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JANUARY 2021

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Finding Narcissism in Church

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Millions of South Sudanese people have fled their country because of violence and fighting. Bishop David Manyok is one of these refugees who ended up in the Nyumanzi Refugee Camp in Uganda. Bishop Manyok continues his ministry in the camp and has had the opportunity to distribute 50 Talking Bibles into his community.

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The Gospel is Still Spreading!

Many church buildings around the world have been closed for months now. COVID-19 has made it even more challenging to be the hands and feet of Christ. But the Christian Reformed Church and its members are still sharing the gospel in new ways.

Our partners in the Presbyterian Church of Brazil have been hit hard by the pandemic. But Pastor Paulo has found new ways to share the gospel in his church because of support from the CRC's media ministry, ReFrame Ministries.

"In my church ministry I have used all the learning in your course to teach and share with other brothers and sisters. The fruits are already beginning to appear!"

Whether churches are meeting in person or virtually, the gospel is still spreading through media.



The Christian Reformed Church's media ministry may have a new name, but that won't change the way we come alongside Pastor Paulo as he shares the gospel.



ReFrame Ministries

is the new name of
Back to God Ministries International

ReFrameMinistries.com

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BY THE NUMBERS

The Christian Reformed Church's 2020 survey turned up 22 languages (or combination of languages) spoken in our churches.

A Matter of Speaking

English	900
Korean	112
Spanish	42
Navajo	10
Chinese	8
Laotian	7
Hmong	3
Vietnamese	3
Arabic	2
French	2
Indonesian	2
Karen	2
Cambodian	1
Creole	1
German	1
Thai	1
Khmer	1
Portugese	1
Samoan	1
Swahili	1
Hindi	1
Urdu	1

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.)

- » News: Thunder Bay Outreach Nourishes 'Body and Soul' Through Pandemic
- » News: CRC in Canada Reviews Governance Restructuring in Virtual Town Hall Sessions
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We need not fear
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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.

THANK YOU TO ALL who donated to our fundraising campaign this past year. At the time of writing, we have received more than \$420,000, making it the fourth consecutive year we have raised over \$400,000! Your generous support is amazing, especially because 2020 was a pandemic year with economic downturns. We are most grateful for your strong support.

This support reflects the high number of readers—69.7%—who expressed they were “satisfied” with us in our 2020 readers’ survey. I take this as an overall sign of approval of what we are doing at *The Banner*. We can never please everyone, of course, but it is good to know that our efforts overall are appreciated.

Frankly, on some days I need that encouragement. In striving to make *The Banner* a fair forum for diverse perspectives in the denomination, I know that not everyone will be happy with some of the views I allow to the table. For instance, many people, mostly from those who are affirming of same-sex marriage, were upset at the article “How to Walk Well Alongside LGBTQ+ People” (June 2020). On the other hand, I received a lot of angry letters from readers who support the traditional view after our November article on “Same-Sex Relationships and the CRC,” even though it was a balanced article presenting voices from both sides. Two letters in particular stood out. Both were from longtime Christian Reformed Church members who were so offended by the article that they asked to discontinue their *Banner* deliveries. But here’s the catch: one reader supported the traditional view while the other was affirming of same-sex marriage. Neither side was pleased with the same article.

Thankfully, I also got positive responses to the article. One

traditionalist reader thanked us for presenting the differing views and wrote, “I feel I can now better understand the arguments for both sides and the people behind the arguments.”

The 17th-century Christian poet John Milton once argued against censorship: “Let (Truth) and Falsehood grapple; who ever knew Truth put to the worse, in a free and open encounter?” (*Areopagitica*). In other words, we need not fear a fair and open exchange of ideas, as truth should win out.

When I was a campus pastor, I hosted a weekly no-topic-is-taboo discussion for students. I had Christians, atheists, and people of other faiths attending and sharing their thoughts and questions. Everyone had a fair voice in this forum. It was dialogue, not debate. I didn’t allow any harsh words or tones. I had a number of non-Christians, even ex-Christians, who not only kept returning every week but invited their non-Christian friends to attend.

Rather than controlling the discussion, I trusted in the Holy Spirit’s guidance that the biblical truths shared would take root in the midst of other views. Sure, some of the opinions shared made me cringe. But I trusted that God’s truth would resonate more with people in the end. The Christians grew in their faith because they learned to answer for their beliefs. The non-Christians learned more about Christianity and the Bible in a safe, non-threatening, and uncensored environment. An ex-Christian student once remarked that he might still be Christian if his youth pastor had been as patient as I was with his tough questions.

I try to fill my editor’s role here with that same posture. I believe God’s Spirit of truth (John 16:13) will guide us as we humbly seek for truth in the midst of varying opinions. **B**



REPLY ALL

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

A Safe Place

Thank you to Agnes Fisher for writing “The Safe Place” article (October 2020) about growing up in the Netherlands and experiencing the tyranny and oppression of the Nazi regime and how unsafe so many people were during that time. Even though so many people were murdered and treated barbarically, there are those today who deny that it happened. It’s history, and we should never forget. To study history is to learn from past mistakes.

» Laurie Van Haitisma // Hudsonville, Mich.

Open Minds

You need courage to publish a story like this (“Interaction Opens Minds,” September 2020). It affects our personal story and being aware how many people look down on same-sex couples. We (heterosexual people) will never understand the feelings of people that are attracted to the same sex. Mr. Loenen pleads with us to just meet those people and see their true love. And I believe that indeed there can be true love between people from the same sex. ... We have to love and embrace our brothers and sisters that wrestle with same-sex attraction. But as a church we should not try to study the Bible to let it say what we like. Can we not love the people with same-sex attraction and also plead with them not to start a same-sex relationship? We pray for Synod 2021 for insight through the Holy Spirit.

» Hans Katerberg // Palmerston, Ont.

Digital Life

Kudos to Dean Heetderks for his clear message to “ditch social media

entirely—and not only for election season but for all seasons” (“Big Questions: Digital Life,” October 2020). Allowing ourselves to fall prey to “spin” and “alternate facts/reality” will misguide us into thinking and acting in ways that misshape our service to the One who is the Truth. How we see ourselves, the world, and our relationship to God needs to be informed by credible sources. If we use social media only to show off Fido, exchange pasta recipes, and play online backgammon it may be an acceptable drug of choice. Beyond that, heed this significant warning from a credible source.

» Bob De Moor // Edmonton, Alta.

Writing Contest

Wow, thank you for the essay contest “Christian Love in Divisive Times” (September 2020). Adam (Vanderleest) and Rheanna (Rosenthal) provided such great essays that I had to read them each three times. As a “cover-to-cover *Banner* reader,” I was blown away by how well they were written and how their essays were truly blessed. Being part of the baby-boom generation, we grew up in the Christian Reformed Church with the often-heard lament that our young have gone astray. ... The apostle Paul concludes the book of Colossians by inviting everyone to live in the present as if the new creation arrived when Jesus rose from the grave. It would appear this message is clearly getting through to our young, and they are passing it on in true Christian love.

» Henry Kamphof // Victoria, B.C.

Financial Literacy

Thank you, Dirk (Pruis), for addressing the college student debt issue in your recent *Banner* article (“Financial Literacy,” October 2020). ... It has always been a mystery to me why our educational

system, including our Christian schools, have for the most part neglected to teach our children about financial responsibility as they prepare our children for life. I cannot think of a more important topic affecting every student as they prepare for adulthood. ... Perhaps the Christian Reformed Church, in cooperation with our Christian schools and our Christian colleges and universities, could become a model for other denominations in the United States and Canada if the CRC collectively agreed to teach biblical principles of money management in our churches and in our schools as routinely as we teach the Ten Commandments.

» Ted Boers // Rockford, Mich.

November Issue

Congratulations on another good issue of *The Banner* (November 2020) helping us to look thoughtfully, critically, and biblically at deeply held opinions on societal issues such as same-sex relationships. And regarding religious persecution, Shiao Chong’s editorial was again insightful in encouraging us to make careful distinctions between personal offense received and physical harassment endured.

» Charles O. Miller // Willmar, Minn.

The line that bothered me the most in the same-sex relationships article (“Same-Sex Relationships and the CRC”) was this from Fred Heerema: “I would urge the CRC to stop thinking that the Bible alone has the answer to every question it might have on these matters.” If we stop looking at the Bible, we no longer see it as God’s infallible Word. The Bible is where we learn about God, his love, his sacrifice, his will, his authority, his justice, and how we are to live. There is no other place we should look to find God’s answers.

» Deb Haak // Zeeland, Mich.

Recently I clipped an article by the present editor of *The Banner* written several years ago on the danger of prioritizing experience over intellect. I personally have always consciously chosen intellect over “feeling,” fearing my

The Church Ecosystem

emotions overwhelming my making wise life choices. I am sure my fear of my passions taking control has often been a hindrance and has led to my making some bad choices. However, in some of the opinions expressed about homosexuality in the last *Banner*, I sense the power of experience at work, of how something that “feels right” prevails. It suggests a change in how many in the CRC today wish to deal with contemporary departures from old norms that I find troubling. Can we no longer determine what Scripture says?

» Rev. John Koole // Strathroy, Ont.

READ MORE ONLINE



As I Was Saying

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

- » Conduct Becoming the Body of Christ
- » The Tree and the Gardener
- » Christmas in the Trenches

I RECENTLY WATCHED a movie called *The Biggest Little Farm*. It's a documentary about a couple who move to a barren, dry, unsuccessful 200-acre farm north of Los Angeles, Calif.

The movie takes you through their first five years of farming. Their No. 1 goal is to be 100% natural—no pesticides. They have no clue how to be farmers, so they enlist the help of a natural farming expert to help them regenerate the land. This expert urges the couple to build biodiversity. They enrich the soil. They harvest the power of compost and manure. They buy chickens, ducks, a pregnant pig, a bull, cows, and sheep, and they plant many different crops. But then their farming expert dies. And then the pests come: coyotes, gophers, snails, birds, aphids.

The farm struggles. The couple wants to give up. They get overwhelmed with the problems. They have no idea what to do. They make mistakes. But then they start using the farm's biodiversity to solve its pest problems. They discover that if they move the ducks to the orchard, the ducks eat the snails on the fruit trees, and the duck manure fertilizes the orchard. They build a habitat for owls and hawks, who eat or chase away the birds eating the fruit crops. They build a strong chicken coop so the coyotes eat the gophers instead of the chickens. All this is accomplished without pesticides or otherwise killing pests themselves.

Why is this movie relevant? First, it is a lovely reminder that God creates whole ecosystems based on diversity. Our church is one ecosystem. While there might be many similarities between us, we might not always know what to do with our differences. Sometimes we might feel lonely, disconnected, misunderstood. We might catch ourselves trying hard to fit in. We might fall prey to the

The sense of belonging and love sometimes comes more quickly and is felt more deeply when we are welcomed to be our unique selves.

lie that if we want to be loved and belong, we need to all be the same. But the weird thing is that the sense of belonging and love sometimes comes more quickly and is felt more deeply when we are welcomed to be our unique selves.

Second, the couple struggles, wanting to take control over some of the pests. There are times when they don't trust the process. At one point they kill a coyote to solve a problem. But ultimately their farm shows them that the best solutions come from using the farm's resources. They are constantly humbled by this. In the same way, I need to acknowledge God's rightful place in my life. If we yield to God, seeking out God's face in our daily lives for the choices we make, trusting in God's Word, trusting God's knowledge and provision for our life, we live as God intended: we flourish. It's not easy, but it's much better. **B**



Elisa Rink (née Cook) is a social worker serving cancer patients and their families. She attends Clearview Christian Reformed Church in Oakville, Ontario, with her husband, Gary, and their two daughters. She's yearning for the start of planting season.



Reimagining Celibacy

By Jenna Fabiano

"I am saying this for your own good, not to restrict you, but that you may live in a right way in undivided devotion to the Lord" (1 Cor. 7:35).

After reading 1 Corinthians 7:25-40, a number of instinctive thoughts might come to mind. "Paul hates marriage." "Paul's unrealistic." "Why would Paul tell someone to break off an engagement? That's horrible." "Paul can't really mean that."

But based on Paul's eschatological push throughout the letter, he's trying to get the Corinthians to consider the coming kingdom and prioritize service to the Lord. That's the point. He's reminding them of the new age to come, an age in which marriage is not the ultimate endpoint.

So he urges the Corinthians to live into the reality that Christ has

called them to, married or not—a stance completely outside their societal norms.

People in that society, especially women, were expected to marry. But here Paul affirms the unmarried life (i.e., the celibate life)—even going so far as to call it "better"—for men and women in light of the coming kingdom.

If that's the narrative Paul is pushing, why aren't we? What has kept us from affirming celibacy the same way he has? What would it mean for us to seriously consider that we have two very appropriate options for living as disciples of Christ?

For starters, it would mean recognizing the water we're swimming in.

N.T. Wright observes that over the last century, as sexuality has become an identifying label, the idea that all human beings "need active sexual

experience" in order to feel complete and fully alive has also arisen.

So there is now the "shame of single-ness," a condition in which one's sexual ache is not being fulfilled and one hears constant questions of "Hey, have you met anyone special?", "What are you waiting for?", or "Have you tried online dating?", as if the only way we can receive love in this world is by having a romantic partner. As if something's missing, and we're lacking what our overly romantic culture claims is the highest good.

Based on how we act in the church, we've continued that narrative—but with a bit more "Christianese" thrown in. Many churches treat singles as those who haven't fulfilled their purpose, as if their lives don't really start until they marry.

This has been the tendency since the Reformation, when Protestants

reacted against the Roman Catholic preference for celibacy and reaffirmed the goodness of marriage. The pendulum swung, and it never swung back. It never evened out.

What we need now is a radical rebalancing of that pendulum.

Read what church historian Sarah Williams says about this in Regent College Podcast #068:

What if we had a radical rediscovery of the spirituality of celibacy? What would it be like to call people into a life which isn't singleness—waiting for the bus of marriage to come along—but is about renunciation, about people giving themselves with singularity to Christ, living lives of prayer, of intentional intimacy with Christ? Lives which are not lonely, but lives that must be lived in community. What if we reimagined how we did church so that the nuclear family isn't the idol around which all things have to flow?

What if we—the church—were a place where the narrative changed? How would we do this?

We can start by recognizing that both marriage and celibacy are about sanctification. Both reveal how deeply selfish we are and reveal our need to be more like Christ. Both involve self-denial and a recognition that we (including our bodies) are not our own.

Both marriage and celibacy have the capacity to orient us in the right direction, toward Christ—which is what Paul was trying to articulate to the Corinthians. It's not about you or your marital status. It's about orienting your life around Christ.

