

# BANNER

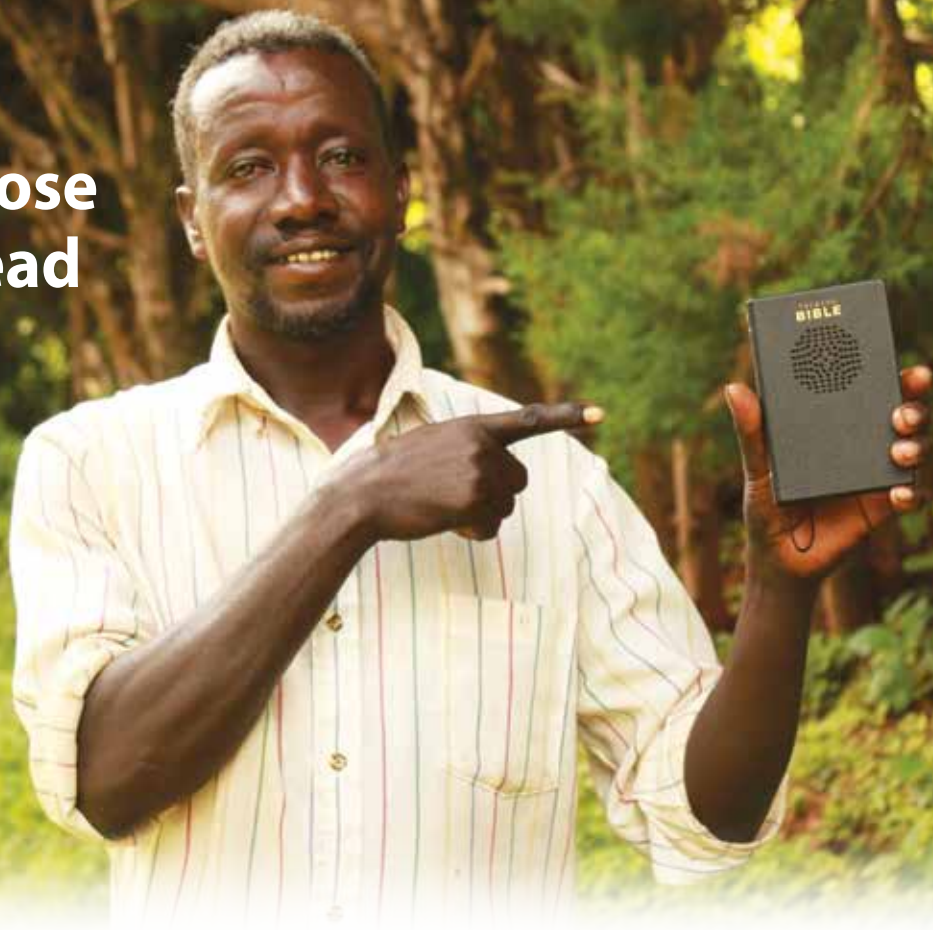
JUNE 2023

THE BANNER.ORG

A close-up photograph of two hands clasped together in a firm grip. The hands are positioned in the center of the frame, with the fingers interlocked. The background is dark and filled with numerous small, bright white specks, resembling a starry night sky or a microscopic view of particles. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting the texture of the skin and the tension in the muscles.

Culture  
War-ification  
of the CRC

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# New Media for New Christians

"Please pray for the people of my village, because they object to me sharing the Word of God with others. Whenever I talk to any person in my village, people of other faiths look at me with suspicion. They stop me from talking to people and persecute me. They behave very rudely and do not allow my family to take water from the village hand pump. They threaten me to ostracize me and my family from the village. It is very difficult to share the Good News of Jesus Christ here."

—Manoj

Your prayers, along with those of your partners in India helped Manoj and his family get through this painful time. About one month later, Manoj called our Hindi ministry partners to share that people in his village were no longer harassing him, and that their hearts were softening. Praise God!

You can reach people like Manoj!  
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is the new name of  
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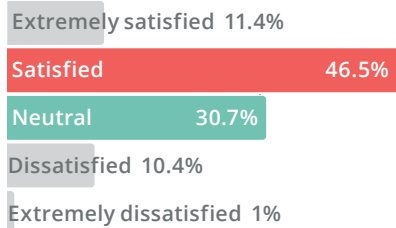
# BANNER

## BY THE NUMBERS

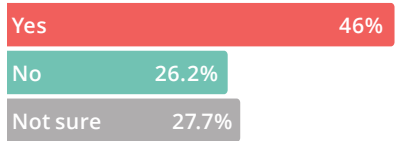
Since 2019 the CRCNA has been trying again to ‘re-imagine’ ministry shares—the money collected from member churches to pay for the running of the denomination and the ministries we hold in common. Instead of synod requesting a per-member amount, congregations can pledge what they like. But the pooled money isn’t stable. In March the CRC asked questions about the system. Here’s what 202 respondents reported.

