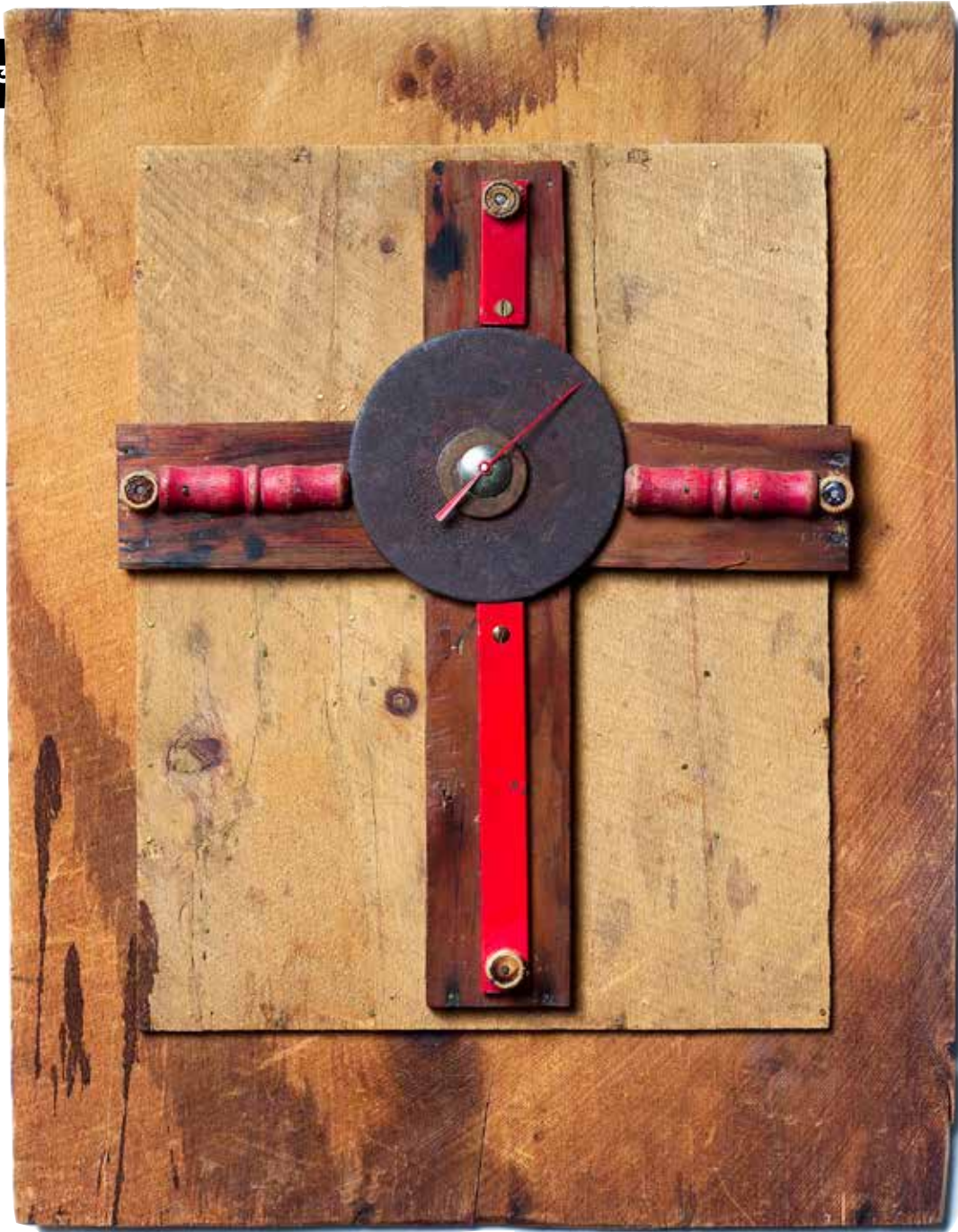


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BY THE NUMBERS

The Christian Reformed Church's Climate Witness Project, which began in 2015, has steadily seen more congregations connect with its programming and resources, including a Solar Faithful project, which launched with its first cohort of churches this spring. Here are some numbers that CWP shared with *The Banner*:



Climate Action

20+ denominations are represented in the CWP. **337** congregations connected with the project's work. **132** of those are climate witness partner churches. **13** CRC congregations are actively pursuing solar panel projects, and at least **10** CRC congregations already have solar panels projects.

Source: Numbers gathered in January 2023 by Andrew Oppong, justice mobilization specialist with Congregational Ministries



WHAT'S ONLINE

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

- » Church Worldwide: Keller Center for Cultural Apologetics Launches to Equip Christians for Post-Christendom Evangelism
- » Book review: *You Don't Know What War Is*, by Yeva Skalietska
- » Movie review: *Women Talking*
- » Podcast review: *Poetry Unbound*

FEATURES



10

As He Hung Dying

Hank Ottens // A retelling of the story of Good Friday.



32

Chasing Wisdom

Sam Gutierrez // Will we trust God's goodness when life is painfully unfair?



35

Faith Matters: Lust Feeds Shame; Jesus Feeds Love

Travis Jamieson // Purity culture didn't help much.

Cover: *It's Time for Jesus* by James Quentin Young // From the discarded remnants of life, Young assembles beautiful collaged crosses that reflect the beauty of our Christian journey. Let's remember this Easter how much beauty can come out of brokenness. // © 2023 James Quentin Young/Eyekons

NEWS

14 Pop-up Art Walk Brings Symbols of Christ’s Passion to Lynden, Wash.

17 Kevin DeRaaf Nominated as Resonate Director

18 Unity, Not Unanimity, Say Organizers of ‘A Third Way’

COLUMNS

7 Editorial: True Faith

Shiao Chong // Be careful of elevating either rationality or experience.

8 Reply All

9 Vantage Point: The Way of Jesus Is Servanthood

Rob Braun // It’s the opposite of our natural inclinations.

12 Big Questions

Can a couple get married in the eyes of the church but not the state?

30 Discover: Herbs and Spices

Christin Baker // They bring the flavor!

35 The Other Six: What Is It About the Country Church?

Gene Bradbury // Why does it quiet the spirit?

38 Mixed Media: Excavating Wikipedia for Fun and Profit

Lorilee Craker // CRC woman garners nearly 2 million followers.

40 Cross Examination: Always Be Ready

Michael Wagenman // What does it mean to follow Peter’s instruction?

41 Word Play

45 In My Shoes: He Blesses Before He Breaks

Michelle VanderMeer // It is difficult to give up one’s own desires.

46 Still: Easter Joy

Helen Sybesma Andringa // Every year, my brother was out of sorts.

Clarification:

The February 2023 article “Rebuilding the Romans Road,” by Leonard VanderZee, should have said the common understanding of the “Romans Road gospel” presentation tends to promote the idea that we are saved by believing in Jesus (as simply assent) rather than by a transformative faith that produces good works.

OUR SHARED MINISTRY

Editor Kristen deRoo VanderBerg,
Director of CRCNA Communications and Marketing



Evangelism for Everyone

Cassie Westrate and Brian Clark // It doesn’t always look the same.

26 The View from Here: The Spirit Is Alive and Well

Joel Huyser // There are plenty of examples.

BANNER

The Banner is the magazine of the Christian Reformed Church

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Classified Advertising 616-224-0725 classifieds@TheBanner.org

Display Advertising 616-224-5882 ads@TheBanner.org

Editorial 616-224-0824 editorial@TheBanner.org

News news@TheBanner.org

Published monthly (except August). Periodicals postage paid at Grand Rapids, Mich. Postmaster, send address changes to: *The Banner*, 1700 28th Street SE, Grand Rapids MI 49508-1407. Canadian publications mail agreement #40063614. Return undeliverable Canadian addresses to: *The Banner*, 3475 Mainway, PO Box 5070, STN LCD 1, Burlington ON L7R 3Y8. Copyright 2022, Christian Reformed Church in North America. Printed in U.S.A. The Banner (ISSN0005-5557). Vol. 158, No. 4, 2023.

Member of Associated Church Press and Evangelical Press Association.

"A Nightmare"

That's what Tetyana called the experience of fleeing from her home country of Ukraine to nearby Latvia. There, she joined a church, and soon learned about a radio program that she could listen to right from her refugee center. She found a radio series called "Refuge

and Strength," from ReFrame Ministries' Russian ministry partners.

"In recent months, we've heard so much bad news about the war," Tetyana shared. "The Christian Good News is exactly what we want to hear now."



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True Faith

We don't seem
to hear as
much caution—
especially in
Reformed circles—
about the dangers
of elevating
rationality.



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.

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ON FEB. 23, 2023, Asbury University officially ended the continuous revival service that spontaneously grew from its routine chapel service Feb. 8 (see p. 21). The Asbury Revival, also called the Asbury Outpouring, drew thousands of visitors to the Christian school in Wilmore, Ky., and inspired similar revival services at other Christian colleges. I am cautiously hopeful that these outpourings are the Holy Spirit's work, and I pray they bear spiritual fruit for God's kingdom.

There were critics and skeptics of the revival on both ends of the Christian spectrum. Much of the criticism seems to stem from a suspicion of emotions and spiritual experience. I myself warned about the danger of elevating human experience and emotions in the 2014 *Banner* article "The Idolatry of Experience."

But there is also an opposite danger: idolizing human reason. We don't seem to hear as much caution—especially in Reformed circles—about the dangers of elevating rationality. This is surely a problem for Christians who reject biblical miracles as irrational. But it's dangerous in other ways, too, and can happen in the most subtle ways and with the best pious intentions.

For example, we have a tendency (in practice, though not in theory) to reduce true biblical faith to an intellectual assent to God's truths. As a result, we are in danger of a "righteousness by good doctrine," which the 19th-century theologian Herman Bavinck warned about in *The Certainty of Faith* (p. 26). Bavinck saw a gradual breaking apart of what the Protestant Reformers held together:

The faith of the sixteenth century became the orthodoxy of the seventeenth. People no longer confessed their beliefs, but they only believed their confessions. Among most of the people this orthodoxy prepared

the road for rationalism. Religion became a matter of reason, ... and the certainty of faith became confused with rational insight. On the other hand, within the small circles of the faithful it evoked another reaction; they were not satisfied with merely rational knowledge but sought the essence of salvation in experience. This movement gradually devolved into pietism (pp. 28-29).

Is not Bavinck's description still relevant for what's happening in the church today?

The Heidelberg Catechism defines true faith as "not only a sure knowledge by which I hold as true all that God has revealed to us in Scripture; it is also a wholehearted trust" (Q&A 21). By starting its definition with "not only a sure knowledge," the catechism was correcting the common mistake of reducing faith to only head knowledge. "In other words," Fred Klooster's commentary on the catechism says, "faith involves heart knowledge rather than mere head knowledge" (*Our Only Comfort*, Vol. 1, p. 211). This heart knowledge is a gift and work of the Holy Spirit.

This true faith is also, as Len Vander Zee noted in his March 2023 article "Rebuilding the Romans Road," a transformative faith. As the Belgic Confession states, "It is impossible for this holy faith to be unfruitful in a human being"; rather, it moves people to do good works of "faith working through love" (Art. 24). True faith is holistic. It includes the head, heart, and hands.

Therefore, this Easter, let us not merely believe intellectually that Jesus died and rose to save us while we were, and are, still sinners. Let us wholeheartedly trust in Jesus. And may that move us, deeply and emotionally, to extend that same undeserved and unearned grace to others. **B**



REPLY ALL

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

Abortion

It was with disappointment that I read the January 2023 article “Abortion: Seeing the Trees for the Forest.” Certainly there was some good advice offered; however, the main point of the article, summarized in large, boxed text—“Your aim is to build relationships, not change minds”—sounds a lot like “Let’s be friends with the world and not proclaim God’s Word.” It goes on to say, “This person does not need to hear our views on abortion.” I would argue that she does need to hear, and that as Christians, our calling is to compassionately and boldly speak the truth.

» Laura Sebert // St. Catharines, Ont.

I read with interest the article on unplanned pregnancies in North America and the issue of abortion. This is a serious issue, and your article offered great insight on how to address someone who is facing an unplanned pregnancy. I am a woman who has been on both sides of the issue and struggled to make a choice with nowhere to go. My decisions were taken from me by my parents because I was only 15 years old. My problem came after the birth of my beautiful baby boy. I never saw him. He was taken from me and placed for adoption, and I was left behind with no one to talk with—ever. I was told we would never discuss it again. My situation allowed me to have an inside understanding of how to address the issue with another who was in the same situation I had been in and the options available to us with great reverence for them and their individual needs. Since that time long ago I have been able to share my story, offer understanding to others facing the same issue, and (talk with them about) how to make decisions based on the many options available.

» Linda Parent // Port Perry, Ont.

Meaning in the Margins

In “Meaning in the Margins” (January 2023), Sam Gutierrez reminds us of how the church has misinterpreted God’s general revelation. As Gutierrez puts it, in the early to mid-16th century Copernicus “knocked humanity off its pedestal at the center of the universe.” Though Gutierrez focuses on the denial or despair this “dose of humility” can cause, this article raises another question. If we need to approach general revelation with humility, shouldn’t we be equally humble about our understanding of special revelation? By the early 1600s both Catholics and Protestants were citing biblical support for a heliocentric universe. Being humbled by past errors in knowing the meaning of God’s revelation should lead us to approach contemporary issues, such as our understanding of LGBT issues, with similar humility.

» Frank Barefield // Holland, Mich.

The Romans Road

Thank you for the excellent article by Rev. Leonard Vander Zee (“Rebuilding the Romans Road,” March 2023). His biblically based research is a well-reasoned reminder that fruit and faith should never be viewed separately. As Jesus said so clearly in Matthew 7:20, “By our fruits we will be known.” Again, in James 2:26 we read, “As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.” It is so refreshing to see the holistic understanding of the gospel and the magnificent power and glory of God in Christ in action for the entire cosmos. In our 35-year missionary career in Nigeria, Sierra Leone, and Minnesota we have seen this integrated fruit of the Spirit change individual lives, start churches, make peace in wartime, and transform communities.

» Paul and Mary Kortenhoven // Grand Rapids, Mich.

The Way of Jesus Is Servanthood

“POWER,” former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger is said to have believed, “is the ultimate aphrodisiac.” Is it any surprise, then, that the lust for power and control is at the heart of one of the three temptations of Christ? Luke 4:5-7 reads, “The devil led him up to a high place and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And he said to him, ‘I will give you all their authority and splendor; it has been given to me, and I can give it to anyone I want to. If you worship me, it will all be yours.’”

We live in a time when we’re paying a heavy price for this lust for political power and manipulation of each other. It is tearing apart our society, our families, and even our churches. Make no mistake: that desire for control is a tool of Satan used to divide us. The aphrodisiac of worldly power is poison to the church.

Jesus’ response to Satan is simple: “It is written: ‘Worship the Lord your God and serve him only’” (Luke 4:8).

Being a Christian is about following Jesus’ example of serving one another, not trying to rule over each other. Our instructions are fundamentally the opposite of Satan’s seductive offer. Jesus said, “Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:43-45).

Jesus’ way is the opposite of our natural inclination to be self-serving. It is a seemingly instinctive desire to want to control the world and the people around us. Yet by operating in this way we find ourselves in complete opposition to the way of Jesus.