As members of Christ's body, all of us are on the road of sanctification and self-denial. We should never feel shame, and we should never feel alone, because throughout church history, celibacy always implied community. It was never an individual project, something you maintain by yourself. Jesus chose to live without a wife, but he

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never lacked community. Monastics have always lived in groups because they know they must.

Wesley Hill, a celibate professor in Pennsylvania, notes that celibacy does not mean exclusion from meaningful relationships. He lives with a married couple and their two young kids. He has five godchildren. He's a spiritual uncle to all of them.

We have to start thinking more creatively. Maybe our houses could be homes for more than just our own families. Maybe we could invite one another into community living situations. Have we given space for our kids to have input from spiritual mentors or godparents?

Is there a place to redeem a vision of "family" that is bigger than just our own nuclear families? Christ didn't call the church a support group or a yacht club; he called us a family. What does that mean? Can we expand our imaginations and be prepared to support one another when life circumstances change?

Celibacy does not imply permanency. One celibate woman puts it this way: "Am I called to singleness? Today I am. I don't know about tomorrow."

Marriage is not necessarily permanent in this life either. My husband, Danny, grew up with a single mom.

His dad passed away when Danny was 9 months old. His mom was married for six years, and then she was celibate again.

Nothing is guaranteed. I'm not guaranteed to be married to Danny until I'm 95, so why would I live with that expectation when an even greater joy is waiting for both of us?

What have we done to our understanding of Jesus and his kingdom by limiting ourselves to a vocation that doesn't exist in the new creation, a place where our longings and our aches—inside and outside of marriage—will be completely fulfilled in the presence of God?

None of us in this life is free from aches, longings, or feeling alone. Our desires are off-kilter. Our bodies are broken. We're waiting for redemption.

So we take that longing and train our hearts for when we do see Jesus face to face. We keep our desires in tune with him and remember that we have a future destiny.

Perhaps one day we'll see Christians not lamenting someone's singleness, but celebrating the decision to be celibate, delighting in a brother's or sister's desire to pursue Christ at all costs, undivided, unhindered, walking ahead with open hands, faithful to whatever God sets before them, marriage or singleness, looking ahead with joy to the final restoring of all things.

The question is never "What do we lack?" Rather, it's "How can we best set our hearts on Christ in the place where we are?"

Because that's exactly where he wants to meet us. **B**



Jenna Fabiano currently serves as the associate pastor at Willoughby Christian Reformed Church in Langley, B.C.

BIG QUESTIONS

Relationships

What do I say to young adults in my family when they say they have left the church because they were hurt by the church? How can I engage my family members in a sensitive but honest discussion?

It begins by repenting on behalf of the church and praying for the young adults in your family. After repenting, pray that someone other than family may help them see Jesus in a new way. Pray also that you will receive guidance from the Holy Spirit to pick the right time to open a conversation about God, faith, and the body of Christ, and that you will have the right words and wisdom to engage in such a conversation.

When the Holy Spirit prompts you to speak to young adult relatives, ask questions. Find out the specifics of the hurt experienced in the church of their youth and express your sorrow on their behalf for the hurt caused. Talk about who Christ is and how he made friends with those on the margins of the respectable synagogue crowd of his day. Point out that Jesus, too, was critical of the instituted religious establishment of his day and not very obedient to these religious leaders.

Above all, remind them that the body of Christ cannot be confined to one



Illustration for The Banner by Laurie Sienkowski

church or one denomination, and that it is better to find a new community for worship than to simply withdraw from the existing one. Encourage them to seek until they find.

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

Faith Formation

How do I explain the Trinity to my children?

The Trinity is a notoriously difficult concept to understand, so explaining it well to children is going to be difficult. To explain complex things to children we often grab an analogy—for example, the Trinity is like water. Water can be a liquid, a solid, or a gas, but it is always water. Or the Trinity is like an egg. An egg has three parts—the shell, the yolk, and the white—but they are all parts of the egg. The problem with these analogies (and others) is that they can pretty quickly lead us to a limited, incomplete, and wrong understanding. The water analogy might make us think that God simply reveals God's self in different ways at different times. The egg might make us think that God is split into three parts.

Jesus does give us a clue to understanding the Trinity in his prayer for believers in John 17. He prays that the people who believe through the disciples' message will be one just as he is one with the Father (John 17:20-21). These believers who will make

up the church are a small reflection of the unity of the persons of the Trinity. When we experience deep unity with fellow believers, we get a small glimpse into the unity of the triune God.

One good place to go for a brief reflection on the Trinity is the Athanasian Creed, which lays out the basic doctrine of the Trinity: There is one God, but he is three persons—the Father, the Son (Jesus), and the Holy Spirit. The Father is God. Jesus is God. The Holy Spirit is God. But there is one God. It is hard to understand, but that's OK because God is much bigger than we can understand.

Laura Keeley is a regional catalyzer for Faith Formation Ministries and director of children's ministries at 14th Street 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.

Ethics

Shouldn't Christians use biblical truth and language to encourage understanding and acceptance of our human oneness—the scientific fact that there is biologically only one race?

You're right that the category of race plays a huge and often divisive role in today's culture. And yes, the Bible

certainly provides a compelling vision of human oneness—God as Creator of all (as in Genesis 1 or Acts 17:26), and Christ’s redemption establishing a community in which sinful divisions are rendered obsolete (as in Gal. 3:27-28).

However, the fact that Scripture shows racial categories to be, in the end, theologically inconsequential does not mean that those categories have no relevance for Christians. Similarly, the fact that science shows no genetic basis for “race” is not the end of the conversation. Biological reality is not the only kind of reality. And God’s creative intent and redemptive work are not the only relevant theological truths.

Social and cultural realities, even if not rooted in biology or ultimately sanctioned by theology, are still real. Race, though an idea invented in human history, is all too real because society has threaded that category into its institutions and ways of organizing life, usually with an intent to exclude or dominate. Race, in short, is a product of racism. And sadly, Christianity contributed to the making of the notion of race in its involvement with patterns of Western colonialism that are, also sadly, still with us today.

Perhaps ironically, then, working to transform today’s cultural conversation toward a biblical vision of humanity’s unity requires paying attention to the historical and social reality of race in relation to the sin of racism and, through the Spirit, doing what we can in our churches, our friendships, our workplaces, our childrearing, and our voice on social policies to remedy the injustice of racism. It is by addressing the wrongness of racism, not by ignoring the concept of race, that Christians best testify to our human oneness.

Matt Lundberg lives in Grand Rapids, Michigan. He is a member of Boston Square CRC and the director of Calvin University’s de Vries Institute for Global Faculty Development.

Missional Living

What is evangelism?

Good question! “Evangelism” has often been reduced to a simple formula that “the other” is invited to accept and believe. But evangelism—literally “gospeling”—is much more than that. As Resonate’s Gospel Witness Guiding Team puts it, it’s about bearing witness to “the good news of God’s reign, grace, and love in and through Christ for the redemption and renewal of all things: personal, communal, and systemic ... through the embodiment, proclamation, and demonstration of God’s sovereign work. God’s people participate in God’s mission holistically as contextually engaged, grace-filled, truth-telling co-workers with the Spirit for the reconciliation, peace, and justice (shalom) of all of creation.”

In other words, “evangelism,” or gospel witness, is about who we are and how we live in our everyday lives and relationships. It’s about a lifestyle and the postures and practices that reflect, embody, and proclaim who Jesus is and what God has done for the world God so loves.

The implication of this, of course, is the reality that we are evangelizing as those called, equipped, and empowered by the Spirit all the time. Unfortunately, our witness has not always been positive and accessible. Factions of the church have throughout history distorted or even obscured the good news. We also tend to distance ourselves from the “others” in our communities such that there’s no chance they’ll experience salt, light, or the sweetness of the fruit of the Spirit. The shalom, justice, and mercy

of God’s gracious rule has simply not come near.

So where and how might you begin to bear witness to God’s good news—to evangelize? How about right where God has sent you: by getting to know and love your neighbors, by inviting them to your table, listening to their stories, becoming friends, sharing your lives, and together discovering how both of your stories are part of God’s good story?

In doing so, I think you’ll ascertain that the Spirit has gone ahead and is already working out our salvation and the restoration and renewal of all things for the sake of God’s name, God’s kingdom, and God’s glory right next door.

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.



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

Sexuality Report Released to Churches

NEWS

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

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Photo by Karen Huttenga

An interim report by the human sexuality committee was released ahead of Synod 2019. Delegates to that synod discussed it and offered the committee feedback.

A report to be presented to Synod 2021 of the Christian Reformed Church affirms the denomination’s historical position on homosexuality and offers scriptural and pastoral guidance on a range of sexual matters. Four years in the making, it’s expected to dominate much of the June meeting’s agenda. (Synod is the annual general assembly of the CRC.)

The committee behind the report was formed in 2016 and mandated to articulate a “biblical theology of human sexuality.” Synod 2016 decided that pastors may not officiate same-sex weddings. To further address the topic, that synod requested an in-depth study, to be reported to Synod 2021.

The 175-page report has now been released for local churches to review and provide feedback (overtures or communications) to synod if they choose.

The report’s overall stance is, to use its own language, traditionalist. It reaffirms the CRC’s 1973 position on homosexuality: that same-sex attraction is not a sin, but acting on that attraction is.

The report is notable for recommending that synod decline to take previously discussed actions. At past synods, some suggested the CRC adopt an official

confession about gender and sexuality. According to the new report, the denomination does not need such a confession. The Bible is clear, the report states, that any sexual activity outside of a male-female marriage is sinful. The report points to the Heidelberg Catechism, which in its explanation of the biblical commandment against adultery says that “God condemns all unchastity.” (Written in 1563, the Heidelberg Catechism is an official confession of the CRC and many other denominations.)

“The church’s teaching on premarital sex, extramarital sex, adultery, polyamory, pornography, and homosexual sex already has confessional status,” the report asserts, recommending that synod adopt that statement (Report, p. 149). The report raises questions of the consequences of that action on current and future office bearers of the church but does not offer synod any answers.

No Change to Church Order

The report allows that a future synod could adopt a statement on human embodiment and sexuality such as the Great Lakes Catechism on Marriage and Sexuality, written for the Reformed Church in America in 2018. However, the report advised against appointing

a committee to devise such a “quasi-confessional” statement because it would involve duplicating the work already done in the report.

In the same vein, the committee recommends that synod make no change to Article 69c of the denomination’s Church Order, which reads, “Ministers shall not solemnize marriages which would be in conflict with the Word of God.” Adding specific wording about same-sex marriages is unnecessary, the committee says, because Article 69c should be interpreted “in light of the biblical evidence laid out in this report.” Synod 2016 already added a supplement to Article 69c identifying same-sex marriage as one example of a marriage considered to be in conflict with the Word of God. (Adding supplemental material to an article of Church Order is not the same as altering the order itself, which requires changes be proposed by one synod to be adopted by another.)

Committee Makeup

Eleven people, mostly seminary professors, pastors, and college professors in the CRC, were appointed to the committee. As the committee members met over the past four years, they interviewed churchgoers who represent sexual minorities. Their stories—with identities protected by pseudonyms—pepper the report.

Two of the appointed members withdrew from the work of the committee, one in February 2018 because of a move to South Korea, and the committee’s reporter, Matthew Tuininga, more recently. The introduction to the report notes that while Tuininga affirms the biblical teaching sections of the report, “he believes the pastoral care sections fail to provide the church with much-needed guidance on how to discipline erring members with love and grace and incorporate them into the sacramental community of the body of Christ” (Report, p. 4).

Biblical Framework

The report includes a 22-page biblical theology of human sexuality that pays particular attention to the creation-fall-redemption arc of Scripture, specifically noting Matthew 19, Genesis 1-2, and passages from the wisdom literature, letters to the Corinthians, and the Gospels. Under particular subject headings, the report often returns to the same Scriptures.

“Genesis 1-2 are paradigmatic texts,” the report reads. “They describe God’s purposes for creation in a way that is not

Pornography

The report covers potentially uncomfortable and divisive topics—including pornography, gender identity, homosexuality, and disorders of sexual development—in exacting detail.

The 20-page pornography section discusses the prevalence of porn and its negative effects on porn users, their families, and those exploited to create porn. Because pornography involves violence, exploitation of the poor, racism, sexual sin, and broken relationships, the report



Photo by Tracey DeWeerd

A group of about 25 people occupied gallery seating at Synod 2019 while delegates spoke in groups to give feedback on the sexuality interim report. Paul De Vries (standing), chair of the CRC’s Council of Delegates, listened to the audience members’ feedback.

simply descriptive, but normative—that is, the way God intended. Scripture itself teaches us to interpret these texts in this way” (Report, p. 75).

A later section of the report gives an in-depth analysis of Song of Songs, holding it up as a biblical example of good sex between two equally valued partners.

The committee’s mandate included “dialogue with, and potential critique of ... conclusions arising from scientific and social scientific studies.” The committee did this, it said, “through the lens of Scripture,” noting a warning from the *Acts of Synod 1972* against “giving science as much weight as Scripture” (Report, pp. 37-38).

says that it is condemned by Scripture. “Although porn usage is a deeply personal issue, as churches we can no longer allow it to be a private issue,” it states. The report includes pastoral care suggestions and many resources to help those affected by pornography.

Gender Identity

The report devotes 33 pages to gender identity. Gender dysphoria and disorders of sexual development “are to be interpreted as a result of the fall, which in many ways has distorted God’s good creation,” it states. “Of course, this does not in any way mean that the people suffering from these conditions are

personally responsible for them. Rather they suffer the consequences of the post-fall groaning of creation (Rom. 8:22; John 9:1-12). The church must therefore reach out to them in compassion and love” (Report, p. 76).

The report counters an interpretation of the first chapters of Genesis that would understand the possibilities of sexual biology as a spectrum. “Genesis 1-2 clearly and explicitly describes pre-fall human beings as created in only two forms: male/man (Adam) and female/woman (Eve). Unlike the degrees between dark and light which are found frequently in Scripture, nowhere does Scripture suggest that there is a spectrum of normative biological manifestations of humanity beyond male and female” (p. 76).

The idea of transitioning to one’s true inner gender stems from an unbiblical belief that body and soul are separate, the authors purport: “We cannot claim that a person’s true identity resides in their subjective sense of self as distinct from the body with which they were born” (Report, p. 81).

The report does encourage Christians to reconsider traditional gender stereotypes because they can alienate gender-nonconforming people in an unbiblical way. “Although he made us with important sexual differences, God does not dictate masculine or feminine traits that ought to accompany these differences,” it states. “Biblical teaching is not nearly as specific or dogmatic as Christians have typically made it out to be. In many cases, we owe one another greater freedom than we have given in the past” (Report, p. 82).

