", nee Smith, age 90, of Plainfield went to be with her LORD on February 28th, 2020. 2101 Nicholas Ct, Bettendorf, Iowa, 52722. Beloved wife of Bernard for 66 years; loving mother of Edward Doorn, Diane (John) Klosak, and Gary Doorn; devoted grandmother of Kimberly (Joshua) Smith, Michael (Rachel) Klosak, Jillian (Jay) Reavis, and Randall Klosak; great grandmother of Alexander and Abigail Smith, Ethan, Liam, and Elliott Klosak, and Weston and Olivia Reavis; dear daughter of the late Edward and the late Ida Smith; fond sister of the late Marjorie (the late Adrian) Laning, the late Stella (the late John) Van Tholen, the late Jacob (the late Jeanette and the late Flo) Smith, and the late John (the late Gwynn) Smith; aunt of many nieces and nephews. Memorials to Timothy Christian Schools, 188 W. Butterfield Rd, Elmhurst, IL 60126, are appreciated.

FEDDEMA, Charles (Chuck), age 99, died on March 18, 2020. He will be lovingly remembered by his wife of 58 years, Tena Draayer, his only child, Karen and John DeVries, 2 grandsons Nathan and Laura DeVries and Ryan DeVries. He lived a full life. He served in WW2 in the Merchant Marines and would talk often of those adventures. Born and raised in Whitinsville, Massachusetts, he later lived with his family in other beautiful places around the country - Washington DC, Colorado, Florida and Michigan.

HOLLAAR, Bill, 71, died March 30, 2020, in Palos Heights, IL. Beloved son of Lois and the late William (Bud) Hollaar. Dear brother of Vivian (the late Dave) Sytsma, Friendship, WI; Larry (Debbie) Hollaar, Monee, IL; and Ken (Heather) Hollaar, Crestwood, IL. Special uncle to 33 nieces and nephews. Preceded in death by his father and a nephew, Tim Sytsma.

RITZEMA Bernice Jean (VANDER WEIDE), 92, of Grand Rapids, MI, passed away April 5, 2019. Preceded in death by her husband, Richard Mark Ritzema, she is survived by her children, Jane Kropewnicki, Malois Ritzema (Mike Brady-deceased), Mary (Bruce) Hanson, Lorraine (Stan) Beloncis, Debra Ritzema (Tim Pendergast); grandchildren, Nadia (Chapin) Rydingsward, Alice (Nathaniel) Peterson, Zoe Beloncis, and Isabel Brady; and great grandchildren, Mae Li and Linnea Rydingsward, Maxwell and Walter Peterson.



SMIT, Corry (Korneliske Brouwer) September 29, 1933 - March 5, 2020. Corry will be remembered for her faith in God, her zest for life, her keen interest in others' lives, her constant desire to learn, her quilting expertise and her deep commitment to her family.

She was the loving wife of Ralph (Roel) to whom she was married for 63 wonderful years. Her children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren will miss her presence and her prayers.

- Corinne (and Stuart 2012) Cameron, Elizabeth and Ryan (Abbey, Noah), Megan and Josh (Leona, James), Mark
- Cynthia and Jim Stevens, Josh and Nicole (James, Hailey, Emberly Cori), Jeremy, Cori-ander and AJ
- Karen and Jeff Veldhoen, Calvin, Krystal and Caleb (Jonathan, Lukas), Jason



TRIEZENBERG, Shirley (Pastoor), age 90 of Grand Rapids, MI, formerly of South Holland, IL passed away peacefully on 3-30-20. Preceded in death by husband Herman in 2002. Survived by daughters Cindy (Rick) Bandstra, Pat (Jim) Talen, Nancy (Gary) Fox, Julie

lie (Steve) Jones, Jennifer (Brad) VanderBrug and Sheila Stoffle, brother Dan Pastoor as well as fourteen grandchildren and four great-grandchildren. God's peace Mom

VAN HAL, Geurt, age 92, of Homer Glen, IL, passed away Feb. 23, 2020. Geurt, born in Sully, IA, is survived by his wife of 63 years, Carolyn; daughter, Carol; grandchildren, Emily and David; and a brother, sisters, sisters-in-law, and brothers-in-law in Iowa and Colorado. Geurt was a 1954 graduate of Calvin College, worked his entire career in the insurance industry, faithfully served as an elder in Newton, Park Lane, and Orland Park CRCs, and worked with The Gideons.