### Sharing about Ministry Shares

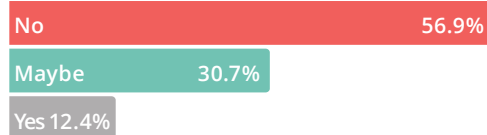
How do you feel about ministry shares?



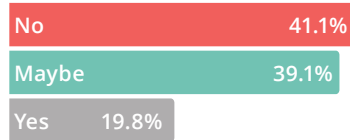
Do you think payment of ministry shares should be required as part of a congregation’s membership in the CRCNA?



Do you think classes (regional groups of churches) should play a role in promoting and tracking congregational ministry shares involvement?



If ministry shares allowed each congregation to direct their ministry shares to the ministries they felt closest to, would that increase your pledge and your likelihood of participating?



From 202 respondents to a CRC questionnaire in March 2023.



Cover: There is a lot of disagreement in the CRCNA right now. Can we find a better way forward?

## WHAT’S ONLINE

Look for these headlines at TheBanner.org

- » *The Banner, Reformed Worship* Receive Christian Press Awards
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**Correction:**

The article, "As He Hung Dying," in the April 2023 issue should have said, "A soldier clubbed *his* legs; another stuck a spear into the side of the man whom he would soon meet in Paradise."

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**Editor** Kristen deRoo VanderBerg,  
Director of CRCNA Communications and Marketing



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**BANNER**

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## A Challenging Parable

I think Jesus' original audience would have expected the priest and the Levite to pass by on the other side!



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](http://TheBanner.org).

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Este artículo está disponible en español en [TheBanner.org/spanish](http://TheBanner.org/spanish).

**THE MORE I DIVE** into the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), especially its cultural context, the more I find it challenging. Here's why.

To first-century Jews, Samaritans were not only social outcasts, but hated enemies. For ancient Jews, the Samaritans epitomized what it meant to be impure and unclean, those who were definitely NOT "our neighbor." The ancient Jews traced the Samaritans' origins to Assyria's political resettlement of Samaria, described in 2 Kings 17:24-41. The new population was steeped in idolatry with an impure mixing of true worship with false idols: "Even while these people were worshipping the LORD, they were serving their idols. To this day their children and grandchildren continue to do as their ancestors did" (2 Kings 17:41). In the second century B.C., Jews destroyed the Samaritans' temple on Mount Gerizim. About 100 years later, the Samaritans desecrated the temple in Jerusalem during Passover with human bones. The Jews considered Samaritans enemies of the Jewish faith.


In stark contrast were priests and Levites, viewed as paragons of the Jewish faith, especially in purity and holiness. The ceremonial laws about "clean" and "unclean" were part of a religious system that taught the Israelites about God's holiness, about their sins, about how to be brought back in relationship to God, and about obedience to God. The priests mediated God's presence to the people. The Levites were their assistants in the temple.

We are so accustomed to reading them as the "villains" in the parable that we forgot how the original Jewish audience would have viewed them: with utmost respect and admiration. In fact, I think Jesus' original audience would have expected the priest and the Levite to pass by on the other side! At least for the priest, this was in obedience to God's law: "A priest must not make himself

ceremonially unclean for any of his people who die," except for a close relative (Lev. 21:1b).

Hence, it was no surprise that the priest would choose to steer clear of the man lying on the road. The man was stripped—it wasn't clear if he was a Jew or some foreigner—and he was "half dead," meaning it wasn't clear if he was a corpse or not. Furthermore, there's no way of telling if the man even deserved mercy. What if he was a robber himself? Or a murderer? Why risk breaking God's rule for an unknown entity? Even if he was done with his temple duties (if he was also coming "down from Jerusalem"), the priest, and probably the Levite too, were still expected to keep themselves as pure as possible. Therefore, I am not sure if Jesus' Jewish audience would have disapproved of the priest's and the Levite's actions, given the circumstances.