Citing 1 Corinthians 13:12-13, the report notes that “in its mission and pastoral care, the church should demonstrate great openness to people who experience gender dysphoria or who are gender nonconforming, and should be cautious in any pronouncements and policy making,” (p. 83).



Photo by Karen Huttenga

Delegates to Synod 2019 discussed the interim report of the human sexuality committee and prayed for the committee’s continued work.

The church can become stronger by better including “members of your congregation who see themselves as gender nonconforming, who experience gender dysphoria, or who are attracted to the same sex,” the report says. Encourage them “to advise or help give leadership to any outreach. Not only will this further their own discipleship, but the church will also benefit from the personal advocacy and compassion they will bring” (p. 90).

Singleness

Throughout the report there is pastoral advice aimed at fostering better inclusion of people in the church who are single (for any reason) and outside of traditional family structures. In fact, the report recommends referring to the church as a family and elevating the church family over the traditional family unit. Single people, it urges, should be invited into fellowship in deep, meaningful ways, such as in intentional communities.

Homosexuality

The 34-page section on homosexuality includes subsections for cultural context, Scripture, and pastoral care. While noting the conclusion of the 1973 synodical report on homosexuality that “homosexuality is not the result of any

conscious choice or decision on the part of the person,” the 2020 report cites recent studies that question whether same-sex attraction is a genetic predisposition (p. 93). (It also includes an appendix titled “What Can Science Tell Us about the Biological Origins of Sexual Orientation?”)

In the same section, though, the report acknowledges, “The church has also harmed people who are attracted to the same sex by promoting the false expectation of orientation change” and points out that “the sin of homosexual practice is often singled out for condemnation while other sexual sins (such as cohabitation, pornography use, adultery, and divorce without legitimate cause) are ignored or minimized” (Report, p. 95). The report calls this hypocrisy that requires repentance.

In reviewing “biblical texts that are typically cited in any discussion of Scripture’s view of homosexual activity,” the report defends “traditional” interpretations against “revisionist” interpretations that allow for committed homosexual partnerships. It spends 16 pages (pp. 97-113) reviewing these texts and countering arguments by those whom the report terms “revisionist scholars.”

To the question of whether “the Holy Spirit is prompting a reexamination of Scripture” as suggested in the Classis Grand Rapids East study report on “Biblical and Theological Support Currently Offered by Christian Proponents of Same-Sex Marriage” (January 2016), the report responds: “It is one thing to reexamine Scripture, but it is quite another thing to ignore the clear and consistent teaching of Scripture in order to reach an alternative reading of the key texts and then claim that this all happened through the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Is it not equally possible that all this happened through the guidance of another “spirit”—the “spirit” of our secular age and contemporary culture (1 John 4:1-3)?” (Report, p. 111).

In the conclusion of the biblical evidence section, the report asserts, “In the world’s eyes, it is outrageous to expect those who are attracted to the same sex not to express those desires in a sexual relationship, just as it is outrageous to refuse to use pornography or to refuse to have sex outside of marriage. This is why Jesus explains that in order to enter the kingdom of God a person must be born from above” (Report, p. 113).

The pastoral care section on homosexuality calls congregations to “honestly examine their attitudes and actions toward people who are attracted to the same sex and ... to repent when such attitudes and actions are sinful.” Further, “congregations need to be clearly taught or reminded that the experience of attraction to the same sex is not sinful in itself.” It adds that “the church needs more godly people who are attracted to the same sex to serve as pastors, elders, and deacons.” The report includes special sections of guidance directed to church leaders and to same-sex attracted church members.

Other matters discussed in specific sections of the report include singleness, premarital sex and cohabitation, polyamory (sexual relationships with multiple participants), and divorce.

Difficult Conversations

Given the scope of the report and the varying contexts of ministry of Christian Reformed congregations, members of the study committee worked with the CRC’s Pastor Church Resources ministry to produce a toolkit to help churches and small groups “discuss aspects of the committee’s report which may be controversial.” That toolkit can be found at bit.ly/PCRtoolkit.

—Roxanne Van Farowe

This full report, and two others to be addressed at Synod 2021, are available online from CRCNA synodical services, with summaries in English, Korean, and Spanish. The Banner’s summaries of the Bivocationality Task Force study and the Ecclesiastical Marriage Task Force report will appear in the February edition.

Noteworthy



Feenstra



Taylor



Rozenboom



Huizenga



LaGrand



Sales

Several men belonging to Christian Reformed congregations were elected to office in the U.S. general election in November. **Randy Feenstra** was elected to the **United States House of Representatives** as a Republican for Iowa’s 4th Congressional District. He attends First CRC in Hull, Iowa. **Jeff Taylor**, a member of Covenant CRC in Sioux Center, was elected to the **Iowa Senate**, replacing Feenstra. He is also a Republican. **Ken Rozenboom** also serves in the **Iowa Senate** as a Republican. He attends Bethel CRC in Oskaloosa and was elected to his second consecutive term.

Bill Huizenga, who has represented Michigan’s 2nd District as a Republican in the **House of Representatives** since 2011, was **reelected**. Huizenga is a member of Haven CRC in Zeeland, Mich. **David LaGrand**, a Democrat, was reelected to his 75th District seat in the **Michigan House of Representatives**. LaGrand attends Eastern Avenue CRC in Grand Rapids, Mich., and is a commissioned pastor in the CRC with a focus in prison ministry. **Walt Sales**, a member of Manhattan CRC, Manhattan, Mont., was elected to the **Montana State Senate** as a Republican, following two terms in the House.



GLOBAL COFFEE BREAK

DISCOVERING TOGETHER

Global Coffee Break, the small group Bible study ministry introduced by CRC members in North America and developed into an international learning ministry, celebrated **50 years** in 2020.

Churches on Mission

Prayer in Times Square



Photo by John Lee

John Lee, a pastor at City Grace Church, a Christian Reformed congregation in New York City, is one of the leaders of a group of prayer walkers who have worshiped and prayed in Times Square every Sunday since the COVID-19 pandemic began. Anywhere from six to 25 Christians from local churches join. Their songs, said Lee,

are “a stark difference from the shuttered theaters.”

“Beautiful things happen in church buildings,” said Lee, but “they are invisible to those outside.” Being on these walks “allows the church to see what is happening in our neighborhoods,” he said. It is a “ministry of understanding.”

Community Hub in Historic Worship Space

A partnership between a Christian Reformed congregation in Cambridge, Ont., and a group that funds and operates transformation projects, is reclaiming a historic church building in a project that is just the second of its kind in Canada.

River City Church teamed up with Trinity Centres Foundation to purchase and renovate a former United Church at 15 Wellington Street, Cambridge. The building is now being redeployed for community impact.

“We have a vision of a community hub development in this old church,” said River City deacon Melissa Burmaster. “I can see how God is allowing River City to be, as a whole unit, living into the vocation of mission in the community by putting roots down and being established in the downtown.”



Deacon Melissa Burnmaster and Pastor Darrell Bierman on the steps of 15 Wellington Street, the new home of River City Church.

Building Relationships on Mountain Bike Trails

“Heartland Fellowship’s advocating for trails and greenspace preservation serves as a practical service to our community and also created a common goal for our members to engage with our First Nations communities,” said Marc Greidanus, a member of the Chilliwack, B.C., Christian Reformed congregation and an initiator of the church’s trail construction efforts five years ago.



Photo by Marc Greidanus

In 2020, funding from the United Way and the provincial overdose awareness program supporting at-risk youth allowed for increased mentoring and mountain biking programs.

Showcasing Crossroads Prison Art

North Hills Christian Reformed Church in Troy, Mich., hosted a traveling art exhibit in September showcasing work from participants of Crossroads Prison Ministry’s correspondence Bible study course.

Several members of North Hills CRC serve as volunteer mentors with Crossroads.

Doug Cupery, Crossroads’ church mobilization director who traveled with the exhibit from the ministry’s office in Grand Rapids, Mich., shared stories of how the art came to be. Artistically inclined inmates, with limited resources, often respond to their maturing knowledge of the Bible with artwork.



Photo by Jeff Saxsma

—Banner correspondents

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Classis Watch: Fall 2020

Two or three times each year, Christian Reformed churches send representatives to their classis, a regional group of churches. Here is a report of classis meetings of the past several months.

Four classes canceled fall meetings due to COVID-19; 21 conducted their meetings by video conference; and eight hosted meetings that were a hybrid of in-person and online.

Some of the actions taken by classes pertain to particular articles in the CRC's Church Order, the rules that govern denominational life. These are noted in the report.

Those **welcomed into ministry in the Christian Reformed Church** include seminary graduates Hyung Jun Kim, Jennifer Rozema, Courtney Saldivar, Ben Gresik, Daniel Kwangmyung Joo, Cary Gephart, Steve Vandyk, Chad Werkhoven, Seongjun Kim, Andrea Bult Visser, Cory Willson, Jeremy Scripps, Elizabeth (Betsy) DeVries, Ahnna Cho Park, Richard Britton III, and Daniel Meyer (Church Order Articles 6 and 10).

Ministers 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 Matthew Wright, Chenaniah "Kenny" Perumalla, Merlin Perumalla, Will Barham, Greg Brady, Hannah Guan, Christian Sebastia, Eukarys Sebastia, and Jung Min Kim (Church Order Art. 8). Ministers from the Reformed Church of America and the CRC may serve in a congregation of the other denomination (Church Order Art. 8b). **Welcomed from the RCA:** Rev. Michael Hooker.

Ministers **loaned:** Revs. Seongjun Kim, to Korean Presbyterian Church (Farmington Hills, Mich.); Hannah Guan, to New Gate Church (Aurora, Colo.); and Ahnna Cho Park, to Korean Christian Church (Denver, Colo.) (Church Order Art. 13b).

Ministers released from a congregation: Revs. Brian Seifert, from Millwood Community (Kalamazoo, Mich.); Vern Swieringa, from Oakland (Mich.); Jason Nelson, from Bethel (Lansing, Ill.); Daryl Meijer, from Maranatha (Woodstock, Ont.); Gregory Kett, from Highland (Mich.); Samuel Lee, from Hope (Ann Arbor, Mich.); Norlyn Van Beek, from executive director position of Inspiration Hills (Innwood, Iowa); Todd Hilkemann, from Cragmor (Colorado Springs, Colo.); Ben Oliveira, from Allen Avenue (Muskegon, Mich.) Keith Mannes, from East Saugatuck (Holland, Mich.); and Bruce Gritter, from River Community (Edmonton, Alta.) (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).

Phil Anderas, Nevada De Lapp, Marvin Leese, and William Zeilstra were **honorably released**.

Do Hyeong Kim, Young Ryul Ki, and Yong Chae Shin were **released**.

Kyle Kloostra was **dismissed**.

Ministers retiring (granted emeritus status): Revs. Thea Leunk, Kent Rottman, Timothy Ouwinga, Rolf Bouma, Christian Oh, Fernando del Rosario, Jack Dik, James Halstead, Randy VanOsdol, and Ron Klok (Church Order Art. 18).

Commissioned Pastors

Commissioned pastors are called to specific roles within their classis (Church Order Art. 23). Sixteen commissioned pastors were approved in recent months and two were granted commissioned pastor emeritus status. For their names and classes, please see the Classis Watch report at *TheBanner.org*.

New Ministries and Ministry Changes

Korean Community Church, Red Deer, Alta., **affiliated** with the CRC.

Spring Rain Church, Boston, Mass., and Orangewood Community Church in Phoenix, Ariz., are **new ministries**.

Centerpointe Church of Plainfield, Ill. and Conrad (Mont.) CRC **disbanded**.

Other Matters

Classis Minnkota **established a non-voting ecumenical relationship** with Classis Central U.S. of the United Reformed Church.

Classis Minnkota asked churches that have reached a conviction that women be allowed in ordained office to **consider pursuing membership in an egalitarian classis**. The minutes note that "such action and separation should be viewed as mutually beneficial and not a matter of banishment or rejection."

The council of Neland Avenue CRC in Grand Rapids, Mich., reported to Classis Grand Rapids East that it had **installed a deacon who is in a same-sex marriage**. No comments or questions were forthcoming at the classis meeting.

Two classes (Zeeland and Minnkota) and several individual congregations from various classes noted sending **letters of protest or concern to Classis Grand Rapids East and/or Neland Avenue CRC**.

Classis Toronto and Classis Alberta South & Saskatchewan are sending requests to Synod 2021 to **halt all proceedings related to the administrative restructuring of the Canadian CRCNA churches**. Toronto's request says "the actions taken by Canadian representatives serving on the denomination's Council of Delegates and the CRCNA's Canada Corporation are in violation of Church Order Article 27a and Article 28c."

—Gayla R. Postma
and Alissa Vernon, news editor

IN MEMORIAM



*Rev. John Frederic
De Vries*
1936-2020

The life of John De Vries was marked by a passionate dedication to “go and make disciples of all nations.” From his pastoring churches to his work at the World Home Bible League, from his founding Mission India to his preaching around the world, his passion never wavered. De Vries wrote numerous Bible study guides and books, including his most popular, *Why Pray?* Through his work at the World Home Bible League and Mission India, millions of people have been introduced to Jesus Christ. De Vries died Oct. 25.

Ordained in 1961, De Vries served Luverne (Minn.) Christian Reformed Church and then Hope CRC in Grandville, Mich. While at Hope he wrote several Bible correspondence courses that developed into Project Philip, an evangelism training program. After working for the World Home Bible League for eight years, De Vries accepted a call to Highland Hills CRC (Grand Rapids, Mich.) and began the founding of Mission India. By 1983, he was CEO at Mission India and soon became a prominent figure within the global church community.

A dedicated grandfather, De Vries enjoyed spending time at the family cottage and fishing. He is survived by his wife of 62 years, Adelaide (“Atts”); four children and spouses; 15 grandchildren; and three great-grandchildren.

—Janet A. Greidanus

Friendship Ministries Connect Despite COVID-19

In Ontario and in British Columbia, Friendship Ministry groups—those designed to bring friendship to adults of varying abilities—have made special connections while living with pandemic restrictions.

Herb Goodhoofd, a member at Clearview Christian Reformed Church in Oakville, Ont., hosts weekly video calls to keep participants from various Ontario Friendship Ministries connected.

Ten years ago, Goodhoofd organized Friendship Festival, an annual event (except for 2020) that brings together up to 200 friends with developmental disabilities for a day of fun and fellowship. The weekly video meetups, called “Zoom into Friendship,” started in March and welcome friends who are part of the Friendship Festival Facebook group.