The way of Jesus is the way of servanthood. In John 13:12-15, after washing his disciples’ feet, Jesus says, “Do you

Being a Christian is about following Jesus’ example of serving one another, not trying to rule over each other.

understand what I have done for you? You call me ‘Teacher’ and ‘Lord,’ and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you.”

Washing people’s feet was a slave’s duty. But this is the way of Jesus. How radically different and loving our fellowship would be if we could simply be Christ’s servants to one another! It would be exactly as Jesus instructed us: “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:34-35).

Let us live the way of Jesus. It is, after all, his command to us.



Rob Braun is a freelance writer and a member of Bethel Christian Reformed Church in Princeton, Minn. He and his wife, Tammi, have three adult children. He’s licensed to exhort in Classis Lake Superior and is an elder at Bethel.

As I Was Saying

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- » I’m Not What I Feel
- » Sacred Songs in Unexpected Places
- » There Is Room



As He Hung Dying

By Hank Ottens

Editor's note: While based on the biblical story of the two men who died on crosses beside Jesus, this is an imaginative retelling of what one of those men might have been thinking.

"God our Savior ... wants all people to be saved."

—1 Timothy 2:4

He slowly lifted his head at the sound of a distant shout. From his lofty perch on the hill called Golgotha, the man on the cross could make out a mob heading his way. He was not surprised, because a rough-hewn beam next to a newly dug hole a few yards away portended yet one more crucifixion on this, the day before Passover. He pushed himself up to get a better look. He saw a brandishing of spears, heard the dissonance of anger. He watched as a wooden beam

was taken off the back of one man and placed on another pulled from the crowd. Prodded by a soldier's whip, the man slowly dragged the beam toward the hill. The crowd seemed more intent on disparaging the just-relieved man, who seemed to have been beaten considerably; it was all he could do to stay on his feet. The shouting and jeering got louder as the mob began making its way up the hill, its bedlam heavy on the sultry air.

He looked over at his companion, bound to a cross a stone's throw away. Earlier this morning both had been escorted to this hill, tied to Roman crosses and hung up to die for their crimes. Their ascent went unnoticed, accompanied only by their

executioners. Clearly the new arrival, driven before the storm of a boisterous mob, was no ordinary criminal.

He watched as the miscreant was stripped of his bloody clothes and stretched onto the crossbeam, his arms secured not by ropes but by spikes driven through his wrists. He winced as the cross, stood on end by soldiers, thudded into the gaping hole. It struck him as odd that the man seemed at peace and had very little to say. And when he did speak, the noisy mob became quiet, the soldiers paused in their routine. In a measured voice he spoke of forgiveness, a ring of authority underlying his words.

It dawned on him that this beaten, bedraggled man must be the notorious rabbi, the one they called Jesus, who had caused so much controversy and trouble in Jerusalem and beyond. It seems his enemies had gotten the best of him at last. So that's what all the hullabaloo these past couple of days before Passover was all about! The Sanhedrin had caught him out at last, and now he hung on the hill between two fellow criminals. He heard the man on Jesus' left voicing his frustration and challenging the miracle worker to get the three of them off their crosses.

He had heard about this Jesus, how he had cured folks and driven out demons. He had caught a little of what the man had said to the crowds from the top of a hill across the lake. Why, he had even eaten some bread from the leftover chunks his disciples had gathered up after Jesus had fed them. He couldn't understand how this miracle man could end up on a cross.

He berated his crucified companion and told him to shut up. He heaved at his restraints, trying to make sense of what was transpiring on this hellish hill. This Jesus was behaving in a

He heard the words, but it took the rest of his ordeal that afternoon to fully understand that his future had become secure and lovely.

way that puzzled him. Why was he not raging at the injustice foisted on him? He had heard him speak of a God in heaven, had called him Father. Why did his divine father not get his son off the cross?

He had heard rumors that this Jesus had forgiven bad behavior: a hated tax collector up in a tree, a whore who cried tears onto his feet, a woman about to be stoned for adultery. Perhaps, he thought, he too could be forgiven. But was it too late? Had his crimes been too heinous? Something stirred deep within him. Tears he could not wipe away flowed down his cheeks. A lump he could not swallow rose in his throat. He felt despair dissolve in courage. He turned to this Man of Sorrows and blurted, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." His words surprised him. Life after death? A waiting kingdom? Such prospects seemed ridiculously out of place on this horrid hill

under this broiling sun, with ropes chafing his aching arms. But the words had tumbled out, and he held his breath.

His eyes met those of the suffering man. "Today," he heard him say with confidence and promise, "you shall be with me in Paradise." He heard the words, but it took the rest of his ordeal that afternoon to fully understand that his future had become secure and lovely. As the day wore on, the man in the middle spoke more words, and with each word he felt his misgivings dissolve and his confidence bolstered. And then it suddenly got dark and cold. When the sun finally reappeared, the man they called Jesus, the man who had welcomed him home, spoke his last words and took his last breath. As his head dropped, so did the noise from the few remaining bystanders at his feet. The silence gave way to the ringing words of the centurion: "Surely he was the son of God."

By the time a trio of soldiers trudged up the hill, the scorching sun had begun to set and the stinging flies had left him alone at last. His pain-wracked body had become numb, but his mind remained keen with anticipation and wonder. A soldier clubbed Jesus' legs; another stuck a spear into the side of the man whom he would soon meet in Paradise. His questions and doubts had given way to assurance. As he hung dying, he knew for a fact that the man in the middle had saved his life. **B**



Hank Ottens is a retired orthopedic surgeon and an active gardener, photographer, and singer. He attends Second Christian Reformed Church in Grand Haven, Mich.

BIG QUESTIONS

Digital Life

I'm hearing a lot about the artificially intelligent ChatGPT. Should I pay attention?

The headline "The End of High School English?" caught my eye. It was a teaser for an article about ChatGPT, the text-generating tool that has been getting a lot of press lately.

Generative AI tools, the generic term for computer programs that create "original" text or images, has been talked about for years, but now the public has access to some of the more powerful applications, creating quite a stir. From outright fear (The machines really are taking over!) to wonderment (It wrote that? With spot-on King James Version language?) to excitement (Think how this could speed up research!).

These tools work by ingesting untold numbers of documents and images. From this vast collection the programs learn language patterns to form well-written sentences and algorithms and create beautiful images. The output is so good it's fooling art contest judges and doing better than humans on medical, business, and law exams.

Pretty cool, eh? Mostly. But questions quickly arise: If the computer is using copyrighted text or images, can it take credit for the result? If most of the information fed into the machine is biased, won't the result also be biased? It might be written in perfect form, but is the information reliable? Did anyone review this first? Can I trust it to be a reliable source?

Back to the headline that grabbed my attention. The fear underlying the headline is legitimate: if a machine can write so well, how is a teacher to know if her students are really doing



Illustration for *The Banner* by Gisela Bohórquez

the writing? Fortunately, in God's great design, for every problem humans create, there are other humans working hard at solving the problem, like the 22-year-old Toronto student who over winter break created an app that can detect whether something was written by a human or a machine. As you can imagine, teachers everywhere are lining up to get it.

Dean Heetderks is co-director of Ministry Support Services of the CRC and art director of *The Banner*. What has been your reaction to generative AI tools so far? Tell him at dean.heetderks@gmail.com.

Church

Can a couple get married in the eyes of the church but not the state if they have financial or family concerns about a legal marriage?

This question has arisen in recent years among widows and widowers who want to keep their finances separate, younger people who are citizens of different countries and want a church wedding in one and a legal ceremony in another, and immigrants from countries with different marriage practices that don't meet typical Canadian or American legal standards. In fact, Synod 2019 appointed a task force to study this topic and report to Synod 2021. That synod did not meet due to the pandemic, and the report was deferred due to another substantive report about marriage and sexuality on the 2022 agenda, but it will finally

be addressed this June at Synod 2023. The report can be found at tinyurl.com/EcclesiasticalMarriage.

The report helpfully explains a biblical and Reformed theology of marriage, recognizing that, following John Calvin's teachings, Reformed traditions have always connected ecclesiastical and legal marriage and that at most weddings the ordained pastor officiates under the dual authority of the church and the state. The report explores stories of those who would like only an ecclesiastical marriage—one not recognized by the state—and considers the advantages and disadvantages of such unions, including practical issues such as what happens if such a marriage does not work out. Would the couple need an ecclesiastical divorce, and would the church administer that?

Because of theological and legal concerns, the report does not recommend that couples and pastors go down this road together because it might create legal liabilities for churches and other involved parties. And it might not provide what couples are looking for anyway, as persons in common-law relationships do have some legal rights in certain jurisdictions. The legal issues are very complex because the U.S. and Canada have different laws about marriage, and in the U.S. they also vary from state to state. We certainly would not want to encourage dishonesty in any way or commit fraud by avoiding legal marriage, but how can we address valid concerns that married

and engaged couples have? Synod 2023 hopefully will provide some helpful guidance for churches and pastors.

Kathy Smith is senior associate director of the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship, adjunct professor of church polity at Calvin Theological Seminary, and adjunct professor of congregational and ministry studies at Calvin University. She is a member of First Christian Reformed Church in Grand Rapids, Mich.

Vocation

My job feels as if it has become my whole life. As much as I love it, I don't think it's healthy for me to always be working or checking messages. How do I break the pattern?

When we find work that fits our calling, we can find a lot of meaning and purpose in our jobs. Yet we need to be careful to remember that our worth comes not first from our job, but from God. This is especially hard to do today, when so much value is put on how productive we are. For example, employees and students are often judged by how much time they put in regardless of whether this is healthy or even effective.

One way to limit how much you work is by practicing Sabbath. You can do that by not working one day per week. You can also do that by making sure that there are times each day when you don't work or even look at your phone. This can feel especially hard to do if you have multiple jobs, work long hours, or depend on finding new clients for your income. Yet even carving out small amounts of non-work time is valuable. Practicing Sabbath is a concrete way of remembering that God delights not only in our work, but also in our rest. Furthermore, letting go of our work for a time helps us remember that it is not we who save the world, but God.

To decrease the importance of work, it helps to find other good things to invest time in. Hobbies are a great way to find rest as long as they do not become a new way to find our worth or distance ourselves from others. Finding ways to volunteer in our communities and churches can introduce us to people and situations that help put our own work and lives in perspective. Walking, biking, or running in our neighborhoods can also help us imagine how God might work in the people and the world around us.

Our calling from God is not just to our job, but to our families, friendships, neighbors, cities, and creation. Finding healthy boundaries for the role of work in our lives is important for our own well-being as well as our relationships with God and others.

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

Bible/Doctrine

What does it mean to "speak the truth in love" (Eph. 4:15)?

There are important context clues to help us understand this phrase. First, just a few verses earlier, the apostle has celebrated Christ's gift: church leaders "to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up" (4:11-12), growing into maturity and experiencing the fullness of Christ. The work of these church leaders is contrasted with "the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming" that causes those without discernment to be "blown here and there by every wind of teaching" (4:14). So, at its heart, this is a passage about the purpose that drives Christian service. Its goal is that the body of Christ would be built up and that believers would be more firmly rooted

in their faith, gaining greater capacity to experience the fullness of Christ.

If we draw larger principles about Christian communication from this passage, we might say that the goal of our speech ought to be consistent with the goals of ministry: to build others up and encourage them to be anchored in Christ, thus to becoming more fully free and alive. Our speech should not be used to deceive, demean, or dominate others, but to help them be full and free in Christ.

But it is certainly the case that committed believers disagree on what they perceive to be true about things such as secondary doctrines or ethical decisions, so it is important to remember that the primary truth that believers seek to "speak in love" is the good news of Jesus itself. We so often use our words to justify or congratulate ourselves. We might begin to feel superior to others in our conviction that we possess "the truth." Paul will remind the Ephesians a few verses later that the truth is "in Jesus" (4:21). This truth is neither our discovery nor our invention; it is the sort of thing that no one can boast about, the sort of thing that we can only ever speak humbly about because we are astonished that it has found us. So with our words we point people to Jesus Christ. The only appropriate way to speak of him is in a way that fits the character of his gift. He is the Love and the Truth that sets us free.

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



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

Pop-up Art Walk Brings Symbols of Christ's Passion to Lynden, Wash.

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Know of a noteworthy event or accomplishment in the life of a CRC member? Have details about an interesting ministry in a CRC congregation? Send your news tip to news@TheBanner.org.

For the past two Easter weekends, downtown Lynden, Wash., has been host to a pop-up art walk featuring 12 sandwich-board drawings representing some of the traditional Stations of the Cross—a devotion used by Catholics and other Christians especially during Holy Week to convey the biblical accounts of Jesus' Passion.

Created by The House, a collection of house churches sponsored and supported by Sonlight Christian Reformed Church in Lynden, the project takes the gospel message to the city sidewalks. "We had panels displayed in front of all sorts of businesses," said Sean Taylor, church planter for The House.

Washington artist Scott Erickson designed the panels that The House displayed in 2021 and 2022. Participants of house church groups mounted them on boards between three and four feet square and set them up in front of the Chamber of Commerce, a beer and wine store, a bar, a barber shop, and many other downtown storefronts. Each panel included a QR code linking to the church's social media channels so that participants could further explore the gospel message. For 2023 The House intends to work with a different local artist to create a similar interactive walk.

While it's tough to count the project's audience, Taylor said, he estimates



Square panels display symbols of the Stations of the Cross.

that hundreds of people participated in the event over the past two years. The display is open 24 hours a day over the Easter weekend.

"The biggest thing for me is that at a certain point, if the community is not coming into the church building, it becomes our responsibility to take church out in the community," Taylor said. "This is also one of the drivers behind the house church movement that we at The House are working through."

Taylor did not grow up in the CRC, but he says his passion for the gospel and desire to reach the community brought him together with Sonlight CRC when the parent church wanted to sponsor a church plant. "In the (19)70s and '80s this area was known as a Bible belt," he recalled, "and now it is one of the most unchurched areas of one of the most unchurched states. If anywhere needs the gospel, it is here."

—Dan Veeneman



House church participants fix symbols of the Stations of the Cross to wooden boards for display.

'Behind The Scenes, I Was Praying for You'

A Grandmother Reaches Her Family With God's Word

For 40 years, Norma VanderMolen of Bethel Christian Reformed Church in DeMotte, Ind., led Coffee Break, a discovery-based Bible study originally developed for women, at her big, round kitchen table. "They called us 'The Ladies of the Round Table,'" VanderMolen said with a chuckle. "And that's what we became."

She loved leading Coffee Break, but another group—VanderMolen's grandchildren—was growing heavy on her heart. Like many people in their late teens and 20s, they had not woven church into the fabric of their lives. "It broke my heart for them," VanderMolen said. She wanted them to hunger for God, and for God's Word. So she began to pray.

"I prayed for them all by name," said VanderMolen, who has 21 grandchildren and 23 great-grandchildren. She was direct with God: "Bring a teacher to them, Lord!" she prayed. God replied just as directly. "YOU teach them," VanderMolen heard.

At first, VanderMolen didn't think that was such a good idea. "I'm their grandma!" she said. "But," she recalls deciding, "if that was truly God's voice, then it won't fail." VanderMolen determined to give it a try.

In 2012 VanderMolen approached one of her granddaughters at a basketball game and asked if she'd like to do a Bible study with her. Immediately, her granddaughter got tears in her eyes and said yes.