But what the audience certainly did not expect was Jesus casting the hated, impure, heretical Samaritan as the hero and model for them to emulate. The Samaritan had compassion, acted mercifully, sacrificed his money and time, and might even have risked his own life (what if the Jews in town thought he was responsible for the man's wounds?). He did not consider whether the man was deserving of mercy. He acted out of unconditional and probably unrepayable love.

I do not have space here to delve deeper. But this parable challenges me deeply. It interrogates my soul. What biblical laws do I use to justify "passing by on the other side"? Would I give unconditional love to my enemies, even enemies to my faith? I need to wrestle with this parable more deeply. 



## REPLY ALL

To send letters to the editor, please see our guidelines at [thebanner.org/letters](http://thebanner.org/letters).

### Cruise Ship Magazine

It was nice to see the January 2023 edition of *The Banner* in the library of our cruise ship when we were on a Caribbean cruise this month. I had left mine at home and was glad to be able to finish reading it on the cruise. I left it where I found it for someone to benefit from reading it.

» Ellen van der Veen //  
Peterborough, Ont.



### Advertising Questions

*The Banner* received questions from several people about an advertisement for the group Better Together: A Third Way on the back of the May issue. To see the editor's response, visit [tinyurl.com/53e3894m](http://tinyurl.com/53e3894m) ("Clarification From the Editor" in the Behind The Banner section).

### Surprised by Love

Thanks to Ray VanderWeele for his heartwarming article "Surprised by Love—Again!" (February 2023). He is so correct in stating: "Neither of us could comprehend how important it could be to embrace another (again) and not feel guilty about it. There are almost no words for that gift of companionship. Studies are beginning to illustrate that while diet, exercise, and genetics go a long way toward telegraphing how long and how well you'll live, belonging to another is emerging as just as important." It is my prayer that the Christian Reformed Church will also someday affirm, bless, and celebrate this gift for our LGBTQ members and thereby (prevent) many tragedies such as the one reported on page 20 of the same *Banner* ("Redeemer University Student's Death Affects School, Community").

» Grace Deunk // Leduc, Alta.

### February Issue

Thank you for your February articles in *The Banner* ("Tough Love" and "Reconsidering How the Church Communicates Love"). It has been disheartening to read about the recent struggles going on in the CRC concerning same-sex marriage, LGBTQ issues, and abortion. I have noticed a subtle

narrative ... that Christians who think more traditionally or who are more conservative on these issues are less loving, do not completely understand God's grace, and are alienating the church from the culture. While there are always exceptions, I do not believe that narrative is true. And it's probably doing more harm than good. I attend a non-denominational church. Over the past year, the influx of the more traditional/conservative members of the Reformed Church in America and the CRC into our church has been over the top. They are like refugees in search of a home. And we welcome them with open arms. But the comments from them are by and large the same: the churches they grew up in and love have marginalized them to the point that they have left. I pray for unity in the CRC. Thanks again for thoughtful articles that address the times we live in.

» Mike DeVries // Byron Center, Mich.

### The Romans Road

Are you expecting a lot of comments on Leonard Vander Zee's "Rebuilding the Romans Road" (March 2023)? People love to discuss this topic, and I hope somebody wiser than me has something to say. But, in case it's worth anything, I'll offer my take on it: ... Viewing Paul's purpose for writing as replacing a nationalistic covenantal nomism with an inclusive one is attractive in our context. With good reasons, readers might agree with both Vander Zee's alternative *and* the "Romans Road." It's OK to talk about Jesus' work using multitudinous biblical images. Perspectives are only sometimes mutually exclusive, as with Paul's interpretation of "law." In that case, a traditional Protestant view disagrees with Vander Zee. Still, John Calvin says, "We are justified not without, and yet not by works" (*The Institutes of the Christian Religion*).

» Derek Kuyper // Grand Rapids, Mich.



### Tough Love

Thank you for calling out “tough love” (February 2023) for what it often is: an excuse for speech that too often lacks the minimal Christian virtues. Some sociological insight might also be in order. In his book *Dealing with the Dutch*, Jacob Vossestein devotes a chapter to “directness.” There he canvasses the Netherlandic reputation for language that is blunt, rude, and abrupt. The language of “tough love” is anchored directly in our ethnic heritage, I am afraid. In a piece on “ordinary aesthetic life,” Calvin Seerveld called us to up our game, urging those practitioners of “brutish rudeness” to aspire to a more Christian aesthetic. Emily Dickinson did Seerveld one better (as the good professor assuredly would concede): “Tell all the truth but tell it slant—Success in circuit lies ... The Truth must dazzle gradually / Or every man be blind.”