In Abbotsford, B.C., Elaine Hart has been leading a Friendship group since 2018. Hart, a member of Trinity CRC, took over a program that goes back more than 25 years. Prior to COVID, they typically met three mornings a month for singing, teaching, prayer, refreshments, and fellowship.

In March, the gatherings at Trinity were shut down. Hart and her volunteers decided to provide a monthly newsletter. “Our group is not tech-savvy,” she explained. The newsletter includes a prayer corner, Scripture and teaching, coloring pages or puzzles, and even a good joke.



Dianne Kwantes-Mazari (right) delivers an advent package to Mairin, a friend in the Friendship Ministry in Abbotsford, B.C.

Birthdays are always noted. Volunteers keep in touch with phone calls to their friends or make arrangements to meet outside for a walk or coffee.

Hart appreciates the support of her team. “We encourage each other through emails and phone calls with a ‘What can I do to help?’ attitude and a willingness to share ideas,” she said.

Ahead of Christmas, they delivered handmade candle arrangements along with a liturgy for participants to read about God’s love and care as they light each battery-operated candle.

Goodhoofd also includes a time for sharing about God’s love in his weekly Zoom sessions. One week, participant Amanda reminded the group that “to love God is everything.”

—Jenny deGroot



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MISSIONARY JUSTICE EVANGELISM RECONCILIATION

Loaded Words

By Kristen deRoo VanderBerg

I once wanted to use the African proverb “It takes a village to raise a child” in something I was writing. While this proverb has been around for generations, an editor told me I should remove it from my piece. The proverb had become too associated with Hillary Clinton because of her book *It Takes a Village*, the editor said, and would therefore immediately turn off half of my readers.

This editor wasn’t wrong. Experts suggest that loaded language, such as a phrase associated with a specific political personality, can make us react to emotional stimuli instead of taking the time to fully read and understand what has been said.

With that in mind, I’d like to suggest a few loaded terms that we should all be thoughtful about in 2021. This doesn’t mean we shouldn’t use them, but I hope we can use them cautiously and redeem them for God’s purposes.

Missionary

In many countries the term “missionary” connotes colonialism and overreach. In the past, some missionaries arrived from Western countries, dismissed local culture, pushed their own ideas and understandings, and cared only for people’s souls—not their health and well-being.

As a result, when CRCNA staff members today talk with people about the prospect of doing gospel outreach, discipleship, church planting, and theological training around the world, it’s common for the candidate to say something like, “I’m really interested in this type of ministry, but I don’t want to be a missionary.”

The Christian Reformed Church is not exempt from historical mistakes by missionaries. But it’s important to realize

that today Resonate Global Mission, ReFrame Ministries*, and World Renew partner with Christians throughout the world to spread the gospel in a way that honors unique local contexts. CRCNA staff are from everywhere and go everywhere. This has changed what “mission” looks like.

“Over the years, my concept of what it means to be a missionary has changed,” said Ken Lee, a Resonate missionary serving in Japan.

Years ago, when Ken’s pastor suggested Ken serve in Japan, Lee wondered, “Why Japan? Japan is such a wealthy country.”

But when Lee visited Japan, he discovered a dire need for the gospel. In a country of 127 million people, less than one percent of the population is Christian. Few of those Christians are young people, and churches are rapidly aging. Without support from Christians in other countries, the church in Japan could die.

“If we just leave them to do it on their own, it’s almost impossible,” Lee said.

Partnering with local churches, Lee disciples and teaches young people to actively follow Christ in their communities. In many cases, Lee also gets to introduce people to Christ

for the first time, but that process often takes months or years.

One time, for example, Lee tutored a university student in

English for a year, getting to know her before he shared the gospel with her.

“She accepted Christ and wanted to be baptized,” Lee said. He connected her to a church and encouraged her to pray for her family. Four years later, her parents accepted Christ too.

Justice

“Around 2010, when Glenn Beck had a Fox News show, he went on the offensive against the term ‘social justice,’” said Kris VanEngen, justice mobilizing coordinator for World Renew. Beck’s influence turned many viewers into critics of the concept.

In 28 verses of the Old Testament and throughout the life of Jesus, the Bible is clear that Christ-followers are called to “do justice.” Unfortunately, because justice issues often

intersect with politics, especially in their most urgent moments, it can be difficult for Christians today to recognize where justice fits in their Christian walk.

I’d like to suggest a few

loaded terms that

we should all be thoughtful

about in 2021.

“What I think we have to come back to is that there is an idea of social justice that is largely determined by our society, and then there is biblical justice, which is determined by Scripture,” said Eliza Cortez-Bast, coordinator for local missional engagement for the Reformed Church in America.

Our call to biblical justice is clear. But we also have a responsibility to discern how God is specifically calling us to pursue this justice.

“It may be times of dedicated prayer—for issues, for our political leaders, for our communities or countries. It may be lament—joining with our communities as we mourn with those who mourn. It may be a letter-writing campaign. It may be service,” said Cortez-Bast.

In other words, we shouldn’t let the political connotations of “justice” prevent us from taking action.

Ida Kaastra-Mutoigo, director of World Renew-Canada, agrees and adds that this should not be just an individual activity. In fact, she said, systems of injustice often contribute to the poverty that World Renew sees around the world. These systems need a larger group of people and policy changes to address them if we want to help individuals overcome poverty.

“It’s powerful when churches embrace ‘justice’ in the spirit of ‘biblical justice’ and think creatively about what that means for each of us in our local and global contexts,” Kaastra-Mutoigo said. “Historically, when the church has engaged these issues and worked for solutions, we’ve had a big impact.”

Evangelism

Evangelism has a bad reputation. Many people think of colonialism, televangelists shouting about burning in hell, and Christians standing on street corners with signs that say, “PREPARE TO MEET THY GOD!”

But every day, CRCNA staff and ministry leaders are working to paint a different portrait of evangelism as they share the gospel in loving ways.

When it comes to evangelism, motive and method make a big difference, said Resonate missionary Linda**. Linda

serves in West Africa among a people group from a Muslim background in which Islamic customs and traditions are deeply embedded in culture. Many are resistant to the gospel.

But Linda wants to see members of this people group know Jesus as Lord and Savior. She has lived among them for almost 30 years and has formed deep friendships.

“I like the term ‘embodying the gospel,’” Linda said—“living it out, being the hands and feet of Jesus, being the only Bible that some will ever read. ... With this kind of ministry, it is often a thousand tiny things rather than one big thing that inches people along the road to Jesus.”

After years of her living alongside them—laughing, crying, working, playing, and praying—people are starting to follow Christ.

Amadou** is one young man who accepted Christ after befriending Linda. He was intrigued by Linda’s character and once remarked how “good” she was. “That was an open door for a long discussion about the only one who can truly be called ‘good,’ and that if there is any goodness in me it is because of him who lives within me,” said Linda.

After nearly a decade, Amadou decided to follow Christ. His changed behavior is attracting other people to Christ, too.

“His integrity, his honesty, his servant heart, his humility, and eventually his passion for the Lord drew and continues to draw others into the kingdom,” Linda said.

That is evangelism at its best.

Reconciliation

“I refrain from using the term ‘reconciliation’ because of my recent conversations with white communities after the George Floyd event and the protests afterward,” said Reggie Smith, director of diversity for the CRCNA. “As I was asked to engage with members and churches about this issue, the statement I kept hearing was ‘we just need to be reconciled to each other.’”

Smith explained that such uses of the term assume that there was a previous time of conciliation that we all need to get back to. But from slavery to Jim Crow, redlining to eugenics, and so much more, the history of racial relationships has long been fraught with pain and trauma.

“Most white people begin with the notion that everything was cool in some previous time,” Smith added, “when in actuality, there was never conciliation in the first place. My white brothers and sisters quickly use ‘reconciliation’ as an easy and less painful trope to avoid the toughest fact that racial relationships did not start on any good footing.”

The complexity of the term “reconciliation” isn’t limited to race relations in the United States.

“While in Canada the term ‘reconciliation’ is generally seen as positive and acceptable, especially as it relates to relationships between colonizers and Indigenous people, the term also points to the need for deeper and harder work,” said Shannon Perez, justice and reconciliation mobilizer for the CRCNA’s Canadian Ministries.

“In my work with the Canadian Indigenous Ministry Committee, I try to help people in Christian Reformed churches understand that for us to build relationships between colonizers and Indigenous people we need to not just teach history or find ways to justify what was done in the past; it is about listening, and then it is about making changes,” she said.

The bottom line is that we have to start from scratch, own the history of racial injustice, listen to each other’s experiences, and build a sustained process toward something better than the status quo.

Some Final Thoughts

Word choice matters. The descriptions and phrases we use solicit specific responses in our readers. That’s what separates decent speech and writing from excellent speech and writing.

When words get loaded with meaning in unintended ways, however, they can elicit an emotional response far beyond the word’s literal meaning. As Christians, let’s be thoughtful and careful about the words we use, ensuring that we are not losing sight of our gospel calling as we interact with each other. Put another way, let’s not allow our words to be a barrier to kingdom work. **B**

**ReFrame Ministries is the new name of Back to God Ministries International as of January 2021.*

***Names have been changed for security.*

A Committee Committed to Justice

CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCHES in Canada have a long history of seeking justice and speaking hope in Canadian public affairs. Established 50 years ago, the Committee for Contact with the Government was shaped by congregations out of a conviction that the CRCNA had a calling to interact with Canadian society and governments “on the significant and pressing issues of the day,” according to the CCG mission statement.

Its work has sparked an approach that encourages dialogue and welcomes many voices to the table.

Committee members are recruited from across the country and “are often a very interesting blend of pastors, laypeople, and folks who are closer to the margins of the CRCNA institutions,” explained Colin Conrad, a member from Halifax, N.S.

The committee has four regular meetings each year and otherwise connects when important issues arise. Members help discern and direct the issues on which the Centre for Public Dialogue (CPD) works. They also represent the concerns of various regions and classes. This allows CPD to take an “inch-wide, mile-deep” approach. Currently, for example, the committee has directed CPD to focus on refugees, Indigenous justice, and climate change.

“The CCG is a beautiful gift,” said CPD director Mike Hogeterp. “Members from different corners of the country and a wide range of life experiences contribute to a rich and well-grounded dialogue on the ‘what’ and ‘how’ of Christ-centered public witness for justice.”



The Committee for Contact with the Government last met in person at the Indigenous Family Center in Winnipeg, Man., in November 2019. Since COVID-19, they now meet via video conference.

Each committee member has seen the fruit of engaging in the public sphere in a biblical, justice-oriented way.

Member Lea Wilking, the Central Ontario representative, said, “I love being part of a church that acknowledges that every square inch of life belongs to God, including the government. In church bodies throughout history, there are political disagreements on how we approach various social concerns from a biblical perspective; nevertheless, I appreciate that we can ask hard questions of the Bible and witness to governments of every political persuasion that the exercise of power must be mindful of all people in its care.”

Jacqui Mignault, the Alberta representative, described CCG’s approach this way: “We are called to be oriented outwards, to the wholeness and health of people outside the circles of faith, for the common good. And we are called to dig deeper in our own faith journeys, not being afraid to ask hard questions, to listen, and to learn

from others not like ourselves. The dual actions of advocating within our system of government ... as well as raising awareness, are representative of the outer and inner work that happens in a follower of Jesus.”

The intentionality of this approach is something to be celebrated as Canadians are pulled in different directions.

“I believe a lot of our civil tension can be attributed to how we seem to have less and less in common with one another,” Conrad said. “The church is one of the very few institutions where we have people from very different socioeconomic backgrounds still coming together. The work of the committee advances this vision and especially the ways that the church can contribute to Canadian society through dialogue.”

—Victoria Veenstra,
Centre for Public Dialogue

The View from Here

Toward a Common Vocabulary

IN A PRIOR CAREER, I spent several years as a marketing executive and helped create messaging for various products and services. The objective was to create specific associations with a product based on the words we used.

We are all familiar with the power of advertising to influence us. Words such as “Google” no longer refer only to a company name and are used as nouns or verbs in our regular conversation (e.g., to “google” means to search for information online). Kleenex, Xerox, and Band-Aid are other brand names we often use generically. Consistent repetition of these words has helped to ensure that the brand names take on a meaning larger than themselves in our human consciousness.

That same power behind select words is at work in our lives and ministries today. I lament the fact that words such as “neighbor,” “justice,” and “racism” no longer have common meanings we can all embrace. Instead, their meanings shift depending on the context and the frequency with which they are used in our own communities and conversations.

Imagine what
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in Christ.

As we slip more and more into echo chambers—media habits and social communities that share our political, theological, and sociological points of view—this differentiation increases. Each specific community speaks its own language, and our ability to listen to others who are different from ourselves becomes harder and harder.

This has a huge effect on the church as well. One need only look at comments on The Network (crcna.org/Network) to see this in action. Sometimes we seem to be talking past each other, with no one truly hearing or understanding what someone else is trying to say.

I long for a day when our entire Christian community, and indeed our nations, could embrace a common meaning for critical words. What if any time we heard the word “love” we

immediately associated it with Christ’s love for us as explained in John 3:16? What if every time we heard the word “justice” we immediately associated it with God’s desire for justice in the nations as God states in Amos 5:24 and Micah 6:8? What if every time we heard the word “peace” we immediately thought of the shalom that comes from fully embracing the work of the Holy Spirit in communities worldwide as described in Romans 15:13?

Imagine what the church would look like if we were able to put aside our political and theological differences and instead develop a common language based on our shared identity in Christ. While we might have to take more time, listen more closely, and put aside our assumptions, I believe that God’s kingdom work would be advanced as a result.



Colin P. Watson Sr. is the executive director of the CRCNA. He is a member of Madison Square Christian Reformed Church in Grand Rapids, Mich.

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

이 기사의 한글번역은 TheBanner.org/korean에서 보실 수 있습니다.

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

Finding Certainty in the New Year

NATASHA HAD A LOT GOING for her. A professional athlete living in Moscow, Russia, she was attractive and wealthy. But when COVID-19 began to spread across her country and the whole world, her earthly riches began to feel trivial.

“How can I find peace and joy in the midst of what’s going on today?” Natasha wondered.

Thankfully, Natasha didn’t keep that question to herself. Like so many others who have been stuck at home asking some of life’s most important questions, she searched online for answers.

Online Events

In order to help people like Natasha, the Russian outreach team of ReFrame Ministries* has hosted about 40 online events, seminars, and conferences in partnership with local churches in Russia and Ukraine.

At such events, seekers and believers are able to have conversations about life’s most pressing issues and work together to explore answers to questions like Natasha’s.

As Natasha searched, she came across ReFrame’s Russian online programs and decided to get in touch with the ministry.