Soon The Ladies of the Round Table were replaced by The Grandchildren of the Round Table. VanderMolen retired from leading Coffee Break and began leading her grandchildren through the Bible. "I knew I couldn't do both," she said. "We're only human, and we have to be led by God."

The first Sunday, five grandchildren attended. VanderMolen asked them where they wanted to start.



Norma VanderMolen (third from left at table) with five of "The Grandchildren of the Round Table."

"What do you mean?" they asked. "Shouldn't we just read the whole thing? When you read a book, you have to start at the beginning."

So that's what they did. This was Feb. 10, 2012. VanderMolen knows the exact date because her grandson wrote it in his Bible.

One of VanderMolen's granddaughters attended with her husband, who confessed, "I have nothing to go on—no prior knowledge."

About four months into the study, he asked VanderMolen if he could talk with her privately. He told her he hadn't wanted to do the Bible study and had only agreed because his wife asked him to. "I thought it would be boring," he said. "It's not boring."

Shortly thereafter, VanderMolen asked the group gathered around the table if they wanted to invite Jesus into their hearts as their Savior. "I'll guide you through it," she told them, "but you have to make the decision." That day, every one of them accepted Christ.

VanderMolen, who recently turned 80, still holds weekly Bible studies for her

grandchildren. She provides a meal, and her husband, Elmer, babysits the great-grandchildren while VanderMolen leads the adults through the Bible, delving even into the more difficult books, such as Leviticus, which details God's laws for the priests of Israel.

VanderMolen emphasizes that those who are interested in this kind of work should start praying. "God has to melt their hearts. He has to open them up to the whole thing," she said. "Without prayer, you're not letting the Holy Spirit prepare them."

And if they're not interested?

"You keep praying," VanderMolen says without hesitation.

Recently one of VanderMolen's grandchildren told her that she mostly felt judged by older people because she wasn't attending church. This didn't make her very warm to the idea of going. "But you never did that," she told her grandma. "You just loved me."

"Behind the scenes," VanderMolen told her, "I was praying for you."

—Callie Feyen

Council of Delegates Discontinues Inspire, Discusses Membership Trends, and More

The Council of Delegates of the Christian Reformed Church, which serves synod between meetings of synod, met by video conference Feb. 15-17 and addressed declining membership trends, the allocation of ministry shares, ministry reports, and more.



Inspire Discontinued

The Council evaluated a staff report on the feasibility of continuing to host Inspire events such as those hosted in Detroit, Windsor, Ont., and Tinley Park, Ill., in 2017, 2019, and 2022. Some delegates spoke passionately about the continued need for wide, diverse, ministry-inspiring gatherings for the whole church, but the Council accepted that declining attendance and overall cost made the large-scale events untenable. Council instructed staff to discontinue Inspire, though it also encouraged staff to “explore smaller-scale and/or regionalized events on particular ministry themes applicable to the churches.”

Revised Code of Conduct for Ministry Leaders

A team reviewing the CRC’s proposed Code of Conduct for Ministry Leaders presented its report to the Council of Delegates with changes based on feedback from congregations and classes. Such a review was requested by Synod 2022, which considered the Code of Conduct but did not vote to implement it. The Council endorsed the proposed revised Code of Conduct and an accompanying FAQ that addresses some questions

the team frequently heard from congregations, and it’s recommending them to Synod 2023 for adoption.

Membership Trends and Church Renewal

An ad hoc membership trends committee formed in response to a steady membership decline across the denomination presented 12 recommendations with a focus on church renewal, but the Council wanted the recommendations’ definitions and goals to be more clearly defined.

Melissa Van Dyk, an at-large Canadian delegate, said, “I love the intention, but I would’ve loved more clarity about what we’re actually asking to see action on.”

Thomas Wolthuis, Classis Central Plains, said, “There’s nothing here that is radically new or exciting or focused. I just feel like it’s a laundry list that’s not going to do much.”

The membership trends committee is now planning to develop a response from congregational ministries and Resonate Global Mission to bring to the Council in May. That will include a description of what denominational agencies are already doing related to church renewal and growth and an outline of how congregational ministries might respond to the renewal and growth needs of CRC congregations in the future.

Ministry Boards, Not Corporations

Shirley DeVries, the denomination’s chief administrative officer, noted for the Council a change in how the CRCNA wants to refer to parts of the organization. In a report, DeVries said the new vocabulary will “provide clarity and focus on the primary nature of our work—ministry.” Some of the changes include using “Canada Ministry Board” instead of “Canada Corporation” or “Canada board”; “U.S. Ministry Board” instead of “U.S. Corp.,” “Michigan Corp.,” “U.S. board,”

or “Michigan board”; and using “Canada ministry office” and “U.S. ministry office” for the offices of the denomination in Burlington, Ont., and Grand Rapids, Mich.

Those ministry boards met concurrently Feb. 16.

The U.S. Ministry Board:

» accepted its officers’ recommendation to establish the position of U.S. director of ministry operations as a full-time executive-level position. A search team will recommend a nominee at the board’s May meeting.

» empowered the board’s officers to act in a legal capacity regarding the CRCNA Grand Rapids office building—a property that had been set to undergo an \$11 million overhaul just before the onset of the pandemic.

» approved the conclusion of Lis Van Harten’s appointment as a U.S. member of the CRCNA Joint Ministry Committee as of Jan. 1, 2023. Van Harten, most recently U.S. director for congregational ministries, intends to retire this spring. That congregational ministries role is now held by Chris Schoon.

The Canada Ministry Board:

» approved terms of reference for the Decolonization and Anti-racism Collective, the new name for the Canadian advisory committee on anti-racism.

» reviewed summaries of comments from a January gathering of Canadian CRC members, in which several people expressed hurt and frustration over the decisions of Synod 2022 related to human sexuality. (See March 2023, p. 18.) The board noted, “Some of the suggestions or desires we heard were ecclesial in nature, which is out of the realm of the board’s authority,” but board members wanted to acknowledge receiving the comments. The board will review a communication at its meeting in May.

Kevin DeRaaf Nominated as Resonate Director



Rev. Kevin DeRaaf

The Christian Reformed Church's Council of Delegates is recommending that Synod 2023 appoint Resonate Global Mission's current acting Canada director, Kevin DeRaaf, as the agency's new director. He'll replace interim director Joel Huyser, who has been guiding Resonate since former director Zachary King became the CRC's general secretary last June.

The Council interviewed DeRaaf by video conference at its February meeting. DeRaaf and a group of North American regional leaders were visiting Resonate missionaries Roland and Loyda Vanderburg in El Salvador.

"One of the reasons I was willing to put my name in for this role is that I'm passionate about the work this agency does, and I'm really passionate about the people that serve on our behalf," DeRaaf said.

Kelly Vander Woude, Classis Rocky Mountain, asked DeRaaf about what he is seeing in churches in countries like El Salvador that is different from North American churches. DeRaaf talked about "allowing our hearts to be broken for what's happening in the world," saying, "I don't know if we dare let our hearts be broken for God's mission."

DeRaaf has been with Resonate since May 2017 and before that spent 18 years as lead pastor of Faith CRC in Burlington, Ont. He has an undergraduate degree from Redeemer University and a master of divinity degree from Calvin Seminary.

—Kristen Parker

—Kristen Parker
and Alissa Vernon

CRC Among Those Lamenting 'Hastened Death' in Canada

The Evangelical Fellowship of Canada released a statement Feb. 21 in which signees affirmed a duty of care to those who are suffering and resolved to "ensure people with disability, chronic illness, and mental health struggles are welcomed into full participation and belonging."

Al Postma, transitional executive director-Canada for the Christian Reformed Church in North America, was one of 51 Christian ministry leaders to sign the statement against hastened death by medical means.

"As followers of Jesus, we share a deep and profound commitment to the sanctity of all human life," the statement says. "Human life is being devalued and discarded when people in vulnerable situations among us are not being supported to live, but facilitated to die."

Since 2016 Canada has had legislation granting access to medical assistance to end one's life for individuals experiencing "intolerable suffering" and for whom there was a "reasonable foreseeability of natural death." After constitutional challenges, the latter stipulation is no longer required, and the choice of what the government refers to as "medical assistance in dying" is available "to relieve intolerable suffering, regardless of proximity to natural death."

The law is set to expand again to make the program available to people with either mental or physical illnesses, but that legislation has been delayed.

—Alissa Vernon, News Editor

» noted the resignations of two Canadian members of the Council of Delegates: Bev Bandstra, Classis B.C. South-East, and Kelli Berkner, at-large member.

Allocating Ministry Shares

Council endorsed the following allocations of the 2023-24 fiscal year ministry shares:

- » Congregational ministries 29.5%
- » CRC governance offices 27%
- » Resonate Global Mission 19.5%
- » ReFrame Ministries 9.5%
- » Calvin Theological Seminary 8.5%
- » Calvin University 6%

Ministry shares are the contributions of member congregations to the work of the denomination. Since 2019 they have been based on congregational pledges. Terry Veldboom, chief administrative officer (Canada), reported to the Canada Ministry Board that "ministry share received is below budget" for the current fiscal year, but "it is above prior year by over \$500,000 (+24%)."

In the U.S., shares were 2% lower than the denomination had budgeted for the fiscal year midpoint at the end of December. "That is very close to where we wanted to be compared to last year, when ... we were down 17%" at the fiscal midpoint, DeVries said.

Unity, Not Unanimity, Say Organizers of ‘A Third Way’

A new group launched in mid-February is urging members of the Christian Reformed Church to consider a “third way” within the CRC on the issue of same-sex marriage: allowing for disagreement.

Better Together: A Third Way is made up of CRC “members, leaders, pastors, churches, and classes,” the group’s website says. “We may have a long list of differences, but we are committed to creating space for disagreement on non-salvific ethical issues in service to maintain the prioritization of the mission of the gospel and protect the unity of the church.”

Encouraging spiritual practices that promote unity is among the group’s goals. “We recognize that these practices may lead to some decisions being reversed for our unity and mission to thrive,” the website says. “One example could be Synod 2022’s decision regarding confessional status.”

Synod 2022 voted with a 69% majority (26 delegates recording a negative vote) to affirm that the Heidelberg Catechism’s reference to unchastity includes



homosexual sex and declared that “this interpretation has confessional status.” During discussion, synod delegates did not conclude what the outcome of declaring confessional status would be.

“Just because synod says we must have unanimity doesn’t mean we suddenly do,” said Stephen DeWitt, pastor of Alger Park CRC in Grand Rapids, Mich., and one of 14 CRC pastors on Better Together’s steering committee. “Alger Park (CRC) asked me to invest in this because we need a way forward. We spent the last two years studying, and we learned so much, and it’s been a huge season of growth,” he said. “Our church’s struggle is, why does this (same-sex marriage) have to be the issue that has to break us?”

Better Together received a one-time \$5,000 grant from Classis Grand Rapids East and an undisclosed amount from Alger Park CRC. The steering committee includes four Grand Rapids pastors, two

other Michigan pastors, and eight pastors from other states.

“This ministry launched without the funding of our classis, but (it) shared a vision of living into the tension of differences while committing to unity with one another,” leaders of Classis Grand Rapids East wrote in a statement to *The Banner*. “While four churches within our classis hold policies of full participation (of LGBTQ members, whether married or single), the majority do not, and we are choosing to make space for one another. Our desire to persevere with divergent perspectives aligns well with the work of Better Together: A Third Way.”

Members of the Better Together steering committee told *The Banner* that their churches have spent the past few years in difficult conversations about human sexuality and other weighty matters.

Joel Kok, pastor of Covenant CRC in Sioux Center, Iowa, said his congregation has been “wrestling like Jacob for a blessing.” This group is for him a way to talk with people who do not share his traditional view of marriage: “I think I can speak on behalf of my congregation that we would treasure denominational unity.”

Better Together might aptly be called a “third way” because two other groups previously launched websites to address the CRC’s stance on same-sex marriage: *abideproject.org*, which supports a traditional view of marriage, in September 2021, and *hesedprojectcrc.org*, which questions the traditional interpretation of Scripture on homosexuality, in February 2022.

—Roxanne VanFarowe

Korean American Pastors Discuss Sexuality Report With Committee Co-chair



Rev. Chris Choe (left), Korean ministry leader with Resonate Global Mission, translates for visiting Calvin Theological Seminary professor Jeff Weima at Orange Hope Church in Fullerton, Calif.

Looking to understand more clearly the decisions of the Christian Reformed Church's 2022 synod and hear details from the human sexuality report in their own language, leaders in Classis Ko-Am invited theology professor Jeffrey Weima to present on the report in February.

The assembly of Korean-American congregations in California, Arizona, Nevada, and Tennessee hosted Weima Feb. 20 for a three-hour session. Rev. Chris Choe, Korean ministry leader for Resonate Global Mission, provided simultaneous translation.

"The Korean pastors wanted me to explain some of the details of the report," Weima said. "I gave an overview of the whole report but did a more detailed analysis of the biblical evidence related to the topic of homosexuality." About 30 people attended, including three pastors from neighboring Classis Hanmi. About 75% of Classis Ko-Am pastors were present.

"Tragically, the Christian Reformed Church has often responded to questions about sexuality either with harsh judgment or simply with silence," Weima said in his presentation, "while at the same time

adapting to the surrounding culture's sexual practices."

Rev. Han Gyu Park of Urim CRC in Laguna Woods, Calif., found the talk to be a great learning opportunity. "I got a firm view on the biblical foundation about homosexuality. And also I learned insight to take care of our homosexual friends within and outside our church as a practical, pastoral application," Park said. Rev. Jaeseong Moon of L.A. Global Mission Church in Los Angeles, Calif., said he felt the need for a seminar like this following Synod 2022's decisions "to seek to cope with homosexuality, with LGBTQ" for the sake of younger generations.

Rev. Jae Young Kim of Olympic Presbyterian Church, a Los Angeles congregation that's part of Classis Hanmi, is a former professor at International Theological Seminary and academic dean for Korean students. He said he appreciated Weima's presentation on biblical scholarship. "He showed us who and why biblical scholars should be (included) in the community of faith," Kim said.

The session was hosted at Orange Hope Church in Fullerton, Calif.

—Jonathan Kim

IN MEMORIAM



Rev. Cornelius Pool

1951-2023

Cor Pool was kind and compassionate and had a great sense of humor. He loved the work of ministry, especially telling of the love of Jesus to those who did not know Christ. He loved diversity and the wider church and sought church unity. He frequently reminded people to keep their eyes on Jesus. Cor, 71, died Jan. 22 after having a heart attack while on a cruise with his siblings.

Born in the Netherlands as the youngest of 11 children, Cor was an infant when his family immigrated to Alberta. He graduated from Calvin Seminary, was ordained in 1978, then pastored Crosspoint Community Church, Tillsonburg, Ont.; Green Meadow Community Christian Reformed Church, Helena, Mont.; Fresno (Calif.) CRC; Sonlight CRC, Regina, Sask; and Hope Community CRC, Riverside, Calif., where he served for 17 years before retiring in 2016.

Cor continued to serve in various ways until his death. In 2017 he was president of synod and from 2017-20 served as interim pastor for four different churches. He enjoyed traveling, including the opportunity to explore the land of his birth.

Predeceased in 2011 by Kathleen, his wife of almost 38 years, Cor is survived by the couple's four children and their spouses and 10 grandchildren.