VAN OOSTRUM, Rena, 91, Sunnyside, WA; died March 2, 2020. Rena is preceded in death by her husband, Jake and 1 great grandson. She is survived by 3 daughters, Jantena, Anny, Audrey; 2 sons, William, Henry; 13 grandchildren; 12 great grandchildren.

WIGBOLD, John K., age 80, of Palos Heights, IL entered his heavenly home on April 2, 2020. He was the loving husband of Beverly for 60 years. The devoted father of John (April), Valerie, Tom (Heidi) and Mark (Leana). Cherished grandfather of 17 and great-grandfather of 10. John was an active member of his church and served on many boards and committees. He was the retired owner of Wigboldy Excavating. Our family was blessed to have him as a Godly example as are all who knew him.

WOUDSTRA, Dr. Rev. Sierd, age 92, of Grand Rapids MI, passed away March 22, 2020. He was preceded in death by his wife Allerdina (Bouwkamp), & daughter Katherine. He is survived by his children, John & Kathleen Woudstra, Irene & Timothy Noveroske, Christina & Mark Spoolstra, Timothy Woudstra, Yvonne & Glen Joelson, Ingrid & James Nelson, 17 grandchildren, and 7 great-grandchildren. Memorials to Calvin Theological Seminary Student Assistance Fund, 3233 Burton St. SE, Grand Rapids, MI 49506.

Employment

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Young Adults Writing Contest

Topic: Christian Love in Divisive Times

***The Banner* is pleased to sponsor a writing contest on the topic, "Christian Love in Divisive Times."**

We'll publish the top two winning articles in print and the top three online, plus award cash prizes of \$1,000 USD (first prize), \$500 USD (second prize), and \$250 USD (third prize).

Deadline for submissions is midnight, June 21, 2020.

Contest open to anyone aged 16 to 25 who has not been previously published by *The Banner* and who is a member of or regularly attends a Christian Reformed church.

Articles should be no more than 1,000 words in length, submitted as a Microsoft Word file or Google doc and accompanied by a separate cover letter that includes your name, address, phone number, where you worship, and brief biographical note. Do not include this information on the essay itself. Send to info@thebanner.org with the subject heading "Writing Contest."

Decisions of judges are final. We reserve the right to withhold one or more prizes if none are deemed worthy. Winners will be notified by July 6.

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A Singing God

'Make a joyful
noise!' the
psalmist says.

The Lord your God ... will rejoice over you with singing. —Zephaniah 3:17

God sings? Who knew?
And he sings to us!

Of course the angels sing their glorias,
and everyone knows God's people sing to him:
"Make a joyful noise!" the psalmist says,
and we do, it seems, whenever
more than two or three of us get together.


We know that Jesus sang. The rabbi
and his disciples sang a hymn,
after the Passover meal but
before they headed out with cleansed feet
toward Gethsemane and heartbreak.
Was there a standard post-Seder-meal hymn?
Psalm 103, perhaps?
Did someone give the pitch?
Did this motley male choir harmonize?
Did they miss Iscariot's strong tenor or
was he a monotone?
Did Jesus on this last night
stop singing from time to time and just listen?

Jesus, the God-Man, singing—

But now here's Zephaniah, whose words I have left unread
for 60 years or more,
telling us all—all of Abraham's seed—
that Yahweh is bending over us
singing and rejoicing
like a mama dreaming the future of her cradled babe.

How does he sing, this Spirit God
who has no larynx with vocal folds,
no pharynx, trachea, diaphragm, or tongue?

Yet the prophet says he sings over us
and surely he's not just talking
about thunder, bird song, choir concerts,
or even the "music of the spheres,"
that celestial hum
the Ancients said the planets made
as they moved in their appointed paths.

No, it's God's voice I'm going to be listening for
crooning a lullaby,
a love song,
a bit of blues, perhaps,
in a voice that sounds older than Satchmo's
singing "What a wonderful world!" 



David Schelhaas is a retired Dordt College English professor and a member of Covenant CRC, Sioux Center, Iowa. Reprinted with permission from *Pro Rege*, Vol. XLV, No. 2, December 2016.

A Moment
of
Hope...

HOPE is often ordinary. Like daily prayer, or \$10 a month. World Renew sees ordinary hope install filtration systems to slow a virus with safe water for handwashing. It equips aid distribution teams with face masks to protect the vulnerable from a virus outbreak. Hope inspires one church to give from abundance so another can continue in hardship. We see God use ordinary hope in extraordinary ways. Because with God, ordinary hope is always enough.

...to
change
the world.