“Natasha was suffering from anxiety when she contacted us,” said Rev. Sergei Sosedkin, ReFrame’s Russian ministry leader. “Our followup staff shared with her that although the uncertainty of COVID-19 fuels anxiety, we can be certain about our standing with God.”

The ministry team shared that inner peace won’t come from a simple



Rev. Sergei Sosedkin has been helping radio listeners and online readers answer difficult questions as Russia endures the pandemic.

relaxation technique or positive thinking alone, but through Christ.

“That’s how Natasha learned about God’s love and salvation,” Sosedkin said.

Now, a few months after her first conversation with ReFrame, Natasha has joined a local church and shared that much of her anxiety has been relieved through Scripture and her newfound community.

A Christmas Prayer Request and a Resource for You

With support from the Christian Reformed Church, ReFrame’s Russian ministry team has been helping people focus on what truly matters, both during COVID-19 and as they

approach Russian Orthodox Christmas on Jan. 7.

Please pray specifically for Sergei’s Christmas broadcast. Pray that God will use it to capture hearts and draw more people like Natasha into a relationship with God.

If you or a loved one are also looking for answers or suffering from anxiety during the pandemic, ReFrame’s English ministry has helpful resources at ReFrameMinistries.org/isolation.

—Brian Clark,
ReFrame Ministries

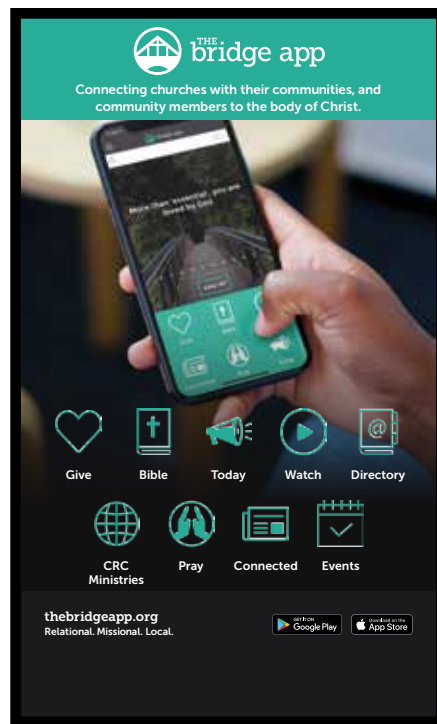
*ReFrame Ministries is the new name of Back to God Ministries International as of January 2021.

The Bridge App Makes Connections during COVID-19

AS LOCAL CHURCHES have sought ways to stay engaged with members during the COVID-19 pandemic, a number of congregations have found The Bridge App to be an effective solution.

Operating on Android and Apple mobile devices, The Bridge App offers a full suite of functions, including announcements, prayers, an events calendar, a membership directory, a Bible, devotions, and electronic giving toward the budget and other causes from a donor's credit card or bank account.

Launched by the Christian Reformed Church in North America about three years ago in partnership with The Bridge App Inc., The Bridge App was originally designed to give churches new ways to connect. And now, with the COVID-19 pandemic creating the need to maintain physical distancing, the app has become helpful in ways that weren't anticipated. Especially popular now are the "WATCH" capability, which allows churches to stream services, and the "GIVE" function through which members can give online.



Sunnyslope Church in Salem, Ore., introduced The Bridge App several months prior to the pandemic.

"When we were scrambling to announce service cancellations and share prayer requests, The Bridge App became an invaluable way to communicate with our members," pastor Rob Toornstra said. "The GIVE function allowed us to introduce online giving seamlessly so members could continue to give even when we were not meeting in person. The Bridge App

has been a fantastic tool and great blessing to Sunnyslope Church."

Sonya Wagenaar, church administrator for First CRC Red Deer (Alta.), said use of the GIVE function more than doubled during the first two months of the pandemic.

That pattern was evident in other congregations too, as giving through The Bridge App in 2020 facilitated donations to local churches in excess of \$2 million.

Ancaster (Ont.) CRC, an early adopter of The Bridge App, began by uploading its membership data into the app's directory and encouraging members to look to the app particularly for announcements and prayers.

"The GIVE feature has been a blessing for our church, especially during COVID-19," says Dick Kranendonk, app administrator for Ancaster CRC. "The amount of time needed to administer The Bridge App is minimal, communication in our church has greatly improved, and members very much appreciate this service."

The Bridge App is made available and supported for CRCs in Canada through the CRCNA and is available to U.S. congregations directly through the app developer, The Bridge App Inc.

Canadian churches wanting to know more about The Bridge App or how to more fully utilize the app can contact bridgeapp@crcna.org. U.S. churches can contact Deb Hunter at deb@thebridgeapp.org.

—Ken Bosveld,
Connections

Iowa CRC Discusses Biblical Framework for Immigration

JASON LIEF, A PROFESSOR at Northwestern College and an immigration mobilizer for the Christian Reformed Church's Office of Social Justice, hosted a series of presentations on the biblical framework for immigration at Covenant CRC in Sioux Center, Iowa, in September 2020.

Over the course of two nights, Lief presented two talks: "Immigration, Human Dignity, and the Image of God" and "Love God, Honor the Emperor."

On one of the nights, he spoke about how the apostle Paul wrote in Romans about the need to obey civil authorities.

In Romans 13:1, Paul wrote, "Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God."

"Paul has this assumption (that governing authorities) are there in some way to promote human flourishing," Lief said.

He also spoke about 1 Peter 2:16-17, which says, "Live as free people, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as God's slaves. Show proper respect to everyone, love the family of believers, fear God, honor the emperor."

Addressing the attendees scattered throughout the sanctuary, Lief said, "I think it's fair to say that none of us in this room would look at our governing authorities and say that they're always getting it right or that all of our laws are seeking human flourishing. ... Our job in politics, whether you're a Republican or a Democrat, is to seek laws that seek human flourishing. ...



Jason Lief is a professor at Northwestern College and an immigration mobilizer for the CRC's Office of Social Justice.

What does it look like to create an immigration system that is closer to human flourishing, closer to justice, than not?"

Attendance at Covenant's evening gatherings ranged from 20 to 30 people, a small enough number to allow them to practice social distancing in their sanctuary in addition to other health protocols. Pastor Joel Kok said the church devotes its evening gatherings to hearing testimonies and offers a chance to learn about causes, always including time for dialogue.

The church decided to host the two-part series on immigration because "we think immigration matters," Kok said, "and we welcome a presentation that allows for dialogue. We also want

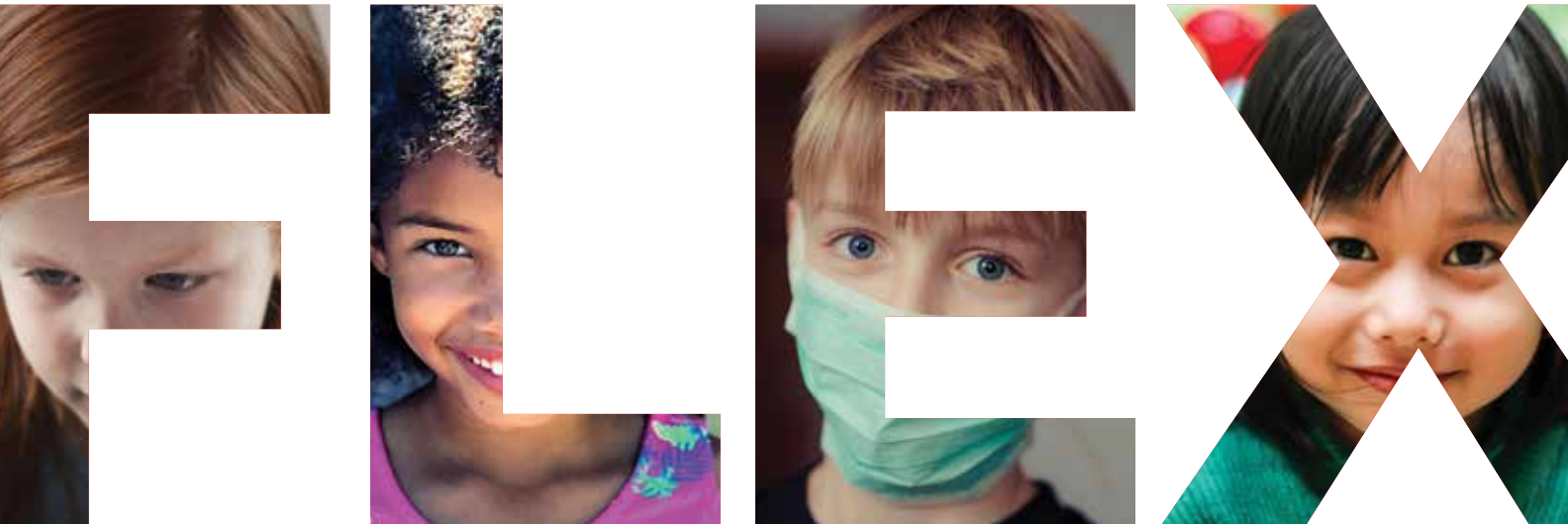
our congregation to stay connected to the Office of Social Justice and our denomination in general."

Mary Dengler, who attended the series, said she was impressed with Lief's presentations. "He stressed social justice toward undocumented workers," Dengler said, also noting the need for immigration reform. "I'd urge that the legalization process be streamlined," she said, "and in the meantime, people should be trained to help (immigrants) work through the paperwork."

To learn more about hosting an immigration mobilizer at your church, connect with Kendra David at kdavid@crcna.org. You can watch recordings of the presentations at Covenant CRC on the Office of Social Justice's YouTube channel.

—Megan Herrema,
Office of Social Justice

Simple Sessions for Complex Times



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For these uncertain times in children's ministry, we've tailor-made 36 new stand-alone *Dwell* sessions for use in a variety of situations to help make lesson planning a little easier. We call it *Dwell Flex*.

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Dwell Flex sessions are available now as part of a church's *Dwell Digital* subscription (and **free to CRCs**, thanks to ministry shares).

Call 800.333.8300 to sign up or visit DwellCurriculum.org to learn more.



Pendulums

I RECENTLY HEARD our worship director talk about pendulums in a children's sermon, and the energy in a pendulum really got me thinking about God and my faith.

You see, in a pendulum, we see two types of energy: kinetic energy and potential energy. Kinetic energy is the energy an object has because of its motion. At what speed is it moving? Does it have a lot of mass? These are all things that matter with kinetic energy.

Potential energy is the energy an object has due to its position or condition. A rock perched on a cliff has lots of potential energy, as does a spring that is tightly wound.


So a swing (a type of pendulum) simply converts potential energy into kinetic energy. At your highest point while riding a swing, your kinetic energy, for just a fraction of a second, is at zero and your potential energy is maxed out. As you swing back and reach the bottom of the arc, your potential energy is now at zero and your kinetic energy is fully used—and the reverse happens as you rise on the swing again.

I think about our relationships with God and others as swings that should be constantly alternating between kinetic and potential energy. I listen to a sermon or a podcast and it really strikes me. I participate in youth group or Bible study, and I learn something new—a better way to live, or a different way of thinking about Christian love. In those moments, we are gaining potential energy. Our “position” or “condition” is changing. We are growing in knowledge and insight.

But we need to do something with that potential energy. In Micah 6:8, God tells us, “And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with

your God.” In the Great Commission in Matthew 28:19-20, Jesus says, “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.”

Christianity is a faith of action. We are called to *do*. How do we do that best? When we learn and charge up, when we gain new insight and knowledge, we can take that new potential energy and do something with it. We become kinetic.

Be a swing! 



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



Finding Narcissism in Church

By Chuck DeGroat

I was sitting in an airport about two years ago when I overheard a conversation between a mom and her pre-teen daughter. As the anxious mother scurried to repack a carry-on before boarding, she kept calling out, “Maddie! ... Maddie! ... I need your help, Maddie!” Meanwhile, young Maddie sat peering at her iPhone, alternating facial gestures and poses, smiling and puckering up, oblivious to her mom’s pleas. Finally, with a voice raised for the entire terminal to hear, the mother yelled, “Maddie, you’re such a narcissist!”

Narcissist.

It’s a word we’re hearing a lot these days. Whether spoken about politicians or pastors, celebrities or social-media-savvy teens, it’s alive in our common discourse. And on that day at the airport, it struck me as ironic—and perhaps a bit providential—that I was sitting with my laptop open, proofing the manuscript for a book I was writing on narcissism.

Nowadays, we label people freely. She’s a liberal. He’s an addict. They’re racists. He’s a narcissist. In an increasingly polarized world, we’re more apt than ever to brand and categorize, alienating us even more from one another. I agree with Marilyn McEntyre, who writes that “caring for language is a moral issue.” In her book *Caring for Language in a Culture of Lies*, McEntyre says, “Caring for one another is not entirely separable from caring for words. Words are entrusted to us as equipment for our life together, to help us survive, guide, and nourish

one another.” In the airport that day, I realized again how important this is.

Over my 25 years in ministry, I’ve become increasingly concerned about narcissism in the church. About five years ago, I decided it was time for a serious conversation, one that transcended amateur diagnoses and cheap labeling. As a pastor, I’d been on the inside of narcissistic cultures in churches. As a therapist and psychological assessor of pastors and church planters, I was seeing warning signs all over the place. My concern was for pastors, particularly in a culture that seems addicted to platform, influence, success, power, and relevance. But I could also see what lurked in the shadows: people confused and abused by narcissistic leaders, debris fields of pain around seemingly successful ministries, and even the shadow side of pastors who shone on Sunday morning but battled shame, depression, addiction, and thoughts of suicide when the church lights went off.

What Is Narcissism?

The pre-teen at the airport likely did not meet the diagnostic indicators of narcissistic personality disorder (NPD). What her mother noticed was a caricature of narcissism. I asked some of my seminary students how they’d describe a narcissist, and they used words like “self-centered,” “arrogant,” and “proud.” Maybe you’d offer similar descriptors. But what is NPD?

NPD is a serious diagnosis, a disorder of the personality that is often traced to a combination of an inherited disposition and significant dysfunction

in childhood. When you hear “disorder” you might immediately think about more common mood and anxiety disorders—depression, bipolarism, panic, social phobias. These are often treatable with the right therapy, support, and even medications. But personality disorders are altogether different. They’re not curable or even treatable with short-term therapy or medications. You don’t read a book and get over it. It doesn’t go away with a confession of sin.

NPD is characterized clinically by a grandiose sense of one’s self, a lack of empathy for others, an entitlement to affirmation or attention, and ruptures in family and work relationships. Psychological professionals use a combination of testing, personal interviews, and assessment tools to determine if someone meets the criteria of NPD. We do this in the spirit of Marilyn McEntyre, I hope: with great care and guided not by a desire to label someone, but a desire for “truth in the inmost being” (Ps. 51:6).