—Janet A. Greidanus

Ontario Congregation Offers 'Family Dinner Meal Box'



Ebenezer CRC's Family Dinner Meal Box program offers recipients freshly made meals plus produce and dairy products.

Filled with two freshly made meals plus produce and dairy, Ebenezer Christian Reformed Church's biweekly food boxes are sharing healthy food with about 80 people in the church's Trenton, Ont., community.

The program began around the 2020 onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Two sisters concerned with neighbors' food security approached the congregation's connections committee. "We had research showing that 12% of households in Quinte were food insecure in 2017," said co-founder Miranda de Vries. "We proposed a program offering a food box with a couple of nutritious meals for the whole family. The committee liked the idea, provided us with seed money, and we got busy."

One of a few main understandings as they got started was that "the meal box program will always be seen as a Band-Aid solution to food insecurity but not an answer," de Vries said. "It's important for us as a community to continue to seek ways to advocate for this right."

Anyone can request a box by contacting the church office or emailing the program. With this direct contact, volunteers can accommodate individual dietary requirements. Most clients pick up their food box at the church building on alternate Friday mornings.

The meal boxes include local produce when it's in season. Other groceries are bought at a local supermarket on a church-funded account. Congregants contribute regularly scheduled offerings to cover program costs.

"The program is entirely run and operated by a growing number of volunteers, both (those) who attend Ebenezer CRC regularly or (who are) a part of the wider Quinte community," de Vries said. "The program has continued to succeed due to the strong prayerful, financial, and volunteer support."

—Ron Rupke

Religion News Digest

The Banner has a subscription to republish articles from Religion News Service. The following are shortened versions of stories from Jan. 12, Jan. 17, and Feb. 28.

Christian Persecution Watch List Marks 30 Years

In the three decades since the religious-liberty organization Open Doors International began compiling its World Watch List of the 50 countries where Christians face the most persecution for their faith, that persecution has never been worse, according to the 2023 list released Jan. 17.

Wybo Nicolai, a former Open Doors global field director who first created the World Watch List, said that since 2010, the number of countries on the list reporting "high" levels of persecution has increased, almost doubling since the first list was compiled in 1993. So has the intensity of that persecution.

The "extreme high levels" of 2022—when more than 360 million Christians around the world reported at least high levels of discrimination and persecution—have roughly remained the same in this 2023 list, Nicolai said.

The list scores the levels of pressure Christians and church communities suffer in private life, family life, community life, and national life, along with violence levels.

The 10 countries where Open Doors reports Christians currently face the most persecution has changed little since 2022.

On this year's list, North Korea is followed by Somalia, Yemen, Eritrea, Libya, Nigeria, Pakistan, Iran, Afghanistan, and Sudan. Sudan, ranked 13th last year, is new to the top 10.





Photo by Fiona Morgan

People join together to worship inside Hughes Auditorium at Asbury University in Wilmore, Ky.

Asbury Revival Sparks Other Gatherings

After more than two weeks and worldwide headlines, revival services at Asbury University in central Kentucky came to a close at the end of February.

But other gatherings continued the momentum.

Minneapolis-based evangelist Nick Hall, who heads the ministry Pulse, hosted a Feb. 26 worship service in Rupp Arena in Lexington, Ky., about half an hour from the Christian school's campus. Hall attended the Asbury revival in its first week and said he was overwhelmed by what God was doing.

After the Asbury revival started spontaneously on Feb. 8, the university officially ended revival services on Feb. 23. During that final service, people prayed over college campuses, asking God to bring revival to the world.

Similar prayer services have taken place at other colleges, including Samford University in Alabama, Lee University in Tennessee, and Baylor University in Texas.

The services included no structured sermons but were marked by a time of worship with simple songs, prayer, repentance, and people sharing testimonies of how God has moved in their lives.

"There's a hunger from the younger generations to seek after the Lord," said Forrest Limon, a Pulse staff member. "It was the ministry that was happening in seats, just young people crowding around each other, and grandparents, just all praying for the younger generations. There was this multigenerational unity tonight."



Photo by IOTA

Attendees of the Mega-Conference of the International Orthodox Theological Association meeting in Volos, Greece.

Orthodox Christian Scholars Meet

Almost 400 Orthodox Christian theologians from 44 countries convened in Greece in January in the largest international conference of its kind.

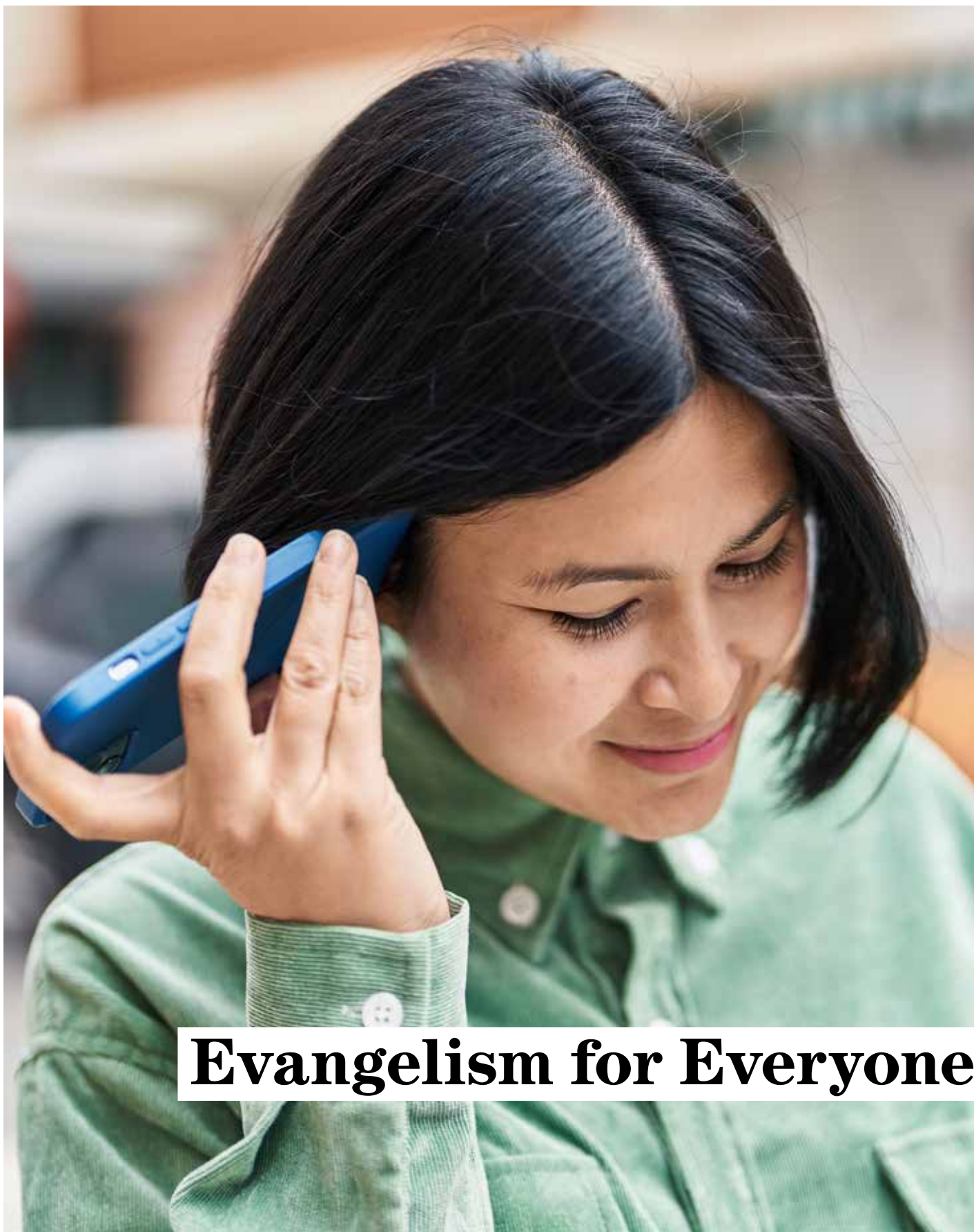
Some of the most contentious issues at the Mega-Conference of the International Orthodox Theological Association, which met in Volos, had been exposed by Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, which exacerbated a split between a newly independent Orthodox Church of Ukraine in Kyiv and the Russian Orthodox Church, based in Moscow.

The conference's keynote speaker, Metropolitan Ambrosios (Zografos) of Korea and Exarch of Japan, a bishop of the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, lamented that "so few of our church leaders have actually taken a public anti-war stance."

"The Mega-Conference of the International Orthodox Theological Association has become a most, if not the most, significant gathering of Orthodox Christian scholars from throughout the world," said the Rev. Anton Vrame, a member of the International Orthodox Theological Association board and a professor of religious education at Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology in Brookline, Mass. "The spirit of the conference is joyous, with a strong sense of unity among the diverse membership."

IOTA hosted its first conference in Romania in 2019. Fostering collaboration among Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant scholars, the conference aims to help church leaders continue Orthodox traditions in modern contexts.

—Religion News Service



Evangelism for Everyone

By Cassie Westrate, Resonate Global Mission, and Brian Clark, ReFrame Ministries

The idea that “evangelism is for everyone” can intimidate anyone. It can be nerve-racking to share your faith. Sometimes we don’t know what to do or say.

The word “evangelism” can also conjure some disconcerting memories or images: people standing on street corners with signs, billboards on the side of the road, or someone knocking on your door and asking, “If you died today, do you believe you would go to heaven?”

In some countries where the Christian Reformed Church works, it is illegal to share the gospel. For Christians who are living in these places, the consequences of sharing their Christian faith are much more threatening than rejection.

But throughout the Christian Reformed Church, believers are taking the idea that “evangelism is for everyone” to heart. It doesn’t have anything to do with a presentation of the gospel or defending the Bible. It’s about paying attention to how God is moving in the world and testifying to God’s work.

Evangelism Through Testimony

Do you have a favorite site for devotional reading or subscribe to a favorite Christian podcast that comes right to your email? Do you ever use the internet to quickly reference a Bible passage? Imagine if all of those tools for deepening your faith were no longer available—in fact, it’s become illegal to access them.

“Christians in China have been living under this reality for several years now,” said Jerry An, ReFrame Ministries’ Chinese ministry leader. New laws passed in early 2022 have posed a particularly difficult challenge for An and his media ministry team.

“Nearly all of our web and social media pages were shut down right when these laws took effect,” An said. Content on radio and television shows was censored, and many websites were completely blocked. “In the blink of an eye, many of our devotional readers lost their tool for deepening their faith as well as the community of believers that used that same tool.”

While the internet is now heavily regulated by the new evangelism laws in China, it also provides other ways to reach people with the gospel message.

Chinese Christians have been encouraging Chinese-speaking seekers and one another by sharing their testimonies in books published by ReFrame.

“Everyone in China has a smartphone,” An said, and while many websites have been blocked or censored, phone apps and social media messaging apps are nearly impossible to monitor fully. “Everyone still has access to video tools, chat, and social media. So everyone can share their faith with their peers. Evangelism is for everyone.”

One of An’s goals even before laws changed in China has been to help ease this intimidation factor. That’s why he’s encouraged people to share their own faith stories.

ReFrame has published a book that includes a collection of testimonies written by Chinese-speaking believers from universities and from online discipleship groups that ReFrame has formed. The testimonies feature people who have struggled in their faith, have asked deep questions, and want to encourage other Christians or seekers. The book has connected with Christians or seekers who might be struggling with the same questions the authors have struggled with or those who simply want to learn more about the Christian faith.

Bao (name changed for his safety) recently shared his gratitude with ReFrame’s Chinese ministry team after he read the book for the first time.

“Every time I read one life testimony, my worries and my fears fade away,” Bao said. “It was as if God was also speaking to me through these life testimonies. When there were lost people inside who were saved by God, the words ‘I too thank God’ came to my heart.”



Jerry An has been navigating ReFrame’s Chinese ministry through new laws that have made it more difficult to share the gospel using the internet.

Evangelism Through Relationship

In the same way that testimonies can encourage believers in China, Resonate Global Mission is helping believers throughout Canada and the United States encourage others and share the love of Christ through relationships.

Ary Vreeken knew his neighbors in Calgary, Alta. He had some good connections, and if he didn't know a neighbor's name, usually he at least recognized them. He even knew



Through participating in Resonate Global Mission's Go Local, Ary Vreeken has found meaningful ways to connect with neighbors and bring faith into conversations.

some of his neighbors' typical schedules—when they left for work, when they took their dog for a walk, when they got home from picking up their kids from school.

When he started being intentional about connecting with his neighbors, that's when things started to change.

"There are opportunities every day that I began to see as what I call 'God moments,'" Vreeken said.

"They're not orchestrated by myself. It's just because

I've learned to open my ears, my eyes. ... This is what God calls each and every one of us to do."

When Vreeken participated in Go Local, a Resonate ministry that coaches believers through a process of joining God at work in their neighborhood, he first considered that being intentional about building relationships with neighbors could make a difference.

"It started by going for walks and noticing who's outside and who isn't, who's doing what, (and) making sure I greeted them and stopped and made small talk," Vreeken said.

Over time, as Vreeken began to build relationships with his neighbors, the small talk wasn't so small anymore. They began to talk about subjects that were more meaningful and sometimes heavy.

When one couple lost their son to suicide, they confided in Vreeken. He was able to visit them, bring over food, and sit with them in their grief. Not long after that conversation, the couple called him over while he was walking. Their grandson had died by suicide too.

"All you can do in those moments is really listen," Vreeken said. "They had a lot of anger toward God."

But Vreeken felt a nudge from the Holy Spirit to minister to them.

"What if God is crying with you?" he asked. "What if God is sad with you?"

That opened up conversation.

Vreeken shares this story about his neighborhood in *Witness: Equipped to Share the Good News*. *Witness* is a self-guided course for individuals, churches, or small groups that helps readers reflect on what it means to be a witness for Christ in one's neighborhood.

Amy Schenkel, a Resonate regional mission leader, developed *Witness* in response to a need she heard from churches and what she experienced in her relationships with her own neighbors.

"In conversations with local churches, I hear the desire of people to share the good news with their neighbors, but the ways they've been taught to do so feel too threatening," Schenkel said. "In my own life, I realized I was developing relationships with my neighbors, but I wondered what the next step of verbalizing the gospel should look like with them."

That's why she worked with Vreeken and other believers to develop *Witness*. *Witness* is free to download on Resonate's website or available to order from Faith Alive. The curriculum includes a personal journal, a small group discussion guide, and video testimonies from Vreeken and other believers.

"I long to hear stories of how people are using the participant guide to actually live out being a witness in their own neighborhoods," Schenkel said. "I am praying that God uses this simple tool to change hearts and lives through the power of the Holy Spirit." **B**

Resources

Go Local: ResonateGlobalMission.org/Go-Local

Witness: ResonateGlobalMission.org/Witness

Expressing Faith in Jesus

ROSANNE EISING came to the Disability Concerns booth at the Inspire conference last summer eager to share about her son Elijah's recent profession of faith. Elijah, 18, is one of the newest members of Fellowship Christian Reformed Church in Big Rapids, Mich. Because he lives with autism and Dandy-Walker syndrome, Elijah's parents and church leaders worked together to adapt the profession of faith process for him.