» John A. Tamming // Owen Sound, Ont.



Find the latest posts from our award-winning blog online at [TheBanner.org](http://TheBanner.org).

- » Weeping in Nashville
- » You Were There
- » To Mumble

## Relaxed and Reformed

**YOU'D EXPECT THAT** staunchly Reformed folks would be some of the most gracious and relaxed people around. After all, we believe that without the active prompting and work of the Spirit, there is nothing we or anyone else can do to build Christ's church—or destroy it. God works through us, but it is God who is doing the work (1 Cor. 3:7).

We all have a responsibility in sanctification: we surrender ourselves to the Spirit and help one another to live lives that give evidence to the holy work God is doing in us. We expect church leaders to be responsible for supporting communities that are shaped by the ongoing dying of the old self and rising of the new that characterizes this growth.

This is one of the most important tasks before us at this moment as a denomination. How do we help our communities be shaped by holiness while also expecting them to be places where holiness is not yet achieved? What room do we give to one another for the space needed to wade through the nuances of specific situations? What room do we give to others for speaking words of challenge into our own lives, leadership, and communities? How do we show our capacity to both *speak well* and *listen well* to one another?


And how do we do all this as a community shaped by the deep inner peace and freedom that comes from knowing that God alone is the author and perfecter of faith (Heb. 12:2)? Our confessions remind us that even when our communities are not giving the full evidence of God's holy work in us, salvation continues to be anchored fully and completely in God's hands rather than any of ours.

We have not been sounding like a community shaped by this peace. To grow in this way, we need the capacity

God is calling  
all of us  
together to  
do better.

to be patient and the willingness to submit to one another—two things that seem to have declined significantly in our community recently. Instead, many have talked as though the church's very existence is at stake because of recent challenges and disagreements.

God is calling all of us together to do better. As a community whose theology embraces God's sovereignty so deeply, we can be a community known for being incredibly gracious, understanding, patient, humble, and peaceful.

We will make mistakes, but nobody will lose their salvation over it. We will at times succeed, but no one will gain their salvation from it. It's an incredibly important responsibility we carry, so we do the best we can. And we do so recognizing that it is all ultimately in God's firm and trustworthy hands. 



Rev. Al Postma is the transitional executive director (Canada) of the Christian Reformed Church. He is a member of Hope CRC in Brantford, Ont.



# Becoming a Listener

By Bryant Russ

**T**hroughout the Scriptures we hear that listening is how we approach our relationship with God (1 Sam. 3:9) as well as how we cultivate healthy communities with one another (James 1:19). It's how we pursue lives of discipleship (Mark 9:7) and grow in maturity (Prov. 19:20). In fact, the most important command in the Bible, according to Jesus, begins with the charge to listen up (Deut. 6:4).

But how does a person become a good listener? This question makes me feel much like I did as a freshman college student signing up for what sounded like a fascinating 400-level course only to be told that I hadn't met the prerequisites. "Prerequisites?" I asked, slightly embarrassed. "What does that word mean, exactly?" I was politely told that a prerequisite is a required prior condition—in this case, the completion of several lower-level classes—before something else could happen.

Similarly, I'm attracted to the idea of being a good listener. However, I'm realizing that, more than being an inherent character trait or even something a person can occasionally

choose to do, listening is the result of a mature, well-tended soul. It is the outcome of having mastered the prerequisites.

The following list represents some of the "prerequisites" I believe are necessary if we are going to grow in our capacity to listen.

» **Listening requires 3 mph.** I have a "3 mph" sign hanging in my office as a simple reminder to *slow down*. Three miles per hour is the approximate speed at which people walk together, a necessity for connection. In his book *Three Mile an Hour God*, Kosuke Koyama writes:

God walks 'slowly' because he is love. If he is not love he would have gone much faster. Love has its speed. ... It is a different kind of speed from the technological speed to which we are accustomed. It is 'slow' yet it is lord over all other speeds since it is the speed of love. ... It is the speed we walk and therefore it is the speed the love of God walks.

Love has its speed; so does listening well. I was recently convicted about how many times I say the word "Hurry!" to my children in a single day.

While I was speed-walking my 6-year-old daughter to her kindergarten class, she said something that stopped me in my tracks: "Dad, you don't hear me very good when you're walking so fast."

Though 90 mph might feel like the minimum requirement in our frantic world, it is not at all conducive for relationships. And at the end of the day, if we accomplish our to-do lists but fail to listen to God and to our neighbor—if we miss *one another*—then I'm not so sure we accomplished anything of lasting value. True listening requires a 3 mph life.