NPD’s theological roots go back to Genesis 3. Adam and Eve’s original temptation was to “be like God” (Gen. 3:5), transcending their God-ordained creatureliness. Christopher Lasch, in his best-selling book *The Culture of Narcissism*, says narcissism is the “longing to be freed from longing.” In other words, the narcissist cannot tolerate the limitations of his humanity and ultimately refuses to live within God-ordained limitations of creaturely existence. Yet here’s the paradox: our desire to be superhuman dehumanizes us, wreaks havoc on

our relationships, and turns us in on ourselves.

Adam and Eve grasped, and we've been grasping ever since. Adam and Eve hid, and we've been hiding ever since. That's the general plight of humanity. But here is the difference for those with NPD: they never come out of hiding. Indeed, their fig-leaved, masked-up, self-protected selves are all we see. Often psychologically enslaved to profound shame and terror, they're afraid to open themselves, instead armoring up to survive in a threatening world.

Characteristics of Narcissistic Leaders

Some might be reading this and thinking, "Surely narcissists don't become pastors! Pastoral leadership requires humility at the core!" I agree. When I think of pastoral leadership in particular, I'm drawn back to Philippians 2 and the description of the incarnate Jesus,

Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God
something to be grasped;
rather, he made himself nothing
by taking the very nature of
a servant,
being made in human likeness.
And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death—
even death on a cross! (Phil. 2:6-8).

Adam and Eve grasped. The narcissist grasps. But Jesus refused to grasp, becoming a servant instead. That's our longing for pastors and leaders. But is it what we see in our leaders?

An older colleague of mine heard about my work on this and pulled me aside one day. He said, "You know, Chuck, I've been in seminary education for 30 years. Ninety percent of the general public doesn't like public speaking, but we get the rare few that not only enjoy being on stage, but feel comfortable saying, 'This is the Word of the Lord.'" His words ring true. I've done hundreds of psychological

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assessments for pastors. The assessments include long narratives, personality tests, and assessments of clinical disorders. What I've found is stunning: the vast majority of pastoral candidates show elevations in the category of Cluster B personality disorders. I call this the "narcissism family." It's a cluster of disorders that feature dramatic, attention-seeking behavior along with a heavily armored personality that protects them from anything that makes them feel vulnerable. The two disorders with the most elevated results are narcissistic and histrionic personality disorders, two close cousins in the narcissism family.

That might sound alarming, so a bit more clarity might help. An elevation on the narcissism spectrum does not make one diagnosably narcissistic. I'm often asked if being a narcissist or not is like an on-off switch—either you have it or you don't. The reality is this: Narcissism exists on a spectrum. Some have the full-blown flu (NPD), others have significant symptoms (narcissistic type), and others just have the sniffles (narcissistic style). Not every confident leader is narcissistic. Not everyone who enjoys applause is narcissistic. But it is telling that the

vast majority of pastors test in this cluster of personality features.

What do we see in pastors who show up narcissistically? I've expanded on Craig and Carolyn Williford's helpful work on troubled church ministries to offer these 10 features of narcissistic pastors:

- » Centering all decision-making on themselves
- » Impatience or an inability to listen to others
- » Delegating without giving proper authority or with too many limits
- » Feelings of entitlement
- » Feeling threatened or intimidated by other talented staff
- » Needing to be the best and brightest in the room
- » Inconsistency and impulsiveness
- » Praising and withdrawing
- » Intimidating others
- » Fauxnerability (a faux or fake vulnerability)

I've seen these features in pastors of both small and large churches and across denominations. I consulted with a small Reformed church in the Midwest that had a pastor who was described as a bully, someone whose dogmatic certainty and arrogant, condescending, and belittling persona drove away the small staff he had. Ironically, the small church grew because some parishioners characterized his disposition as bold, faithful, and courageous. But after a thorough assessment and testing scores that peaked high on the NPD scale, an older elder rightly asked, "How can one so confidently speak of Jesus but live so arrogantly?"

In a large church I consulted with, the popular lead pastor, who'd written three books and commanded a large social media following, seemed to many to be a living saint, one whose winsome personality and communication style wooed his church. He'd often share stories of his own struggles and his desire to be more like Jesus. Meanwhile, his exasperated staff tiptoed around him, fearful

of his angry outbursts, weary of his constantly shifting expectations, exhausted by his hypocrisy. In time, his Jekyll-and-Hyde demeanor became clear to an elder team who tried to remedy it with a sabbatical. But when revelations of emotional abuse in his marriage became public, it became even harder for the pastor to continue his ministry. He left behind a wake of trauma, even as his defenders spoke of the incredible “fruit” of his ministry.

In a nationally known Christian discipleship ministry, the president was called a “bold woman of God” in a Christian magazine that featured her strategic leadership through a time of financial distress. However, those who served under her described someone who constantly needed acknowledgment for successes and who even took credit for others’ innovative ideas. Employees feared her “wrath,” but also spoke of a confusing “she loves you sometimes and hates you at other times” dynamic. When emails were revealed that showed a pattern of belittling, lying, and manipulating, she resigned, posturing herself as the victim of detractors who didn’t care about the gospel like she did.

Why Do We Follow Them?

Former CIA profiler and psychologist Jerrold Post has written extensively on narcissism, including books on Bill Clinton and Donald Trump. Post describes narcissists as “mirror-hungry,” using their audiences and followers as a mirror to reflect back praise and admiration. The narcissistic leader’s hidden shame and pervasive sense of emptiness is alleviated, perhaps only for a little while, by the applause of an adoring crowd or the affection of a devoted follower.

But why are followers so devoted? According to Post, those drawn to narcissistic leaders are “ideal-hungry” people who so long for the ideal image of strength in another that they can’t see or perhaps ignore the leader’s shadow side, including the debris field of damage he causes. For many who

see themselves as weak or incomplete, a powerful “other” can serve as a needed battery source.

One pastor within a larger church-planting network revered the network leader. He’d never heard anyone preach and teach with authority like this man. When he was handpicked to work alongside the leader, the pastor felt as if God had specially chosen him for something significant. But he started to notice minor indiscretions: On occasion, this leader would feel entitled to leave a restaurant without paying or to take items from staff offices without asking. In time, the leader’s sexual abuses of power were revealed. The pastor came to his defense. Later, he’d tell me that even though he knew the leader was guilty, he couldn’t imagine losing the sense of empowerment, significance, and purpose he felt when he was around him. He, the ideal-hungry follower, was fixed on an ideal image of himself that he could only see through the lens of a narcissist.

Likewise, whole groups of people and systems can constellate around a narcissistic leader. This is more prone to happen in seasons when these groups feel particularly threatened. Groups at times plug into the energy, the power, the grandiosity, the dogmatic certainty of narcissistic leaders. Narcissistic religious leaders often use shame and guilt to keep their followers in a perpetual state of dependency, revealing the power of toxic theology in service of narcissistic grandiosity.

Is There Hope?

As we gain a better understanding of narcissism and its impact in the church, we’re better prepared to train healthier pastors, foster healthier ministries, and promote healing in places of brokenness and trauma. But as you can see, we might have to do a bit of self-interrogation along the way, asking how we’ve participated in unhealthy systems or perhaps championed unhealthy leaders.

As I’m engaged these days in helping prepare the next generation of pastors, I’m particularly attuned to important formation processes necessary for the development of healthy pastors. When I went to seminary, we largely studied to pass ordination exams. Many graduates were unprepared for the spiritual and emotional complexity of congregational ministry.

Today, we’re helping pastoral candidates understand not just their Bibles but their family stories as well. As I look at the next generation, I find myself hopeful that a more wise and humble generation of leaders is emerging. But it takes all of us to foster healthy congregations and to support healthy pastors. Your pastors do have limitations! Make sure they rest. Pay for therapy. Support sabbaticals. Together, let’s cultivate health and humility for the sake of a church that looks more and more like Jesus to a hungry and watching world.

Author’s Note: Any stories I share are largely amalgamations of many stories in order to protect identities and confidences.



Chuck DeGroat is professor of pastoral care and Christian spirituality at Western Theological Seminary. He is author of *When Narcissism Comes to the Church* and *Wholeheartedness: Busyness, Exhaustion, and Healing the Divided Heart*. His website is chuckdegroat.net. Follow him @chuckdegroat across social media platforms.

1. What comes to mind when you hear the word “narcissism”?
2. Why are some Christians attracted to narcissistic leaders?
3. What cultural or structural factors make churches an attractive place for narcissistic leaders (pastors, elders, etc)?

READ MORE ONLINE

I Am Baptized

Person after
person came.
Moms and dads
led young children
baptized not that
long ago: "You
belong, in life
and in death, to
Jesus Christ."



Emily Bosscher is director of first-year experience at Trinity Christian College in Palos Heights, Ill., and an elder at Hope Christian Reformed Church in Oak Forest, Ill.

I WALKED TO THE FRONT of the church, looked at the church-issued white bowl that my pastor had dipped in the baptismal font, and took it in my hands. The water was cold, and the excess dripped down my hand and onto my cuff. I reversed to stand behind the congregation and waited.

In the sermon, our pastor had told us that "I am baptized" was a reminder that Martin Luther often wrote when the fear of his work got overwhelming. I don't think about my baptism often, but when the lectionary focused on Jesus' baptism during early January, I realized that though I know the promises of my baptism, I often fear feeling I don't belong, even to Jesus.

The congregation started to rise—just a few at first. No one really knew how people would respond to this new idea: a reminder of our baptism that involved standing up, breaching the intimacy of touch, and having water placed on our foreheads. How uncomfortable would people be even with the intentional framing in the sermon? This moment to remember our baptisms and to tangibly feel that we need not fear was something we had never done before.

The first person walked toward me. I knew his name and his story. He is a deacon who came to this church a few years back after having been away from a church home. He joined because his children found a place in Cadets and the community, and they brought their parents along. I dipped my fingers into the bowl, reached out, and placed the sign of the cross on his forehead saying, "You belong, in life and in death, to Jesus Christ." Behind him was his son, who was baptized when the family joined the church. I remembered the wonderful testimony of this child who claimed Christ as his own at his baptism, and I remembered the promises we made on that day. I

leaned down, traced the cross on his forehead, and said, "You belong, in life and in death, to Jesus Christ."

Person after person came. Moms and dads led young children baptized not that long ago: "You belong, in life and in death, to Jesus Christ." A mom and her towering teenage boys all received the blessing: "You belong, in life and in death, to Jesus Christ." Grandpas and grandmas leading grandchildren, old, young, married, single, healthy, frail: I looked each one in the eyes and spoke the words "You belong, in life and in death, to Jesus Christ." As I struggled to hold back tears, I saw I was not alone.

I turned to the elder standing nearest me. She dipped her fingers into her bowl, raised them to my forehead, and marked me with the sign of the cross. The water was cold, but the pressure of her finger warm on my forehead. As she looked me in the eyes, I was told that I belong, in life and in death, to Jesus Christ. In that moment I no longer only knew it. *I felt it.* I felt it in the cold water dripping down my arm, in the contact between my fingers and the skin of others as I traced the cross, in the tightness in my throat, the tears, the smiles, and the joy with which I was able to proclaim to everyone I looked in the eye, "You belong, in life and in death, to Jesus Christ." And because of that, there is no need to fear. **B**

Why on Earth Am I on Earth?

We sometimes feel as if we **MUST** find our specially crafted, universe-honed, life-giving purpose, and if we don't our lives will pass us by.

FOR QUITE SOME TIME, “finding my purpose” in life gave me a lot of anxiety. But I've recently come to the conclusion that the anxiety is caused by how I've been thinking about purpose: the same way I used to think about romantic relationships and the myth of “the one.”

The myth of “the one” says the universe has picked out one special person for you, a soulmate perfectly crafted to meet your every need and fit your every curve of character. All you have to do is find that person!

This mentality is similar to the idea of finding one specific purpose meant only for you. It raises the stress level of teens, young adults, and even those in their later years. “The universe has specially crafted a purpose for you! A career, a purposeful path, that fits your every curve of character! All you have to do is find it!”

To raise that level of stress a bit more, look at online search results for books related to purpose. Many are based on the premise that if you want to live any semblance of a satisfied life, you must discover your purpose. If you don't, you will live a meaningless, directionless, disappointing life as your true, good, and purpose-driven life passes you by.

To make things even worse, it sometimes seems as if everyone else is already living a purpose-driven life. I recently spoke with a friend who is a mom in her 40s. She has spent the last 20 years taking care of, feeding, and raising her family, but now her children no longer need the same level of care. Now what? As I tried to offer her an encouraging word, she cut me off, pointed her finger at my chest and said, “It's easy for you; you've always known what your purpose is in life!”

That's not true. But I understand why she felt that way. We sometimes feel as

if we **MUST** find our specially crafted, universe-honed, life-giving purpose, and if we don't our lives will pass us by.

That feeling drives midlife crises. It drives crashes in people's higher education or careers. It drives a lot of stress in a lot of people all asking the same questions: “Why on earth am I on Earth? What am I supposed to do with my life?”

I think the apostle Paul has some helpful words for those of us wondering about that. In one of his letters, to Christians living in Rome, Paul says this:

“Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will” (Rom. 12:1-2).

And in his letter to Colossians, Paul writes, “Whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus” (Col. 3:17).

In other words, purpose has far more to do with *how* than *what*. *What* you do with your life is far less important than *how* you do it!

Purpose, then, can be described in these three ways:

Your purpose in life is a *response*.

Your purpose in life is a *renunciation*.

Your purpose in life is to *replicate a reputation*.

First, our purpose in whatever we do is to respond to God's mercy in our lives. Paul says in Romans 12 that we should live our lives “in view of God's mercy.” In other words, everything you do should be in response to the mercy God has shown you. Whether



Corey Van Huizen is the pastor of The Gathering, a church plant in Caledonia, Mich. He and his wife, Alanna, love all things on, in, or near water.



Photo by Marcel Heil on Unsplash


you are a parent, a teacher, a construction technician, a farmer, a father, a mother—whatever you do, you should do it in response to God’s mercy. This is a surprising idea for Paul’s readers. Typically they made sacrifices and offerings in order to get something *from* the gods, not to do something *for* the gods in response to a previous action. They made offerings to procure forgiveness, a good harvest, health, a successful hunt, a fortunate business transaction. But Paul tells them to offer their lives in view of God’s mercy already given. Our purpose is to *respond* to God’s mercy.