"He understands Jesus loves him like I love him, and he has some understanding that his behavior makes Jesus either happy or sad," Eising said. "We figured it out as we went. Instead of going in front of the full council, the pastor came to our home to speak with Elijah. During the service, Elijah sat in a chair because it's hard for him to stand, and the questions were adapted to be appropriate for him."

Because participation in communion at Fellowship CRC is for those who have publicly professed their faith, "it was so special to take communion with him for the first time," Eising said.

Worshiping God through music has always been an important part of the worship service for Elijah. Several of Elijah's favorite songs were sung during the service in which he professed his faith.

"When he was 10 he became blind," Eising said. "When he hears music he'll ask who's doing it. He's become known in our church for encouraging musicians after a song by saying, 'Good job, so-and-so.' I think they've come to expect it. He knows all the hymns—every word and every verse. Elijah is a good reminder that serving our church can come in many forms and that professing our faith can come in many forms, too."



Elijah Eising on the day of his profession of faith.

Disability Concerns of the Christian Reformed Church in North America and the Reformed Church in America helps churches become places where everybody belongs and everybody serves. It's likely that many people with disabilities are actively involved in their church but haven't been invited into the membership process. The *Expressing Faith in Jesus Resource Toolkit* offers ways to adapt the baptism or profession of faith process for people with intellectual disabilities.

Reasons people with disabilities might be reluctant to profess their faith vary as widely as the range of disabilities themselves. For ideas about making your church more welcoming and hospitable for all, check out *Everybody Belongs, Serving Together*, a handbook that's a collaboration of RCA and CRCNA Disability Concerns, Christian Horizons, and Elim Christian Services. *Everybody Belongs, Serving Together* is available in English (in print, digital, and audio formats) and in Korean, Spanish, and French. It is available from faithaliveresources.org. 

—Lindsay Wieland Capel,
Disability Concerns

The View from Here

The Spirit Is Alive and Well

OVER THE PAST YEAR I have had the privilege of a bird's-eye view of what God is doing through the witness of our congregations and the work of our ministry agencies. I can report that the Spirit is in fact alive and well and is far ahead of us in the mission into which God has invited us!

When I read the book of Acts I see the same patterns of the Spirit's movement that I see today. I see the Spirit continually moving ahead of the church and inviting the church to follow.

We see this from the very beginning of the book of Acts. In Acts 2, the gift of the Spirit is accompanied by the ability to speak in the native languages of people from across the world. Three thousand people respond to Peter's message. Would anyone who had known the profiles of the disciples as they are portrayed in the gospels have expected this? Would anyone have seen this in their life trajectories?

Acts goes on to include numerous other stories of the church running to catch up with the Spirit. In Acts 8, the Spirit leads Philip to a desert road where he has an encounter with an Ethiopian eunuch. The work of the Spirit was so evident to Philip that he baptized the eunuch on the spot!

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Then there is the story of Peter and Cornelius. The Spirit pushed Peter way beyond his comfort level. Never in his life had Peter imagined eating in a Gentile house and even staying overnight! But when the Spirit fell palpably on Cornelius and his household, what else could Peter do?


In Acts 16 Paul and his companions are convinced that God had sent them to Asia Minor to demonstrate and proclaim the gospel. Yet door after door closed on them. Then Paul had the vision of a man from Macedonia inviting them to come. They followed the Spirit to a place they had never intended to go and to a person who had never been on their agenda—a businesswoman named Lydia. Lydia and her household became the seed of the church in Europe.

I see the Spirit working the same way in the Christian Reformed Church today. Let me give a couple of examples from Resonate Global Mission.

Resonate recently solicited innovation experiment proposals from CRCNA

congregations and CRCNA-related ministry partners. Those seeking seed funding were asked to undertake a small experiment in discerning where the Spirit was at work in their neighborhood and then to take simple steps to join in that work. To our surprise, we received more than 130 proposals. We wish we could have funded all of them! They were all tangible evidence of the Spirit moving ahead of us in our congregations.

There is something else I have noticed lately. Not only is much of the growth of the CRCNA in our Korean, Latino, and Southeast Asian congregations and church plants, but many of these congregations are now leading the way in reaching back to their countries of origin and planting churches. Frankly, this challenges many of our paradigms as a denomination and even the historic missions models at Resonate. But, as in the early church, the Spirit is running ahead of us and inviting us to follow.

In this issue you will find several other stories of where the Spirit is running ahead of us and inviting us to follow. What do you see the Spirit doing in your neighborhood and in your relationships? 



Joel Huyser is the director of the Christian Reformed Church's U.S. ministry operations and interim director of Resonate Global Mission. He is a member of Madison Square CRC in Grand Rapids, Mich.

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

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

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

40 Days of Prayer for Synod 2023



A delegate prays during Synod 2022.

AS WE LOOK AHEAD to Synod 2023, all members of the Christian Reformed Church in North America are invited to join other members in 40 days of prayer.

Each day, readers will receive a Bible text, a prayer, and some suggested questions for reflection or conversation. All of the prayers are intended to reflect the theme of Synod 2023, which is based on Philippians 2:1-11 and summarized by verse 5: "In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus."

"The 40 days of prayer are written by CRC members, missionaries, pastors, and staff," explained Jon Hoekema, the denomination's prayer shepherd. "They are written by young and old, in many languages, with English

translations for all, reflecting the beautiful diversity of the CRCNA."

The youngest prayer writer is 9, and the oldest is in their late 80s. Writers include pastors, chaplains, missionaries, seminary students, high school students, young adults, and people with disabilities.

"What each of these writers have in common is a hope that you will find in the prayers a perspective of grace, generosity, love, and longing, which can encourage us all to have a Christlike mindset in our relationships with one another," Hoekema said.

The 40 days of prayer will begin April 30 and will conclude when Synod 2023 begins June 8. During Synod, an emphasis on prayer will continue

with focused times of prayer by delegates, morning prayers with anyone who wishes to participate, volunteer prayer champions who aren't at synod but commit to praying during specific times, and prayers that will be offered via Facebook.

To learn more about how you can participate in prayer for synod, or to receive the free 40 days of prayer as a weekly PDF download or as daily emails, visit crcna.org/pray.

— Kristen deRoo VanderBerg

Pastor Peer Groups Approach Milestone

“TWENTY YEARS AGO, I started working for the Christian Reformed Church and we started peer learning groups,” said Lis Van Harten, recently retired director of Pastor Church Resources (now part of Congregational Ministries). She had been hired to coordinate the Sustaining Pastoral Excellence program—the reason peer groups were launched in 2003 with help from a grant from Lilly Endowment Inc.

“As of now,” Van Harten said, “990 individual CRC pastors (ministers of the Word and commissioned pastors) have been in one of our peer groups. I was really hoping to get to 1,000 before I retired, but that goal won’t be reached until the next groups begin to meet in the summer of 2023.”

So what have these nearly 1,000 pastors done in their groups? That answer is as varied as the group members themselves.

“Pastors are free to plan all aspects of their time together: who the group members will be, what topic they’ll pursue, when to meet, what books they’ll read, and if they’d like to attend a conference, have a retreat, or neither,” Van Harten said. “Since the groups create their own plans, no two groups are alike.”

Over the years, some groups have met to discuss a certain book or topic. Others gathered for meals together because they already shared a specific affinity and they wished to offer each other support and encouragement. There have been peer groups who bonded over rowing or climbed a mountain together. Some were able to meet theologian and author



Pastors from the West Michigan area gathered with the help of a Pastor Peer Learning Group grant for mutual support and encouragement.

Eugene Peterson. Some have traveled to specific locations to deepen their learning. They’ve wrestled together over how to foster greater diversity in their churches, and they’ve rested together as they spent time in spiritual retreat.

“Groups funded to date have focused on spiritual growth, Sabbath, developing leadership within churches, contemporary culture, pastoral health, family systems theory, building strong relationships, ministry fit, and the list goes on,” Van Harten said. “Recently most groups are focusing on their personal well-being as they’ve had to weather the COVID-19 pandemic and a variety of other very challenging circumstances. Burnout is very real. Having colleagues who get it is a lifeline.”

Applications for peer groups are submitted by May 1 or Nov. 1 of each year. Groups commit to meeting with each other for a set period of time and accomplishing specific goals. Each

group also provides pastors with opportunities to gather for learning, support, prayer, encouragement, and fellowship.

“We have grown a deep friendship filled with great conversation, side-splitting laughter, tears, and prayer,” one group member wrote in his analysis of his pastor peer group experience. “The greatest reward has been sharing life and ministry with other people who understand exactly what it’s like (to be a pastor).”

Chris Cassis, pastor at The Source Church in Miramar, Fla., agrees. He was a member of a pastor peer learning group and said, “Without our peer learning group, I’m convinced some of us wouldn’t still be in ministry. Instead, we’re thriving today!”

The next round of funding for pastor peer groups will be announced June 1. To learn more or to apply, visit crcna.org/pcr/pastors/grants.

—Kristen deRoo VanderBerg,
CRC Communications

A Shared Celebration



Pastors Jason Truell and Nancy Yang baptized seven new Chinese believers on a beautiful Sunday morning in August 2022.

Photo by Steven Zhou

MEMBERS OF LADNER Christian Reformed Church in Delta, B.C., were privileged to witness the baptisms of seven new Chinese believers on a beautiful Sunday morning late last summer in a swimming pool at a local farm belonging to longtime Ladner members Martin and Ann Hamming.

As each new Christian went into the swimming pool, Yang spoke to them in Mandarin, and then Truell baptized them. Children then presented each new believer with a flower, saying in Mandarin, "Jesus loves you!"

Ladner CRC holds two worship services—one in English and one in Mandarin. Pastor Jason Truell is the lead pastor and leads the English service. Commissioned Pastor Nancy Yang shepherds the Mandarin congregation of nearly 30 recent immigrants who have gathered since September 2020. Once every month, the two groups worship together in a family communion service.

The joint Sunday celebration in August 2022 was especially wonderful and full of joy. Members of both the English-speaking group and the Mandarin-speaking group joined to witness the baptisms, sing, pray together, and feast on an amazing array of food from both cultures. The gathering also included special music and interpretive dance.

"Both the English and the Chinese congregations presented and made us feel like a true, unified family," Yang said.

"This really was a wonderful time for a couple of reasons," Truell said.

"One is we were able to share fellowship between our Mandarin and our English congregations and to be together. And not only was it a baptism, but it was a celebration. We ate great food, we danced, we sang; it was a lot of fun!"

The farm setting gave the event a relaxed, celebratory atmosphere. "We

are so thankful to the Hammings, who opened their home to us all," Yang said.

The baptisms were the result of a class about Christianity that was advertised last May at a community celebration in Ladner. Mandarin-speaking church members spread the word that something good was happening at Ladner CRC. Seven people attended Yang's eight-session class, in which lay leaders from the Mandarin congregation, after Yang's coaching, took turns presenting a topic from Christianity to the class. All seven attendees indicated they wanted to come to true faith, repent, and trust in Christ.

"All these events have made beautiful memories for us all, especially to the newborn in Christ," Yang said. "Praise the Lord!"

—Bev Bandstra
and Kevin Hoeksema

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Herbs and Spices

THINK OF YOUR FAVORITE breakfast, lunch, or dinner food. What does it taste like? What makes it so yummy? Chances are your favorite meal is made with herbs and spices!

What Are Herbs and Spices?

Herbs are flavorful or fragrant leaves from different kinds of plants. Spices come from other parts of plants, such as seeds, bark, roots, or even hardened sap. Both spices and herbs are often used to season food or to make tea and are also used in beauty products or medicine.

Herbs and Spices in Your Kitchen (Scavenger Hunt!)

Herbs can grow in most temperate (cool and mild) places with good soil and plenty of sun. You can also grow herbs in your home or in a greenhouse. Maybe there are some growing on your kitchen windowsill!

Ask for an adult's help to see if you can find the following herbs and spices in your kitchen:

Basil: Basil is an herb with dark green leaves. You might have dried basil in your spice cabinet. It looks like small, green flakes. Basil is used in lots of Italian dishes, such as pizza and spaghetti sauce.

Cinnamon: Cinnamon comes from the bark of trees that grow in southeast Asia, South America, and islands of the Caribbean. The dried bark can be ground into the powder you're probably used to seeing.

Dill: Dill is an herb in the celery family. Its unique flavor is used in seasoning eggs, salads, and pickles.

Garlic: Did you know that garlic is part of the lily family? It also shares some characteristics with onions—they both grow underground and have a very strong smell. Though garlic is

really a vegetable, we usually treat it like a spice or herb. It is used in many dishes to add flavor and is also used to help fight sickness.

Did you find any of these herbs and spices in your kitchen? What do they smell like? What foods do you eat with these spices? Did you find any other herbs in your kitchen that are not on this list?

Herbs for When You're Feeling Sick

Making tea with some herbs and spices can help you feel better when you are sick. Have you had any of these herbs or spices when you aren't feeling well?

- » Chamomile
- » Licorice root
- » Mint
- » Elderberry
- » Catnip
- » Echinacea

Herbs in the Bible (Scavenger Hunt!)

Did you know that spices and herbs are talked about in the Bible? Read the following Bible verses and draw a line to match them to the correct herb or spice.

- | | |
|---------------------------|-----------------|
| a. Garlic | Exodus 30:23 |
| b. Hyssop | Matthew 2:11 |
| c. Cinnamon | Matthew 23:23 |
| d. Dill, mint, and cumin | Numbers 11:5 |
| e. Myrrh and frankincense | Leviticus 14:49 |



- Answers:
 Garlic: Numbers 11:5
 Hyssop: Leviticus 14:49
 Cinnamon: Exodus 30:23
 Dill, mint, and cumin: Matthew 23:23
 Myrrh and frankincense: Matthew 2:11



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

Illustration for The Banner by Anita Barghigiani





Chasing Wisdom

By Sam Gutierrez

Author and art collector Forrest Fenn carefully filled a small, ornate box with old coins, gold nuggets, jewelry, precious gemstones, and other exotic artifacts. Then he hid the box in the Rocky Mountains somewhere north of Santa Fe, N.M., and waited for someone to find it.

When asked why he hid a treasure worth over \$1 million, Fenn said it was the result of his 1988 diagnosis of terminal kidney cancer. Rather than slowly declining in a hospital room attached to medical equipment, he dreamed of trekking out into the wilderness with a treasure chest in tow to die outside under the stars, leaving clues to the whereabouts of both the treasure and his sun-bleached bones. But Fenn underwent cancer treatments and miraculously recovered. Years later, in 2010, at the age of 80, a healthy Fenn finally enacted part of his farewell fantasy by hiding the treasure chest deep in the Rocky Mountains.

Fenn then self-published a memoir, *The Thrill of the Chase*, for which he gathered up pieces of his life in pictures and short stories and organized them around one compelling theme: saying yes to the adventure of living. Near the end of the book, he

wrote a 24-line poem containing nine clues to the hidden treasure, sparking the imaginations of people all over the world with his opening stanzas:

As I have gone alone in there,
and with my treasures bold,
I can keep my secret where,
and hint of riches new and old.

Begin it where warm waters halt
and take it in the canyon down,
Not far, but too far to walk.
Put in below the home of Brown.

An estimated 300,000 people scoured the Rocky Mountains from New Mexico all the way to Montana in search of Fenn's treasure before it was found. For some, it was a fun adventure that gave friends and families an excuse to travel, hike, enjoy campfires, and have playful arguments while poring over topological maps. For others, the hunt became a tragic obsession. At least five people lost their lives looking for the hidden chest when they wandered too far into the backcountry, fell off cliffs, or froze in sudden snowstorms.

A Different Kind of Treasure

There is a different kind of treasure, though, that is worth risking one's life for. Rather than advising us to seek precious gemstones, Proverbs 2:3-6 redirects our passion and pursuit:

Indeed, if you call out for insight
and cry aloud for understanding,
and if you look for it as for silver
and search for it as for
hidden treasure,
then you will understand the fear
of the LORD
and find the knowledge of God.

For the LORD gives wisdom;
from his mouth come knowledge
and understanding.

Gold coins and gleaming jewels are glamorous, but they won't last, and their value rises and falls according to scarcity models and ever-changing world economics. But the wisdom that God offers will never go out of style. Its value does not depend on inflation or interest rates. Like Fenn's treasure, God's wisdom is hidden, but it can easily be found by anyone who passionately searches for it.

Wisdom in the Garden

Before we begin searching, it's important to understand our starting place. Look to the opening chapters of Genesis, where wisdom is at the center of an unfolding drama. Genesis 3:6 says:

When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree (of the knowledge of good and evil) was good for food and

pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it.

As created beings, humans are limited in nature and thus incapable of completely understanding the complexity and mystery of reality's many dimensions, including the moral dimension of knowing good and evil. Because we are limited creatures, God asks us to demonstrate our trust in him by not eating from this tree. Adam and Eve didn't trust God's goodness when asked to live within the healthy boundaries of their limited nature and thus plunged the whole world into sin.

Since then, God has been faithfully teaching us how to flourish. In the Scriptures, we are led on a wisdom journey through three important books: Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job. Our first steps begin in Proverbs, as it firmly establishes God's good lesson first given in the Garden of Eden.

Wisdom in Proverbs

The book of Proverbs lays a solid foundation for living a beautiful and flourishing life. The most famous verses, Proverbs 3:5-6, sum up the heart of the book and the collection of wisdom sayings contained within:

Trust in the LORD with all
your heart
and lean not on your own
understanding;
in all your ways submit to him,
and he will make your
paths straight.

Proverbs confidently states that life is straightforward: honor God by obeying God's commandments and good things will come to you. This might sound overly simplistic, but broadly, it is surprisingly true. When you make good decisions, good things are more

Will we trust
God's goodness
when life is
painfully unfair?

likely to come your way. When you make bad decisions, you're likely to experience tragedy and heartbreak.

Proverbs builds upon the garden instructions in Genesis and defines wisdom simply: life flourishes most when we look to God for guidance and diligently apply God's instruction to our lives, so living wisely means trusting God by putting into practice what God says. Proverbs is a clear path and a compass, establishing our sense of direction and guiding our feet as we move forward. However, we soon encounter a tricky descent that will lead us into a difficult and disorienting place.

Wisdom in Ecclesiastes

The book of Ecclesiastes takes a hard and honest look at life and says something that scares us, though we know it to be true: Life is neither simple nor straightforward. After careful observation, the writer of Ecclesiastes concludes that life is largely

unpredictable, beyond our control, and often unfair. Life is *hevel*.

Hevel is sometimes translated "meaningless," but a better translation is "vapor" or "mist." To say that life is *hevel* is to say we cannot hold on to anything in this life as final and lasting. Just when you think you have something of permanence, it's gone—like smoke. The writer of Ecclesiastes doesn't deny the wisdom of Proverbs but disturbingly says, "What's the point of being good if in the end, bad people still prosper and then everyone dies?" If we're brutally honest about our actual lived experience, we can't help but agree with the teacher in Ecclesiastes 9:11:

The race is not to the swift
or the battle to the strong,
nor does food come to the wise
or wealth to the brilliant
or favor to the learned;
but time and chance happen
to them all.

This is a hard but necessary message to swallow on the wisdom journey. If we want to discover the treasure that wisdom is, then we'll have to traverse the difficult descent of Ecclesiastes. We long to return to the simplicity of Proverbs, but the Scriptures will hold us here and have us navigate this tricky place a bit longer in another wisdom book called Job.

Wisdom in Job

In this book, Job is suffering, and no one knows why—not even Job. Job asserts his innocence, and the story clearly states that he has done nothing to deserve the calamity that has fallen on him and his family. Job is a living example of the combined wisdom of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes—a good person who obeys God and is suffering terribly for no apparent reason. His friends offer some explanations gleaned from Proverbs, but Job is lost in the valley of Ecclesiastes wisdom

and wants to hear directly from God about his *hevel*-like predicament.

God answers but never gives Job a reason for his suffering. Instead, God reaches down, pulls Job out of the dark valley, and takes him on a tour of the universe. Then God asks two very challenging questions:

Job, where were you when I created everything?

Do you understand how it works?

Job is quick to realize that he is guilty of trying to take “fruit” that is beyond the boundaries of his limited human understanding. In a posture of humility, he declares in chapter 42:

Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know. ... Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes.

The wisdom journey that has led us from the Garden of Eden to the broad path of Proverbs and through the descent of Ecclesiastes has now led us into a decisive fork in the road: Will we trust God’s goodness when life is painfully unfair?

In the opening chapter of James, the apostle is helping his fragile faith community wrestle with the same question. James tells the church to ask for wisdom (“If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God,” v. 5), but we often forget the larger context. James urges the church to ask for wisdom when they “face trials of many kinds” (James 1:2). Wisdom is needed because suffering sows seeds of doubt about God’s goodness, God’s love for his children, and God’s justice in handling the world’s affairs.

We all feel this dilemma deep in our bones. When suffering sows seeds of doubt in our hearts, pain persuades us to reach out beyond our human limitations to take hold of mysteries too great for us to comprehend. Instead of trusting God, we are tempted to become our own gods, reaching out to

grab and possess knowledge, control, and autonomy.

The Foolishness of Fenn

Jack Stuef, a 32-year-old medical student and Michigan native, became obsessed with finding Fenn’s treasure after he learned about it in 2018. For two years he thought about it every day as he read and researched everything Fenn had written and said, looking for additional clues. Stuef believed the key to finding the treasure was to discover the place where Fenn wished to die. In 2018, Stuef marked out a region that had been a favorite camping spot of Fenn’s when he was young. Then he began meticulously searching.

On June 6, 2020, Stuef found the treasure. Immediately he sent Fenn a picture of the weathered chest resting outside, sheltered in a nook in the wild expanse of Wyoming. Fenn announced the news on his website, confirming the find and declaring the treasure hunt over.

Three months after the treasure was found, Forrest Fenn, then 90, died. Two years later, Stuef sold the treasure to an auction house, which in turn sold 476 artifacts from the collection for a total of \$1.3 million. Nestled among the gold coins and gemstones was a small, wax-sealed glass jar that contained a miniature version of Fenn’s autobiography. In his 2010 memoir, Fenn said he included his story “because maybe the lucky finder would want to know a little about the foolish person who abandoned such an opulent cache.”


The Foolishness of God

Christ gave up the opulence of heaven to take on human flesh, suffer, and die on a cross. In the end, like Fenn, God appeared exceedingly foolish. But the generous love of Christ’s incarnation and death flipped foolishness on its head. It turns out that this kind of foolishness is in fact wisdom of the truest and deepest kind. In another garden—Gethsemane—with the cross casting a heavy shadow over his agonizing prayers, Christ does for humanity

what Adam and Eve failed to do: He laid down his own life and trusted in God’s wisdom.

Having become wisdom incarnate, Christ calls us to follow him in the thrilling adventure of embracing the foolishness of the cross, surrendering our lives in humility, and trusting that God faithfully and lovingly holds the universe in his hands. The wisdom lesson in the Garden of Eden, clarified in the cross and confirmed in the resurrection, is a return to a new kind of simplicity: trusting God and living within our limits as beloved creatures made of dust.

So when life falls apart, circumstances don’t make sense, our hearts are broken, and our dreams shattered, when we wake up and go to sleep with a heavy spirit and we can’t seem to find a way out or forward, the Spirit will guide us as we wade through the wisdom books, decipher puzzling clues in the prophets, and journey to Bethlehem to discover the rich cache of wisdom that is Christ.

Finding this treasure is not the end, but a new beginning as we answer the call to follow and even chase after Jesus on a sure path into the same kind of trusting foolishness that will turn out to be a treasure more precious than gold and thrilling in every sense of the word. 



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

1. If you could have, would you have joined in the hunt for Forrest Fenn’s treasure? Why or why not?
2. Which of these three biblical books—Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, or Job—resonates most with you? Why?

READ MORE ONLINE

What Is It About the Country Church?

It's more than dust, dampness, and polished pews.



Gene Bradbury is a retired Lutheran pastor who lives and writes from Sequim, Wash. He has served parishes for 40 years, many in rural areas. He writes for magazines and journals and self-publishes poetry and children's books that can be found at genegbradbury.com.

MY MEMORIES lie somewhere between sleepiness and wakefulness. Many came back to me on a recent visit to a country church. I wandered through the old sanctuary and the Sunday school rooms. I found the pastor's office near the altar. The door was open, its absent tenant unconcerned about intruders. I felt immediately at home there among the book-lined shelves.

It was there the question arose like incense: What is it about a country church that quiets the spirit? The building itself had little to recommend it other than its simplicity. Country churches are often small, as are their congregations. In these rural communities, a few faithful worshipers still attend according to the pattern set by parents and grandparents.

Entering the church, I smell the musty hymnals and the citrusy polish applied to the pews. My eyes are drawn to the tile floor, worn down by many feet. The carpet down the center aisle is tattered and torn.

A damp odor greets me as I descend the stairs to the basement. Entering the kitchen, I pause to wonder at the gallons of coffee served from the large urns on the counter. How many bowls of potluck Jell-O have passed through these serving windows? I seem to taste the memories.

In the fellowship hall, I feel the hot breath of the furnace. Long tables, heavy and covered with old linoleum, stand in review, awaiting arrangements of plastic flowers to make them more welcoming.

The kitchen itself needs new appliances. Generations have lit the old stove. The counters are clean, but surface cracks show their age. The cupboards have been painted far too many times. Porcelain plates, cups, and saucers wait on papered shelves, too good to throw out.

I recall people walking overhead as they leave after worship. The door of

the sacristy squeaks open as the pastor enters to take off his robe. He will sit a minute before coming downstairs. His study is warm and quiet. He looks out the window at the graveyard and remembers the words of hope and resurrection he has pronounced beside the graves. Those buried there once worshiped here too and sang the same hymns the congregation sang today. They too drank coffee after the service and ate open-faced sandwiches.

What is it about a country church? It's more than dust, dampness, and polished pews. It's more than coffee and Jell-O, more than a cramped pastor's office with outdated furnishings. What is it about a country church?

I confess I can't really say. Perhaps it is the spirit of place that follows me between the gravestones as I think about the sermon I'll be preaching today. The quiet invites me to ponder the years spent and the years ahead. I peer down the hill and out over the farmland. Families will soon be walking up the path to the church.

My thoughts move to the words I will say, gathered from books I have read. I think of the conversations in the café and in homes I have visited.

"Good morning, pastor," the first arrivals say.

What is it about a country church? Can I say? The answer lies somewhere between sleepiness and wakefulness. Many country churches are closing their doors. But I hope not all. I would like to think there are still pastors opening the rural churches to turn on the lights and turn up the heat. I would like to think there are pastors sitting quietly before the service begins to look over their sermon one last time.

I might have lived some of this history. I am hopeful that others will experience the spirit of place. **B**

Lust Feeds Shame; Jesus Feeds Love

In order to find the light, we must be willing to enter the darkness.



Travis Jamieson is the pastor of Palo Alto Christian Reformed Church in Palo Alto, Calif. He serves alongside his wife, Annie, and together they have two children.

STARTING A NEW MINISTRY position at a church can be daunting. Preaching on the topic of lust can be awkward. No preacher wants to do both at the same time.

A couple of weeks into my new role, I was asked to preach a sermon as part of a series on the seven deadly sins. As the new guy on the team, I was eager to do my part, but then I found out the deadly sin of lust was the sermon topic for my Sunday.

Lust is a tough topic for preachers, especially for those who grew up in the evangelical purity culture of the 1990s and early 2000s. I was taught to save sex for marriage, avoid pornography, and remember that even a lustful thought was like committing adultery in my heart. If I was able to live up to these standards, I'd eventually find the perfect wife and together we'd have a blissful marriage. But after growing up, getting married, and seeking to live in purity, I found the reality was more difficult than purity culture made it out to be. In fact, I carried deep shame about who I was because of my failure to live a pure life.

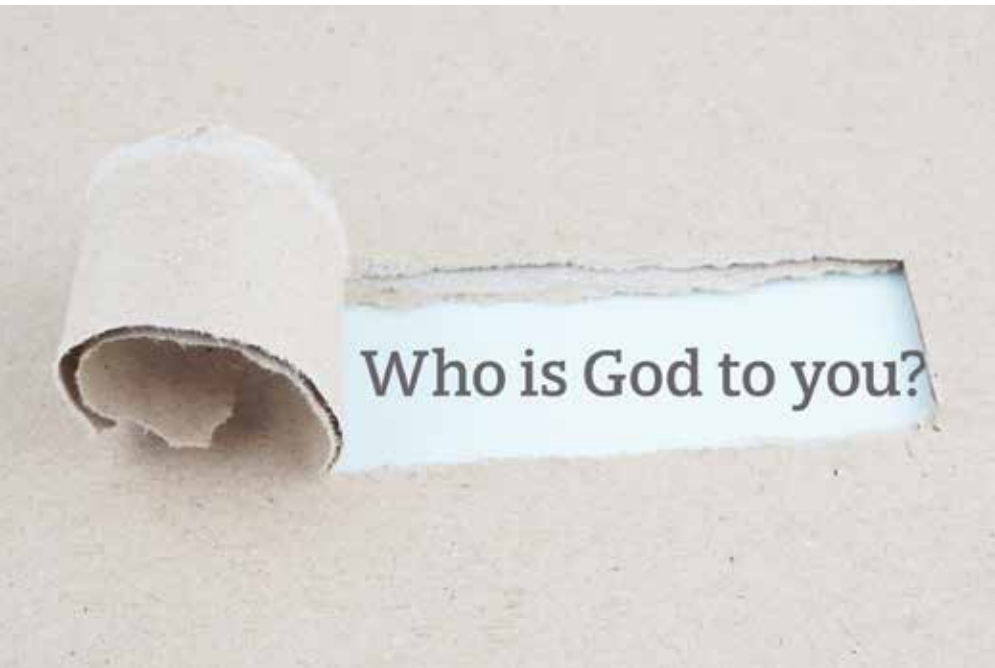
I was taught only what I *wasn't* supposed to do. I was never equipped with the emotional and spiritual tools I needed to embrace a healthy sexuality. I was ashamed of myself, and I thought God was ashamed of me too. It would be years before I'd let go of that shame and embrace the God of grace and love in Jesus Christ.

In the week leading up to my sermon, I was out in the parish visiting congregants. Without fail, they all mentioned the topic I had to tackle. Along with a hearty chuckle, however, they were sympathetic about the task ahead of me. I appreciated their empathy and often responded, "At least it's a universal topic."