Secondly, our purpose is a renunciation. Paul uses the language of self-sacrifice. Your purpose in life is not to sacrifice for personal success. Your purpose in life is not to sacrifice for self-fulfillment. Your purpose is to renounce yourself and offer your life for others. The pattern for offering one’s life was set by Jesus, who “did not

come to be served, but to serve” (Matt. 20:28). Likewise, your purpose in life is to renounce yourself and to offer your life in service to others.

Finally, our purpose is to replicate a reputation. Paul says that whatever you do (notice he doesn’t seem to care too much about the “what”), do it in the name of the Lord Jesus. This sounds odd; we don’t often do anything in someone’s name anymore. But what Paul means by “name” is a reputation. Whatever you do, do it as though Jesus’ reputation is going to be attached to it. Your purpose is to replicate Jesus’ reputation. If people look at how you’re living your life, do they see Jesus?

When you find yourself wondering, “Why on earth am I on Earth?”—when it becomes a stressful, paralyzing question—start asking yourself instead, “Where I am right now? How can I live in response to God’s mercy? Whom can I serve? Does this add to

the positive reputation of Jesus?” Your purpose has far less to do with *what* than *how*. The *what* will change with life’s changing seasons, but the *how* never does. The rest will work itself out in time. 

1. How do you answer or have you answered the question of your “purpose” in life?
2. How does refocusing from “what” to “how” help us?
3. What difference does living one’s life as a response to God’s mercy make?

[READ MORE](#) [ONLINE](#)

The Forces That Shaped Today's White Evangelicalism

Editor's note: We recently spoke with Kristin Kobes DuMez, a history professor at Calvin University, a member of Church of the Servant in Grand Rapids, Mich., and the author of Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation, an influential and controversial book that has been widely featured in national media outlets such as NPR and The New York Times.

Your book addresses the rise and influence of white evangelicals in America. Were you thinking of the Christian Reformed Church as you wrote this?

I've received notes from (CRC) people asking, "Are we or are we not evangelicals?" It's complicated. Definitely popular culture that defines evangelicalism has swept through the CRC. In an old survey in *The Banner*, James Dobson topped the list for "favorite theologian." Of course, he is neither Reformed nor a theologian. Some pockets of the CRC are not just deeply influenced, but functionally evangelical.

If, as you say, many in our denomination are functionally evangelical, how did CRC readers respond to your book, which is a pretty serious critique of white evangelicalism?

I had expected so much more pushback, but the response from readers, including CRC readers, has been overwhelmingly positive. Many letters I get have been from people who are somewhat troubled by where the (evangelical movement) has ended up. "I never understood what was behind some of these views" is something I hear a lot. One man said, "I bumped up against a lot of these trees but never saw the forest."

How did you come up with the premise of this book?

When Donald Trump won the presidency with that critical evangelical support, it clicked for me: I already had

the research to support the fact that aggressive masculinity is at the heart of evangelicalism. I began to write this book because I wanted to testify to and name this. There is power in history.

It's easy to think that this form of militant, patriarchal evangelicalism is just a progression of the way it's always been, but that's not true, is it?

Things have not always been like this. In the 19th century and at the beginning of the 20th, real men were thought of as supportive and gentlemanly. There was evangelical feminism in the 19th and early 20th century, too. It's only been since the Cold War that evangelicals have increasingly had these emphases. It's incredibly powerful to look at history to show how we got here.

Evangelicals are deeply divided, and both sides have entrenched ideas about power, gender, and politics. Can we find any common ground?

These are deeply entrenched views, and I don't see a lot of hope for common ground. However, as a spiritual practice we can, wherever we find ourselves, listen to people with different views. We can humble ourselves. I have been overwhelmed by the enthusiastic and humble reception of the book. People have written to me, "I was complicit in this. We need to undo, to take steps back." I find some hope in that. The last words of my book say, "What was once done might also be undone." **B**



Lorilee Craker, a native of Winnipeg, Man., lives in Grand Rapids, Mich., in a 1924 house full of teenagers, pets, exchange students, and houseplants. The author of 15 books, including *Anne of Green Gables*, *My Daughter and Me*, she is the Mixed Media editor of *The Banner*. Find her at Lorileecraker.com or on Instagram: @thebooksellersdaughter.



A Little Blue Bottle

*By Jennifer Grant,
illustrated by
Gillian Whiting*

Reviewed by Alison Hodgson

A Little Blue Bottle opens with the young narrator's matter-of-fact statement about her elderly neighbor: "Mrs. Wednesday died last Thursday, or maybe the week before. All I know is, ever since then, nothing feels the same anymore." This is a book about grief. Grant's text exercises an incredible economy, and each word builds and evokes the little girl's confusion and pain. The title comes from Psalm 56:8 (NLT): "You keep track of all my sorrows. You have collected all my tears in your bottle. You have recorded each one in your book." Gillian Whiting's luminous illustrations make this a beautiful book in every sense. (Church Publishing Incorporated)



The Last Dance

Reviewed by LeMarr Seandre Jackson

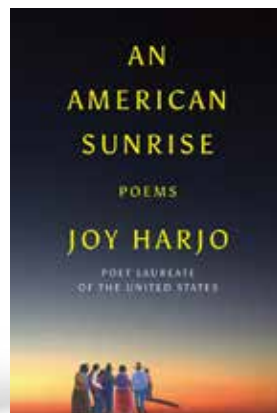
The Last Dance is the Sistine Chapel of NBA documentaries, a masterpiece detailing one of the most amazing stories in basketball history: the career of Michael Jordan. *The Last Dance* tells the tale of Jordan's final season in a Chicago Bulls jersey and is enhanced by exclusive media access to the 1997-98 Bulls. This 10-episode series explores how Jordan became a champion and sustained that success for a decade, but also details in astonishing fashion the Chicago Bulls before the Jordan era. *The Last Dance* is an accessible watch for even the most casual fans of basketball or documentaries. Jordan's faith in his teammates, his goals, and himself are admirable and even inspiring. (Rated TV-MA for language. ESPN/Netflix)



Somebody Feed Phil

Reviewed by Natalie Hart

Phil Rosenthal, executive producer of the popular sitcom *Everybody Loves Raymond*, travels around the U.S. and the world, one location per show, and eats. An expert in each location often joins him to show him the best of that place, and his famous friends sometimes eat with him. But the best moments are when Rosenthal crashes a coffee klatch of older Israeli women in a mall, sits on the tailgate of a pickup truck with construction workers at lunch, or talks with the people who make or grow the food he's consuming. *Somebody Feed Phil* is an excellent show to watch in good times, but it's especially good to watch during stressful times. It reminds us that food is good, curiosity can connect us, and joy is contagious. (Netflix)



An American Sunrise

By Joy Harjo

Reviewed by Josh Parks

Joy Harjo's latest collection of poetry, *An American Sunrise*, answers painful history with defiance, memory, and grace. Harjo, a member of the Muscogee Nation, is the first Native American to hold the position of U.S. Poet Laureate. In *An American Sunrise*, she portrays the transgenerational trauma of the Indian Removal Act alongside the resilience of Native people and the natural world. Interspersed with Harjo's poems are several short prose passages. In one of these passages, Harjo notes that practicing Native culture—stories, art, songs—was essentially illegal until the Indian Religious Freedom Act was passed in 1978. *An American Sunrise* laments those lost centuries and calls us to listen to what our Native relatives are saying and singing now. (W.W. Norton)

The Lowdown

A Great Cloud of Witnesses: A six-week Bible study by Trillia Newbell dives into Hebrews 11, examining the lives of Rahab, Enoch, Gideon, Sarah, and many more whose faith withstood the tests of their days. (Moody Press)

From Book to Oscar Bait: Based on the Man Booker Prize-winning novel by Aravind Adiga, *The White Tiger* follows the extraordinary journey of an ambitious Indian driver who uses his wit and cunning to escape from poverty. (Netflix)

All Is Not What It Seems: Possibly one of the most ambitious Marvel Studios projects, *WandaVision* traps *The Avengers'* Wanda Maximoff / Scarlet Witch and Vision inside retro U.S. sitcoms. (Disney +)

The Children's Blizzard: *The New York Times* best-selling author of *The Aviator's Wife* reveals a little-known story of courage on the prairie: the freak blizzard that struck the Great Plains in 1888, threatening the lives of hundreds of immigrant homesteaders and especially their children. (Delacorte Press)

Does My Forgiveness Depend on My Forgiving Others?

Jesus' teaching in this passage is tricky to understand.

"FOR IF YOU FORGIVE other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins" (Matt. 6:14-15). Jesus' teaching in this passage is tricky to understand. Is he saying that God forgives our sins only if we first forgive others? Doesn't this attach conditions to God's grace? Our church confessions state unequivocally that God's grace "is free to save sinners who offer nothing" (*Our World Belongs to God*, 26). It does seem, though, that Jesus is saying the opposite: we must offer something—namely, forgiveness—to others in order to receive for ourselves God's gracious forgiveness.

As a Reformed Christian, I cling to the unconditionality of God's grace, by which my sins are forgiven. We love because we were first loved (1 John 4:19), and we can forgive only because we've already been forgiven. In our Reformed tradition, the "ought"—what I should do—follows the "is"—who I am through the death and resurrection of Jesus. God's grace is not conditional. Rather, it creates the conditions by which we are able to forgive our friends and enemies. But while it's not conditional, grace is costly and demanding, and probably nowhere more than in the matter of forgiveness.

No doubt about it, this is one of Jesus' hard teachings. He insists that redeemed lives inevitably show grace. We *must* forgive as we've been forgiven. And if we don't? Jesus' warning is earnest. If we don't show grace by forgiving others, then perhaps we don't know God's saving grace in the first place. Or perhaps, just as the law and prophets in the Old Testament warned Israel that covenant grace still demanded costly obedience (Deut. 15:12-15, e.g.), Jesus' remarks are meant foremost to rattle those of us

who've experienced God's grace but balk at offering it to others.

I was recently reminded of the costly, difficult nature of forgiveness in a conversation on campus with a thoughtful Muslim student. As we chatted, she raised the matter of forgiveness, which for Muslims is celebrated as an attribute of Allah and commanded for his followers. She had trouble, however, with the Christian teaching that God forgives sinners on the basis of the death of Jesus Christ—God is free, after all, and shouldn't need a sacrifice in order to forgive. She also wasn't comfortable with the teaching that forgiveness should be offered beyond our own community even to our enemies.

I pointed out that Christians grasp the concept of forgiveness through the cross, by which God forgave his enemies at enormous cost to God's self (Rom. 5:10). Christians admit that forgiving others, especially our enemies, comes at great cost to our honor and comfort, and it demands that we sacrifice our claims to personal retribution. I suggested that forgiving others "echoes" the costly grace by which God forgives us in Christ.

She wasn't convinced, but she understood my point. When Jesus says, "if you do not forgive others ... your Father will not forgive your sins," he's insisting that God's children *must* forgive the wrongs and evil done to them, even by our enemies. This is a difficult act of discipleship. It echoes the astonishingly costly grace and sacrificial love by which God has forgiven us in Christ.

"Nothing comes cheap or easy to us that was costly to God," wrote Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his classic *The Cost of Discipleship*. Indeed, forgiving others as Christ commands us might very well be impossible except for the Spirit of the forgiving God dwelling in us. **B**



Todd Statham is the Christian Reformed campus pastor at the Okanagan Campus of the University of British Columbia.

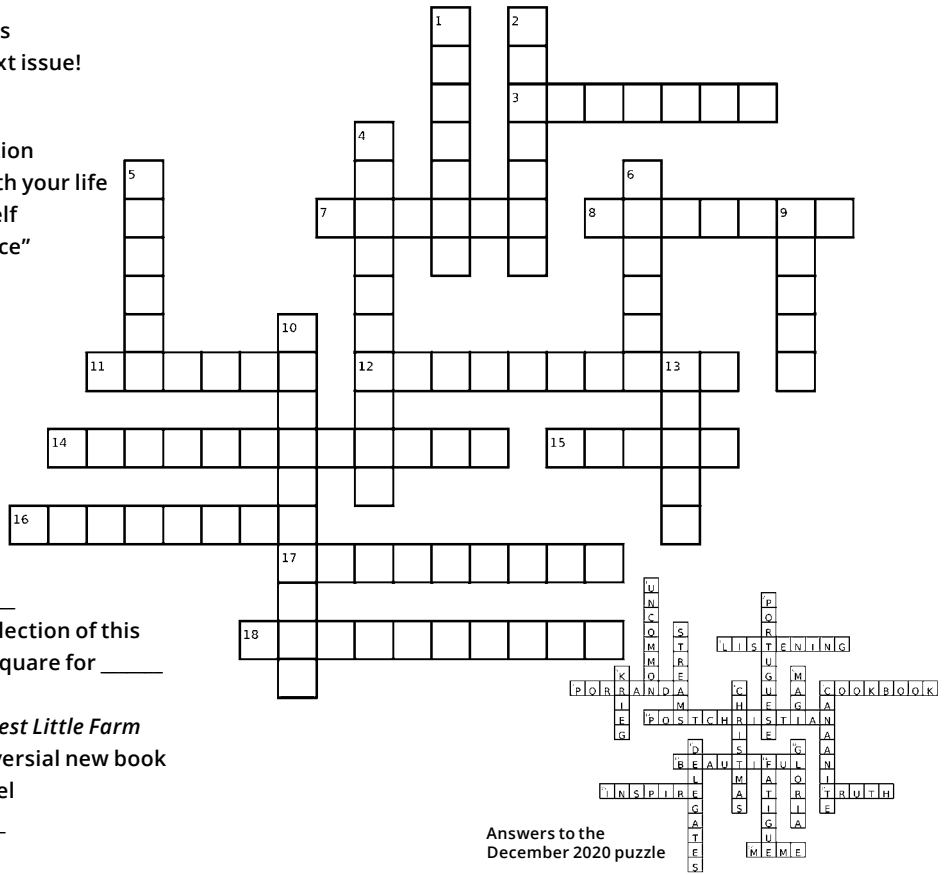
Find the answers to the crossword clues in this issue of *The Banner*. See the solution in the next issue!