Lust is universal. In the purity culture days, lust was treated as a male-only issue. This is simply not true. Sure, there are young boys who become addicted to pornography, but there are also middle-aged women who fantasize about their colleagues, young adults who use dating apps to hook up for a night, fathers (or mothers) who have affairs, grandfathers who have hidden stacks of *Playboys*, and teenage girls who get into a cycle of sexting. The "lust list" goes on and on.

I recognize that lust is not something we like to be honest about, especially within the walls of the church. That's not to say Christians never talk about the issue. In fact, if purity culture is any evidence, Christians sometimes obsess about it. Yet finding a Christian community that is vulnerable and also continually gracious is challenging. In her book *Glittering Vices*, Calvin University philosopher Rebecca Konyndyk DeYoung writes, "Surrender, vulnerability, intimacy, and dependence are the hard road we resist taking at all costs. Insisting on independence and creating a false form of happiness for ourselves signal lust's prideful roots" (p. 200). Vulnerability is like a common cold: We just want to avoid it, especially when it means being honest about our unwanted sexual behavior.

I wonder if our fear of being vulnerable with others stems from a fear of being vulnerable with God. I remember the day my therapist asked me, "Who is God to you?" As a lifelong church member, I knew theologically that God was love, but deep within me, God was something else. After years of feeling profound shame, my lived theology communicated that God thought little of me and that the thoughts God did have were angry and shaming. The truth is, I was afraid of God. I hadn't experienced the loving Jesus who




meets the woman at the well (John 4) or the Jesus who makes breakfast for a friend who had betrayed him just days before (John 21). I had done what the German theologian Karl Barth had fought so hard to stop among the theological liberals of his day: I was starting with my human experience and plastering it onto God. I felt ashamed and had been shamed by others, so I assumed God must be ashamed of me as well. However, as Barth emphasized in his day, I needed to start letting God define what God feels toward me. The best place for me to discover what God thinks about me, Barth said, is to look at Jesus Christ.

Jesus is never ashamed of sinners. It is the sick who need a doctor, not the healthy. On the cross, Jesus took not only our sin, but also our shame, and he put them to death. In his resurrection, Jesus raised up a humanity worthy of love. No longer do we need to feel shame in God's presence. He became shame so that we can be fully loved.

Author, pastor, and therapist Jay Stringer developed a survey of more than 100 questions to collect data from people struggling with sexual behavior they wished to stop. More than 3,800 men and women participated in his study. Stringer's research showed that our sexual struggles are not random. In his book *Unwanted: How Sexual Brokenness Reveals Our Way to Healing*, Stringer says, "There are always reasons (for our behavior). If you want to find freedom, it begins by identifying your specific reasons." Discovering those reasons will require a willingness to engage the pain of our lives, Stringer says, but the payoff is immense: "One evening of deliberate curiosity (of the reasons) for your sexual fantasies will tame you further into transformation than a thousand

nights of prayerful despair." In order to find the light, we must be willing to enter the darkness.

When we are secure in Jesus' love, we can begin to hear his invitation to be curious about our lust. We don't need to cover up our sin because Jesus' unconditional love is the safest place for us to explore the depths of our pain. As Henri Nouwen writes in *Life of the Beloved*, "The first step towards healing is not a step away from the pain, but a step towards it" (p. 94). The pain might feel overwhelming, but the God who has experienced the worst of this world is right there with us.

God made us for love, but when we don't feel worthy of love or are not receiving love, we will go searching for it in the wrong places. As DeYoung says, "Lust looks best when we are most starved for love." Lust serves us by filling a void that should be filled with love. God has opened a way in Jesus Christ to meet our needs. We can enjoy our sexuality in gratitude as a gift from God. As we know and are known, as we love and are loved, we can ultimately find this need met in the knowledge and love of God and in the body of Jesus Christ. 

1. What does "purity culture" mean to you? How do you understand the teachings and practices of purity culture?
2. What do you know about the sin of lust? What do you think of how churches or Christians have generally handled this topic?

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

Excavating Wikipedia for Fun and Profit

THIS WHOLE “social-media mogul” thing started with Annie Rauwerda being captivated by a Wikipedia entry about cow tipping—“the purported activity of sneaking up on any unsuspecting or sleeping upright cow and pushing it over for entertainment,” according to the internet’s massive user-curated encyclopedia.

What actually grabbed her were the entry’s photos and captions: “Cows routinely lie down to sleep,” the caption reads, under a photo of a slumbering bovine.

Another: “A healthy cow lying on her side is not immobilized; she can rise whenever she chooses,” it proclaims under a picture of a cow lying down with her head raised.

Rauwerda mines the weirdest, most absurd, and oddly fascinating Wikipedia entries for her project *Depths of Wikipedia*, a group of social media accounts on Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter. Her nearly two million followers include singers John Mayer and Troye Sivan and actors Olivia Wilde and Jesse Eisenberg.

Rauwerda, who grew up in Grand Rapids, Mich., and is a member of Cascade Fellowship Christian Reformed Church, says her curiosity and sense of wonder was cultivated at home, at church, and as a student at Grand Rapids Christian Schools.

“In Christian school, I was always interested in morality, in right and wrong, but I never felt indoctrinated,” she said. “The teachers were focused on getting students like me to think for themselves.”


After graduating high school, Rauwerda took a gap year in Chicago through Americorps, tutoring young students in math and science. In 2019 she started a neuroscience degree at the University of Michigan, where

she contributed a page to a friend’s zine project during the COVID quarantine. “My page was all these weird Wikipedia things,” she said.

She began to post oddities from Wikipedia on her Instagram page, which got a major boost when internet celebrity and influencer Caroline Calloway posted some of the content on her stories. “It snowballed from there,” Rauwerda said.

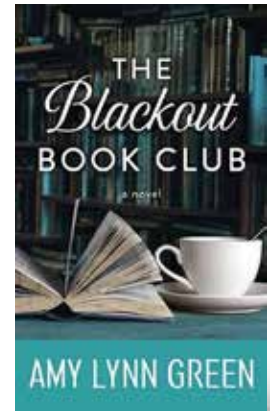
With more than 55 million Wikipedia entries, the 23-year-old has her work cut out for her as she tries to curate the strangest and most obscure articles. “The first thing to blow my mind was an entry about sexually active popes,” she said. Other topics she’s highlighted include exploding trousers, water pie, “chess on a really big board,” and a recipe for toast sandwiches, which calls for “two pieces of bread with toast in the middle.” Her hilarious captions make the entries even funnier.

Since graduating from Michigan in the spring of 2022, Rauwerda has made a living from gigs related to *Depths of Wikipedia*. She has a full schedule of live stand-up shows booked, and she has given workshops on editing Wikipedia pages.

“It’s fun to be curious,” Rauwerda said. “I always think about the *New York Times*’ slogan ‘All the News That’s Fit to Print.’ There’s no way that’s all the news that’s fit to print, because the world is full of all these crazy stories. There is so much wonder out there.” 



Lorilee Craker, a native of Winnipeg, Man., lives in Grand Rapids, Mich. The author of 15 books, she is the Mixed Media editor of *The Banner*. Find her on Instagram @thebooksellers daughter or on her podcast *Eat Like a Heroine*.



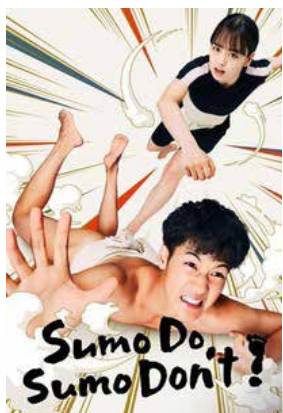
The Blackout Book Club

By Amy Lynn Green

Reviewed by Sonya VanderVeen Feddema

When Avis Montgomery’s brother, the local librarian, leaves to serve in Europe in 1942, he asks her to promise to keep the library open. Avis, who doesn’t like to read anything but magazine articles, assures him that she will. But when the library’s owner threatens to shut down the library, Avis impulsively starts a book club for the community that will meet at the library.

Book club members Avis, Louise, Ginny, and Martina face their own inner battles, but when the threat of nearby U-boat attacks intensifies and the war seems ever closer, the four hesitantly but surely begin to share the contours of their past and present lives, and their emotional burdens are lightened as they are carried in community. (Bethany House Publishers)

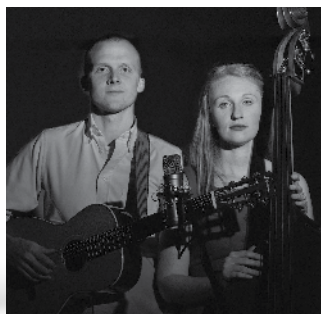


Sumo Do, Sumo Don't

Reviewed by Sara Kyoungah White

Based on the award-winning 1992 Japanese film of the same title, this 2022 comedy drama television series follows Ryota Moriyama, a senior at Kyoritsu University who joins the school's sumo club so he can graduate on time. The formerly well-known club is now on the brink of collapse and has only one member, a female student named Honoka Oba. Over the course of the series, the club grows in membership to include an unlikely but charming cast.

If you don't mind reading subtitles and seeing men clothed only in mawashi, *Sumo Do, Sumo Don't* will stand out as a refreshingly wholesome series that champions the underdog and inspires us toward greater perseverance, devotion, and community. (Disney+)



Poor Bishop Hooper

Reviewed by Sam Gutierrez

Leah and Jessie Roberts searched for a creative and memorable band name that pointed to Jesus in some way. A friend suggested Poor Bishop Hooper, after Bishop John Hooper, an Anglican bishop who was martyred in 1555.

Over the years, what started out a simple musical duo has developed into a multifaceted performance experience that has included a full band, a multimedia version of the Stations of the Cross (*Golgotha Experience*), a collection of art and music for Advent (*Firstborn*), and a three-year pandemic project where they wrote new tunes for all 150 psalms and released them on YouTube.

Through their lives and music, they embody the passion, love, and simplicity of the Anglican bishop from whom they derive their name—Poor Bishop Hooper. (Poorbishophooper.com)



Black Adam

Reviewed by LeMarr Jackson

Black Adam's people were severely mistreated, and they needed someone to set them free—not unlike the story of Moses and the Israelites.

But superhero Black Adam (Dwayne Johnson) is flawed, and his idea of justice at first is synonymous with revenge. His actions also lack direction—so much so that his people aren't sure whether to revere Adam or fear him.

However, Adam tries to carry on the legacy of the chosen one who sacrificed his life for him and gave him his power. He begins to find a new direction. Where he once sought revenge, he now commits to using his power to defend the oppressed people of Khandaq. "Khandaq has always had heroes. And it still does," Adam says. "What it needs now is a protector." (Amazon Prime, HBO Max, Hulu)

The Lowdown

Growing Up

Evangelical: In *Testimony*, Jon Ward tells the engaging story of his upbringing in and eventual break from an influential evangelical church. Ward sheds light on the evangelical movement's troubling political and cultural dimensions, tracing the ways in which the Jesus People movement became politically captive rather than prophetic. (Brazos)

Are You There God? It's

Me, Margaret: In the big-screen adaptation of Judy Blume's classic coming-of-age book, 11-year-old Margaret (Abby Ryder Fortson) is uprooted from her life in New York City and moves with her family to the New Jersey suburbs, where she goes through the throes of puberty with new friends in a new school. (Lionsgate, in theaters April 28)

Olivia Colman Plays

Miss Havisham: In a new Hulu series, Charles Dickens' 1861 book *Great Expectations* comes to life in the story of Pip, an orphan who yearns for a greater lot in life. (Hulu, March 26)

A Symphony of Secrets:

A gripping page-turner about a professor who discovers that the most famous American composer of all time stole his music from a young Black composer named Josephine Reed. By Brendan Slocumb, author of *The Violin Conspiracy*. (April 18, Anchor Books)

Always Be Ready

What—or who—
unites us is far
more important
than our
differences.

TO BE A CHRISTIAN means to follow Jesus into the world as an ambassador of God's reign. This involves our lifestyle and our language. There will be times when we have to explain our ultimate allegiance to Jesus rather than to the many idols others are infatuated with. So what does it mean to always be ready to give an answer (1 Pet. 3:15)?

For a long time I thought the apostle Peter was issuing a mandate for aggressive apologetics—that we must always be telling people that “Jesus is the answer.” But then I looked at the verse's context, and this helped me understand the snarky bumper sticker that asks Christians, “What's the question?”

Peter quotes two Old Testament passages in this part of his letter: Psalm 34, which invites us to praise the Lord at all times because the Lord is the great rescuer, and Isaiah 8, which speaks about being faithful to God in the midst of rebelliousness that inevitably leads to suffering. Then I recognized it: Peter is writing to Christians suffering because of their unwavering loyalty to Jesus, encouraging them to have clearly sorted out the reasons why they've chosen their way of living out their faith.


Understood in this context, Peter is saying that when our faith in Jesus causes us to suffer for the good we persist in doing in the world, we will attract critical questions about why we continue to hope in Jesus when it looks like our faith doesn't work in the real world. “Why endure unnecessary suffering for your odd faith?” is the question Peter says we should be ready to answer.

Peter knows there will be those who think, “Just go with the flow; your life will be easier.” Peter responds with encouragement to be clear—to

ourselves and to others—how our countercultural lifestyle is part of God's worldwide redemptive mission.

Often this advice comes from fellow Christians, not unbelievers. This is why Peter goes on in this passage to write about the importance of bearing with each other sympathetically and loving each other with compassion and humility. In closing this section, Peter reminds us that we all share a common baptism into one Lord. What—or who—unites us is far more important than our differences.

This passage becomes all the more relevant to our life and faith today when we recognize the situation Peter was originally addressing. We also live in a world with various ways of understanding and living out our faith. Some Christian lifestyles reduce the tension with the surrounding culture; others accentuate the differences. Within the Christian community today there are deep differences leading to mutual suspicion, and we question each other: “Why are you living out your faith like *that*?”

Our tendency is to split the church over differences, but Peter encourages unity through talking with each other through and about these differences. His words assume that each Christian will have done the difficult work of sorting out between themselves and Jesus how they're going to live out their faith and why. Peter knows that our Christian unity does not depend on our complete agreement with each other. Our unity comes from our common baptism into Christ, which means that we are called—all the more when we encounter differences—to put love, compassion, and humility toward each other into practice. It is in how we respond to disagreements and questions, suffused with the fruit of the Spirit, that we can stand before the Lord Jesus with a clear conscience. 



Michael Wagenman is campus minister at Western University in London, Ont. He is a member at Redeemer Christian Reformed Church in Sarnia, Ont.

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

Down

- 1. Open Doors International monitors Christian _____
- 2. A 19th century theologian
- 4. First name of the man who created a treasure hunt in 2010
- 5. Room where the pastor puts on the clerical robe
- 7. The way of Jesus
- 8. Olivia Colman plays Miss _____ in Hulu's *Great Expectations*
- 9. An herb in the celery family
- 13. Annie _____ runs Depths of Wikipedia
- 15. Lust feeds this

Across

- 3. A New Testament book
- 6. Sidewalk art in Lynden, Wash., depicts _____ of the Cross
- 10. Norma VanderMolen says reaching her grandchildren started with _____
- 11. It's for everyone
- 12. This church baptized seven new Chinese believers last summer
- 14. What we should be ready to give
- 15. _____ *Do*, _____ *Don't*, a comedy television series from Japan
- 16. Resonate _____ Mission
- 17. Being food _____ means not having ready access to healthy, nutritious food

Answers to the
February 2023 puzzle



What do people not know about your ministry job?

Hey church and ministry workers in the CRC!

What do others not know about your ministry job?

Our *Banner* team is wondering about the work you do. Do you find fellow church members misunderstand what's involved in being a nursery coordinator, youth pastor, summer camp director, hospitality lead, senior pastor, head cadet counselor, or any other church or ministry function? Drop us a line at info@thebanner.org to tell us what no one understands about your ministry job. Your response might be selected for an upcoming feature. Thanks for your help!

DEADLINES: Ads for the May issue are due April 3, 2023; June issue: May 8, 2023. Subject to availability. Details online at thebanner.org/classifieds, or for display ads see thebanner.org/ads. Advertising in *The Banner* does not imply editorial endorsement.

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

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

Congregational Announcements

URGENT NEED FOR ENGLISH BIBLES! In communities around the world, believers outnumber Bibles 300 to 1! You could be an answer to their prayer by donating Bibles today! We will accept any translation in any condition. English Bibles needed for English speaking believers. Please call/text Jess at Project Bible Runners: 217-273-9497 or email her at: projectbiberunners@gmail.com for more information.

Denominational Announcements

NATIONAL DAY OF PRAYER (U.S.) In May 1988 the President of the United States signed into law a bill establishing the first Thursday of May as a National Day of Prayer—when people from different faiths are called to pray for the United States and its leaders. This year the National Day of Prayer falls on Thursday, May 4. The synod of the CRC has urged churches in the United States “to observe faithfully any national day of prayer which the United States President publicizes to the nation” (Acts of Synod 1969). “Our churches must be open to our congregations and our fellow [citizens] on such occasions, when God in his providence leads those in civil authority to call our citizenry to prayer. We must pray for and with our country” (Acts of Synod 1958). Zachary King, general secretary of the CRCNA

Church Positions Available

CALVARY CRC IN OTTAWA, ONTARIO is seeking a full-time Pastor. Please visit our website www.calvarycra.ca for a full job description and our Church Profile.

DIRECTOR OF MUSIC/WORSHIP 15 to 30 hours/week, negotiable. Strong relational, musical and coordination abilities desired. Contact Mary Jelsema, Church Administrator, at 616-4533105 or Mary@westviewcra.org

EBENEZER CRC (Jarvis ON Canada) is prayerfully seeking a full time Pastor to partner with and lead in teaching, equipping and empowering us to share God's saving grace. Send your letter of interest to: rayvmolen@gmail.com

FULL TIME PASTOR Sully Christian Reformed Church, in Sully, IA, is seeking a full-time pastor, who is passionate about preaching the Word of God and engaging with a multi-generational congregation. Sully is located in South Central Iowa, a small community surrounded by a beautiful rural setting, within easy driving distance to many larger communities. If interested, please send email to sullycrasearch@gmail.com.

FULL-TIME ASSOCIATE PASTOR Modesto, CRC, Modesto, CA seeks an Associate Pastor to lead discipleship and disciple making ministries, administration and pastoral care. Contact in confidence janiceviss@sbcglobal.net

HIRING WORSHIP LEADER Talbot Street Church is seeking a gifted musician, vocalist & worship leader to help us live into our engaging worship core value. A successful candidate will not only have musical talent, they will demonstrate a passion for leading volunteers towards excellence and embrace the mission of Talbot Street Church to invite people to find & follow Jesus. Click the link at the top of our website at talbotstreetchurch.com

LEAD PASTOR POSITION Cornerstone Church in Pella, IA is looking for our next lead pastor. Visit our website cornerstonepella.org for more information. To apply send resume to pastorsearch@cornerstonepella.org

LEAD PASTOR The First Christian Reformed Church in Sioux Falls, SD is seeking a Lead Pastor. We desire a pastor who is able to lead us in discipling believers, challenge us with new ways of reaching our community, strengthen the faith of the faithful, and expose the gospel to both newcomers and mature Christians. Interested candidates are encouraged to review our Church Profile, Lead Pastor job description, and information on how to apply including other valuable information on our website, <https://firstchristianreformed.org/>. Specific questions can be emailed to the Lead Pastor Search Committee at Search@FirstChristianReformed.org.

NEW HOPE CRC in Spokane, WA, is seeking a full-time, sole pastor to preach the Word of God faithfully, to disciple and nurture our members, and for community outreach. Church profile and job description are available at <https://network.crcna.org/job/full-time-sole-pastor-new-hope-crc-spokane-wa>

PART TIME YOUTH DIRECTOR 24 to 30 hours, depending on applicant skills and availability. Middle and HS youth activities and spiritual formation. Please contact Mary Jelsema, Church Administrator at 616-4533105 or Mary@westviewcra.org

Birthdays

BIRTHDAY 100 YEARS

HELENA SWIERENGA, formally of Prinsburg MN will be celebrating her 100th birthday on April 19th. We are so grateful for her lifetime of Christian example and generous hospital-

ity. Birthday greetings can be mailed to 1125 9th St. SE Apt. 105 Willmar MN 56201.

BIRTHDAY 95 YEARS



RUTH VAN GROUW-BANDSTRA will celebrate 95 years of God's faithfulness on April 27. Birthday blessings can be mailed to her at 2105 Raybrook SE, #4046, Grand Rapids, MI 49546.

BIRTHDAY 90 YEARS

JEAN GOEMAN April 20 - Celebrate 90 years of God's faithfulness to Jean. Our loving mom, grandma, sister, friend. Send cards to 95 Old Mill Dr #8 Holland MI 49423

Obituaries

NICHOLS, Arlene (De Jong) passed from this earth to her heavenly home on Feb 10th, 2023. Predeceased by her parents, Herman and Catherine De Jong (Peoria, IA and Grand Rapids, MI). Survived by her sister Pat De Jong (Salt Lake City, UT), brother Marion (Linda) De Jong (Byron Center, MI) and sister Rose (Ken) Vander Ark (Oro Valley, AZ). She leaves behind 3 children, 7 grandchildren and 1 great grandchild.

VAN DYK, Ralph (age 91) passed away on February 14, 2023. He is survived by his wife of 66 years Mary (née Wierda), children Sandi and Bruce Ornee, Terry and Julie, Mike and Debbie, David and Rachel, and Nancy and Bryan Westra, 15 grandchildren, and 16 great grandchildren. His family thanks God for our dad's long life of service to Him.



VANDER NAALD, Ben, age 94, of 400 w. Butterfield Rd., Apt 404, Elmhurst, IL 60126. Beloved husband of Theresia Vander Naald, nee DeGroot and the late Jantina, nee Hoogsteen; loving father of Henrietta (Kenneth) Huizinga, Edith (Eelke) Veenstra, Henry (Rebecca) Vander Naald, Herman (Cynthia) Vander Naald, Theodore (Laurie) Vander Naald, Gary (Lisa) Vander Naald, the late Ronald Vander Naald; devoted grandfather of 18; great-grandfather of 25; fond brother of Stella Greninger, the late Reinhardt Vander Naald, the late Fred Vander Naald, and the late Theresa Mays; uncle of many nieces and nephews. Visitation Thursday March 2nd,

from 3-7PM at Knollcrest Funeral Home, 1500 S. Meyers Road Lombard, IL 60148. Funeral Service 10AM at Faith CRC. Interment Fairview Memorial Cemetery. Memorials to Faith CRC Education Fund, 1070 S Prospect Ave, Elmhurst, IL 60126 are appreciated.

VANDERVEER, Edward Imke. 1939 - 2023. Surrounded by his family, Ed went to Christ his Saviour on February 11. Ed will be missed by his wife Hennie, children Jack (Anita), Mary-Ann (Jeff) and Michael plus 5 grandchildren and 6 great-grandchildren. Ed volunteered in support of children and youth, housing-challenged persons, the Christian Reformed Church in North America and First Nations - settler reconciliation. Ed became a valued friend wherever he went.

Employment

NEW LIFE RECOVERY MINISTRIES TEAM POSITIONS With a new campus set to open summer of 2023 in Belleville Ontario, Full-time positions available for an individual and Christian couple to join the team ministering to women struggling with addiction. Staff family home available on site. See <https://newlifecanada.org/make-an-impact/> email: martin@newlifecanada.org

TRUCK DRIVERS Zeeland greenhouse looking for motivated CDL A & B drivers for deliveries. Get paid well by the HOUR, not the mile! Drivers rewarded for dedication & hard work. Full time position for April & May, and into June, also opportunities in the fall. Be home on Sunday, some Saturdays may be required. All expenses - trucks, fuel, tolls, hotel (if required), are covered by the company, not the driver. Retired? Great extra income if you have a current CDL, medical certificate, and good driving record. Contact Amy: 616-875-7211 for info or @ Meadowridge: 8952 Tyler St. in Zeeland

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CARING FOR AGING PARENTS? Visiting Angels has been providing in-home assisted living for 15 years in West Michigan. Trish Borgdorff and her multitude of Angels offer meal prep, light housekeeping, run errands, provide transportation to appointments, and joyful companionship. Whether you need a few hours a day or up to 24-hour care for assisted independence in your home, call Visiting Angels at 616-243-7080.

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REMODELING? Call Ken DeVries today for a free estimate on windows or kitchen/bath renovation. 616-457-5880. Since 1985. www.homework-construction.com

TOP DOLLAR REAL-ESTATE SALES Need to buy or sell a home or condo? B. DeVries, M. Pruis, D. VredeVeld, M. Breemer, A.VanderMeer and others recommend Pam Patterson, Midwest Properties ERA West Michigan for buying and selling. Would you like to get top dollar for your home? I have affordable resources that can help you do that. Full service and Low Fee options available. Call or Txt 616-617-4874, Email-psp56@sbcglobal.net Corp.ofc#616-364-8831.



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Debra Freeberg & Gary Schmidt

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May 22 – Jun 2 | *Dr. Jeffrey A.D. Weima*

MUSICAL TOUR OF AUSTRIA
with the Traverse Symphony Orchestra
Jun 12 – Jun 20 | *Dick & Candice Wallace*

BEST OF IRELAND
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He Blesses Before He Breaks

It is difficult to give up one's own desires—to be broken, in a way, for others.



Michelle VanderMeer lives in Whitby, Ont. She currently works full time at her church, Zion Christian Reformed Church, in the areas of ministry and administration.

IT IS A FAMOUS STORY, one depicted in both stained-glass windows and the colorful pages of children's books: the story of Jesus feeding multitudes with a little boy's lunch.

Motivational speakers use the tale to remind us of what Jesus can do. Do you feel as if you have little to give? In the hands of Jesus, five loaves and two fishes can feed thousands. Just put your life in Jesus' hands, and he will do abundantly more than you can imagine.

Yet I struggle with this story. Some of the gospels place it after two events: John the Baptist's beheading—a loss that would have deeply affected Jesus and his followers—and the disciples' return from their ministry trips. Mark paints a vivid picture: "Then, because so many people were coming and going that they did not even have a chance to eat, he said to them, 'Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest'" (Mark 6:31).

Then Jesus sees the crowds and has compassion.

I can imagine being in the disciples' shoes: ready to leave, exhausted and hungry, and then catching a glimpse of Jesus' face. "No, please, not this time!" they beg. "Just turn away and let them deal with their own problems and rumbling stomachs." Self-pity and resentment clash with Jesus' compassion. Though their hands serve the baskets of bread, their heart is angry and hard. The miracle is missed.

I've reacted similarly when Jesus' compassion and the prompting of the Spirit ask me to serve when I just want to rest and be comfortable. It's difficult to give up one's own desires—to be broken, in a way, for others—even when it means you take part in a divine miracle.

Yet here is the sweetest part of the story: Jesus blessed and gave thanks for the bread before he broke it. He didn't bless the baskets of bread that fed the multitude, but the humble five loaves and two fishes that the little boy brought. Before Jesus began his official ministry, the Father blessed him: "This is my son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased" (Matt. 3:17). Jesus too blesses us before he breaks us. In his hands our broken pieces press up against the wounds in his palms, for he suffered first. He was broken and given for me—for us—first.

In the world of missions and church leadership and in myself, I have seen a tendency to overspiritualize the sacrifice of duty—to give and love and serve until you are dry and empty, and then to do it a bit more. It sounds so holy, like the poured-out offering Paul mentions (Phil. 2:17). If the disciples forgo rest to serve at Jesus' request, we reason, so should we! But we become so focused on trying to bless that we forget the blessing that is ours—the blessing that was ours before we did a single thing. God speaks over us: "Beloved, the one with whom I am well pleased." That's not for what we have done or will do, but because of who we are in Christ. Maybe that knowledge is what keeps us going, as it kept Jesus going even when weary. It is not duty, but the blessing of love that propels us to serve. Then we get to become communion bread for the world, a way for people to meet the Savior with the pierced hands who always blesses before he breaks. **B**

Easter Joy

Were those angels
giddy with joy
as they shared
the news, like
Vernon was each
Easter morning?

MY BROTHER Vernon had Down syndrome. Vernon loved Jesus with all his heart.

Every year during the weeks and days approaching Easter, Vern would start to get touchy and cranky—“owly,” as our mom would say. He seemed uncharacteristically sad much of the time, and he would talk a lot about the people who hurt Jesus. He would ask about Jesus getting nailed to the cross. Vern seemed to need to process the crucifixion story over and over. He would bring it up repeatedly, often ending with a shake of his head and the comment “Can’t do that”—Vernon’s phrase of disapproval.


After a few years of this, it occurred to me that maybe Vern thought Jesus was getting tortured and crucified every year—and rising from the dead every year. In case this was true, I did my best to help him understand that the crucifixion happened long ago and that at Easter every year we were simply remembering it. Each year I would try a different approach, doing my best to let Vern know this was not happening right now. I don’t think he ever understood that, and every year, he would be out of sorts before Easter.



Helen Sybesma Andringa taught in Christian schools in Colorado, Arizona, and Illinois. Now retired, she enjoys being a full-time grandma and volunteer. She and her husband live in Bettendorf, Iowa, where they are members of Christ Family Church.

But then: Easter. No one I know was happier about Easter than Vernon. Every year on Easter morning, he would get downright giddy, telling everyone, “Jesus is alive!” and “He’s not dead anymore!” One Easter morning on the way to church he giggled and told us, “I saw Jesus this morning! He’s alive!” (Maybe on a TV special?)

Sitting in church that Sunday morning, listening once again to the Easter story from the gospel of Luke, I visualized the angels telling the women that Jesus was no longer in the tomb, that he had risen from the dead. As I pictured the angels calmly imparting this information to the women, I began to wonder: Is that what it looked like? Or were those angels giddy with joy as they shared the news, like Vernon was every Easter morning? The angels sang at his birth; did they also celebrate his resurrection with song? Was there giggling, and were there exclamations among themselves of “Jesus is alive!”? Did “the angels roar for Christ the King”?

Vernon is now living in the presence of Jesus. He no longer frets that the Jesus he loves is being tortured and crucified. Here on earth, every Easter, I am reminded of Vern’s great Easter joy. And I thank God for my brother’s example. 



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I am a child of God. ~ Chenda

I feel God with me. ~ Sytha



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