Down:

- 1. The energy an object has because of its motion
- 2. It is more about "how" than what you do with your life
- 4. Someone with a grandiose sense of one's self
- 5. First name of the reviewer of "The Last Dance" documentary
- 6. This app was designed to give new ways for churches to connect
- 9. This should win in a fair exchange of ideas
- 10. Ministries connecting adults of varying abilities
- 13. The CRC's annual general assembly

Across:

- 3. New name for BTGMI
- 7. A B.C. church maintains mountain bike _____
- 8. Believers who make up the church are a reflection of this
- 11. Several church members gather in Times Square for _____
- 12. Paul affirms this in 1 Corinthians 7
- 14. How they solved pest problems in *The Biggest Little Farm*
- 15. *Jesus and John _____* is the title of a controversial new book
- 16. *The Children's _____* is a new historical novel
- 17. A 175-page report focuses on human _____
- 18. In many countries it connotes colonialism



Answers to the December 2020 puzzle

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Church Positions Available

ASSOCIATE PASTOR Sunnyside CRC in Sunnyside, WA is seeking an associate pastor to help us realize our vision of "connecting the valley to Christ." Job description is available at suncrc.org If interested contact pastor@suncrc.org

FAITH CRC IN PELLA, IOWA is seeking applicants for our Lead Pastor position. We are looking for a pastor who is committed to biblical preaching, creating unity among our members and equipping our members to reach our community through relational evangelism. For more information contact Lee Talma at lemata16@gmail.com or Faith Church 215 E. University Pella, IA. 50219

LEAD PASTOR - Aylmer CRC in Aylmer, Ontario is seeking a Lead Pastor gifted in the areas of shepherding and teaching. We are prayerfully searching for a self motivated and compassionate Pastor who is devoted to providing Reformed preaching, passionate about nurturing our spiritual growth and equipping us for community outreach. If this is a position you may feel God's calling to, we would love to speak with you. Please contact Lisa at 519-520-1220 or email bruceandlisavk@hotmail.com. Job description and church profile are available on the Portal.

PASTOR POSITION AT CALVIN CRC IN LE MARS, IA. We are actively searching for a leader of our congregation who can lead both from the pulpit and in the community. A pastor who can drive our congregation to meaningful outreach and relationships in our community, while also guiding our children for kingdom involvement. Le Mars is located in Northwest Iowa, the ice cream capital of the world. Our church profile is available at crcna.org and via e-mail upon request. For more information contact our search committee at CalvinCRC.search@gmail.com.

SENIOR PASTOR Faith Presbyterian CRC of Guam is seeking a senior pastor for our multi-ethnic congregation. We desire a candidate with strong Bible-teaching skills and a heart for evangelism. Web: www.faithchurchguam.org. Interested applicants may email kvolestadt@gmail.com or fprcguam@gmail.com or call 1-671-734-7778.

WORSHIP COORDINATOR The Junction Church in St. Thomas, ON is seeking to fill a 16-20 hour per week position for a Worship Coordinator. This position requires music

proficiency and an ability to plan a variety of worship styles in a multi-generational setting within the Christian Reformed perspective of Blended Worship. Interested candidates can visit our website at thejunctionchurchstthomas.com for a more detailed job description and to submit a resume with references.

Congregational Announcements

COME WINTER WITH US Escape the harsh winter and enjoy the sunny beaches of Bradenton, FL. Make Bradenton CRC your church home away from home. We offer multiple services for safe gathering during the pandemic. For details, check our website at bradenton-crc.org. We look forward to you worshipping with us!

WORSHIP IN CENTRAL FLORIDA You are invited to worship with us at Lake Alfred Ministry, a church of Reformed persuasion in Central Florida, meeting from Nov.15 - April 11, 2021 Services: 10AM & 5:50PM. Pastors: Rev. Jim Admiraal, Jan.3 - 31, Rev. Ed Tamminga, Feb. 7 - 28, Rev. Ron Noorman, March 7 - April 11. Address: 140 Mallard, Lake Alfred FL. Directions: lakealfredministry.org or call 269-720-6413

Birthdays

BIRTHDAY 95 YEARS

PHYLLIS BOONSTRA celebrated her birthday on Jan.1. She resides at 2121 Raybrook St SE Grand Rapids, MI 49546. She enjoys good health while continuing to inspire her children, grandchildren, & great-grandchildren. We love you Mom/Grandma/Oma!

BIRTHDAY 90 YEARS

MARION BRENTON (DEVRIES) celebrated her 90th birthday on December 11. Born and raised in Lansing, IL, member of the 1st CRC and charter member of Bethel CRC in Lansing. Attended Calvin College 1948-1950. Marion was the first teacher of deaf students at Elim Christian School in 1953. She is now a member of Delavan CRC in Delavan, WI. Marion is the mother of four children-Bob, Lei Ann, Mary and Ron: eleven grandchildren and nine great grandchildren as well as four step grandchildren and twelve step great grandchildren. Love to Mom, Grandma, Gigi. Address: 830 Oak St. Delavan, WI 53115.



CONRAD EUWEMA, of 1725 Port Sheldon St. Apt B111, Jenison, MI 49428, celebrates his 90th birthday January 24, along with his wife Catherina (Tina) of 67 years. His children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren are thankful for his love and Godly example.

GERALD (JERRY) HUYSER celebrates his 90th birthday on January 5. Celebrating God's grace and faithfulness in his life are his wife, Dorothy, his children Kent and Bonnie, Kevin and Sara, and Kurt and Gloria, along with seven grandchildren and spouses. Greetings may be sent to 1701 Campus Drive, Unit #4421, Clive, Iowa 50325.

RUTH DIEPHUIS will celebrate her 90th birthday on January 16. Her children Dan and Betty Jo Diephuis, Sheryl Bigelow, Brian and Pamela Diephuis, and Lori McQueen thank God for His many years of faithfulness in her life. Widow of Roger, Grandmother of 14, Great Grandmother of 11. 930 Edison NW, Room 307, GR, MI 49504

Anniversaries

WEDDING ANNIVERSARY 65 YEARS

DEBOER, Marvin and Merrie Lou, 65th wedding anniversary Nov. 25. We thank God for the blessing you have been to our family. 725 Baldwin St. #B-25, Jenison, MI 49428.

ROELS, Edwin and Bertie will celebrate their 65th wedding anniversary on December 16, 2020. They have been blessed with 5 children, 12 grandchildren and 10 great grandchildren. The family is so grateful for their beautiful, God fearing marriage and lives throughout the years. We all love you and thank God for you and for His faithfulness to us all. Congratulations can be sent to 2805 E Fulton Grand Rapids, MI 49506.

Obituaries

BROUWER, Maaïke (Venema) Surrey, BC. November 8 her Lord and Saviour called our dear Wife, Mom, and Beppe to be with Him in Paradise. Born January 3, 1931 to Sjoukje, nee Broos & Pieter Venema in Veenwouden Fr, Netherlands, she lived her faith in the Lord Jesus in full confidence of her salvation. She is remembered for her great love and dedication to Peter Brouwer, her husband, their children, Garret & Wendy, Sonya & Ray Lenos, Pete & Joanne, Tricia & Dave Cook, Fred & Jacquie, Mike & Marguerite, Annette & Vince VanRanden, and was Beppe to 24 grandchildren and 26 great grandchildren. The memorial service was held at New West CRC on November 14. Address: 7-9088-158th Street, Surrey BC V4N 5G4, email address: pebro@shaw.ca

HEKMAN, Geraldine (Van Anel) of Ripon, CA, went to be with her Lord and Savior at 83 years of age, surrounded by her loving family, on November 12, 2020. She is survived and dearly missed by her husband of 60 years, Bruce Hekman, and their 4 children, Greg (Jeanette) Hekman, Brent (Sandra) Hekman, Jana (Dan) Tanis and Laurie (Chris) Van Groningen of Ripon, 14 grandchildren, 4 great-grandchildren. Geri played the organ for 63 years at various local churches. She volunteered at Ripon Interfaith Ministries as coordinator for 35 years and as a busy homemaker, wife and mother she still found time to help anyone else who needed a hand. In her spare time she loved to make ceramics, paint, sew and play tennis. Now this wonderful wife, mother and grandmother sits at the feet of Jesus worry and pain free. Praise the Lord.

HUITSING, Jean L., of Jenison, MI, passed away on Sunday morning, Sept. 27, 2020. She is survived by her loving husband Gerrit, 3 children and many grand & great grandchildren, and missed and loved by all who knew her. She was ready to meet her loving Savior Jesus Christ. A Celebration of Life service was held at Baldwin St. C.R.C. in Jenison, MI, on Oct. 5, 2020. Jean resided the last 3 years with her husband Gerrit at Sunset Manor, 725 Baldwin St., Apt. 2065, Jenison, MI, 49428.

KOSTER, Marguerite (Marge), 98 years old, of Grand Rapids, MI, passed away on Thursday, November 5, 2020. Preceded in death by her husband John, she is survived by her children and grandchildren: Don & Bev (Jonathan, Heather & Omar Khalaf, Derek & Katie, Hilary & Dan Lanning), Jerry & Dotti (Ryan & Kristen, Courtney), Nick & Ann (Kristopher & Sarah, Bradley & Nikki, Jessica), Nancy & David Gezon (Nicole & Steve Dyer, Ben & Ashley, Daniel & Joanna), Judy & Kevin Scholten (Michael & Kelli, Matthew & Rachel, Mallory & Mike Rohlfing), Margie & Todd Krause (Trevor & Lauren, Meg, Austen & Madison); and 25 great grandchildren.



TERPSTRA, Geraldine, 94, Palos Heights, IL passed peacefully on November 3, 2020. Beloved wife of the late Melvin Terpstra, loving mother of Dale (Mary), Gale (William) Meyer, Melvin, Valerie (Glenn) Bruinius; 11 grandchildren, 14 great grandchildren. Memorials to Bible League International and Back to God Ministries are appreciated by the family.

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Hobbit Heroics and The Responsibility of Privilege

Young, white
Christians, while
not the salvific
hero in the
fight for racial
justice, can learn
from Frodo.



Emily Joy Stroble is a graduate of Calvin University, art maker, mocha drinker, and reader of many books (but never as many as she wants to). A regular contributor to *The Banner*, Stroble lives in Grand Rapids, Mich.

Editor's Note: The Banner is introducing this new column for perspectives from diverse voices that are less often heard in Christian Reformed forums.

"I WISH IT need not have happened in my time," Frodo laments in *The Fellowship of the Ring*.

"So do I," says Gandalf, "and so do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us."

Frodo's wish is not a very heroic sentiment, but it's a relatable one. My rising generation feels the eyes of friends and enemies turning to us.

"Awareness" is a buzzword. Our countless feeds and messaging tools can ignite a chain reaction of outrage faster than Gondor's beacons. The alarm sounds daily, it seems, particularly as our communities grapple with racial injustice. But what right has the young church to be weary already? We're supposed to be angry, rattling sabers. One does not simply say "No, thank you" to a world-saving calling.

Are we the reluctant underdog hero of this story, though?

Among contemporary epics, Frodo is a unique hero. He's not exactly scrappy. Harry Potter is an abused child. Luke Skywalker is a farmhand. Katniss Everdeen is a marginalized, impoverished young woman. Most of our beloved stories expect us to identify with the persecuted. Christians also dwell more on everyman Peter than wealthy Zacchaeus. Perhaps we are uncomfortable with the idea that the transformation that comes with faith in Christ prompts us to repay four times over those we have wronged (Luke 19:8).

Frodo isn't a teenage rebel, but an educated, land-owning gentleman. He is privileged. And young, white

Christians, while not the salvific hero in the fight for racial justice, can learn from Frodo.

Both Frodo and the Elves inherit the problem of The One Ring. We also inherit a world, forged by our ancestors, with sin and good creations mixed. Frodo did not seek the power wrought by the art of the Elves. He received it in the course of a story set in motion before his birth. But Frodo and the Elves respond differently. Frodo moves, setting off on a dangerous journey to Mount Doom to destroy the Ring. The Elves take the role of scholars—advising, but seldom acting, except on the sidelines.

The Elves' failure hits home for me as a writer. Words are important, but we have exaggerated the nobility and sufficiency of speaking truth to power. It's not enough to condemn evil in a social media post or a conversation and take our place on the side of good for all to see.

The suggestion that we "use our privilege" is also perilous, because it justifies our possession of that privilege. You cannot use an evil to destroy itself. That was Boromir's mistake. White privilege and the systems it shapes are set up to fuel our power by abusing others. Like the Ring, white privilege only works by consuming and corrupting. Every time we use it, it grows stronger. The only option is to destroy it.

Tolkien tells us plainly that doing the right thing is going to cost us. We will sacrifice time, money, and well-being. We will lose some of our innocence and contentment.

Moreover, we must practice giving up our power. It's going to hurt. We've been told the advantages, safety, and benefits rightfully belong to us. We love them. But in the time that is given to us, we must do the arduous work of destroying our precious evils. **B**

No Place I'd Rather Be

I am amazed at what God has done here. This has got to be the weirdest place in town.

Editor's Note: This article was written before the COVID-19 pandemic led to restrictions on gatherings.

I AM STANDING at the back of the sanctuary, singing along as the praise team leads the congregation in the last verse of the song "The Lord Is My Salvation." The singer standing closest to me has green hair and tattoos. The singer next to her is a Christian school teacher wearing glasses. Playing the guitar is a woman in her 60s who just finished vision therapy. On the drums is a university student who decided not to go back to classes this fall. And behind a large acoustic bass is a guy with a big, black beard. He has an advanced theological degree and is apprenticing to become an electrician.

From where I stand, I can see a chicken farmer, an entrepreneur, someone who uses a wheelchair, a university professor, an elderly widow, and a homeschooling mom. Most of the worshipers are white. But there is a whole row of people from the Philippines. Sitting close to them is a woman from India in a sari who is here for the second Sunday in a row. There are folks from other places scattered around the sanctuary. This is small-town Ontario. But the diversity is remarkable.

Today we celebrated communion for the first time with all gluten-free bread to be as accommodating as possible. Some time ago we transitioned to all juice in the communion cups for the same reason. We want the sacrament to be as hospitable as we can for all God's people.


Three people professed their faith in Jesus Christ this morning. It was a joy for our elders to interview them and hear their faith stories leading up to this morning and a real encouragement for the congregation to welcome them as full professing members. In

a few moments, people will congratulate them and shake their hands. But for now, the praise team is still singing, and I'm savoring the moment.

Church is packed with visitors today. Most, if not all, of these visitors were warmly welcomed by one of our greeters. No matter their gender, social status, ethnicity, age, body shape, or belief system, people have been accepted into our worship space with a smile.

I hear some people think that churches are places where only certain kinds of people are allowed. I hear that some people think church people are mean, racist, judgmental, unforgiving, condescending, intolerant, and joyless. I hear some people think church is a place of hate rather than love, a place where minds are closed rather than open, and a place where hearts are cold instead of warm.

Those people must never have come to this church. I am amazed at what God has done here. This has got to be the weirdest place in town. Where else could you get so many truly different people united together in one place? We have such an unlikely assortment of humanity at Palmerston Christian Reformed Church. And yet it works. How is this possible? Truly, it is a miracle of grace.

This is my church. This is God's church. Right now there's no place I'd rather be. 



Andrew de Gelder is pastor of Palmerston (Ont.) Christian Reformed Church.

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