» **Listening requires curiosity.** Curiosity means rejecting the temptation to one-dimensionalize another person—especially someone you don't understand or agree with. While the non-curious person tends to assume, the curious listener expects to find multidimensionality in others, because human beings are complex! Eugene Peterson puts it like this:

Of all the parts of the creation we have come across in our travels, this part we call human is the most marvelous, most complex, most mysterious. We know a lot about our bodies, our minds, our

emotions, our souls, digestive systems, ... but when we stand before the human being, any human being, most of what is taking place is beyond us. And for that reason, we had better not start poking around in what we do not understand, lest we destroy something precious (*Subversive Spirituality*, p. 163).

What would it look like to approach another human being—even someone with whom you disagree—with this kind of reverence?

» **Listening requires presence.** “The LORD our God, the LORD is one” (Deut. 6:4). While these words are typically read as God’s claim to be the one and only God in a time when polytheism was the norm, the ambiguity of the original Hebrew words offers some room for play.

Years ago my Hebrew professor suggested that “the LORD is one” might very well be an acknowledgment of God’s undividedness. God is one, whole, never split in his care and attention toward his people, like a parent who puts away all other distractions when their child enters the room and looks their loved one directly in the face. The next verse of this passage, then—“Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength”—becomes an invitation for God’s people to be “one” in their attention back to God—the very thing that happens when we love him with *all* our heart, *all* our soul, and *all* our strength.

But being “one” is not something we’re very good at. While I’m by no means anti-technology, one effect of our modern gadgets is that we’ve become absent while being present. I’m here, but I’m also somewhere else. We’ve become so incredibly efficient that a person can be everywhere and

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nowhere at the same time. But what has happened to the God I worship and the people I love? I can no longer offer my whole self, but only pieces of my attention—an eye, an ear, but never all of me. Presence isn’t about being in more places, but being more in a place. And listening well requires it. God is right here, right now. The question is, am I?

» **Listening requires a desire for smallness.** The best listeners I know tend to have a healthy sense of their comparative insignificance. The problem is that I want to change the world, and to do this I’m going to need a bigger microphone, a bigger platform, more attention, more influence, more followers. Unfortunately, I’m beginning to realize these things stand in opposition to a life of true listening. Listening assumes the focus is on the other, whether that’s another person or God.

Consider John the Baptist, who said of Jesus, “He must become greater; I must become less” (John 3:30). This longing for the attention to be on Jesus (or on my neighbor) is fundamental to a life of listening. It also feels next to impossible most of the time, especially in religious contexts.

Just the other day I was praying for the students of the school system I work in. While asking God for something like revival, a question popped into my head that I believe was prompted by the Spirit: “Would you be satisfied if revival ignited in this place ... and it had nothing to do with *you*?”

This question was exposing. I was doing all the religious things—saying the right words about God, praying for others regularly, leading in a Christian community—but the foundational motivation was still about me and my longing for validation. A soul in this state is unable to listen well.

“Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves” (Phil. 2:3). A person who truly values another above herself knows that her most basic needs for acceptance and approval are met in Jesus. This turns a person’s soul from a sinkhole into a wellspring and is the only way to reverse the default longing to be “big.”

My prayer is for the Christian church to be known for its ability to listen well. May God grant us the patience and passion needed to invest in these prerequisites. 📖



Bryant Russ serves as the director of faith formation for Holland Christian Schools in Holland, Mich.

## BIG QUESTIONS

### Vocation

**What's a good job application strategy? Should I submit applications one at a time and wait? Or submit a bunch until I find something?**

It can be wise to send out many applications at once, and it can be wise to focus more attention on a specific job or application. Just like the sayings in the book of Proverbs, the wise way to do something depends a lot on the situation.

As part of your application process, it's wise to speak to people already doing that job or in the organization to which you're applying. Can they give you advice about what people are looking for? Do they believe you are truly qualified for the job, and, if not, can they suggest things you can do to become more qualified? Can they connect you to people or companies that might be a good fit for you and help you with networking and making a good impression? While you do not wish to take advantage of others or act in a way that is contrary to your faith, most people are delighted to connect with others who share similar passions and interests. Furthermore, being the body of Christ means doing what we can to help all members of the body use their gifts to love our neighbors and benefit society.

When applying for jobs, it is wise to focus your energy on applying only for jobs that you believe would be better for you than what you already have. If you don't currently have a job, then it might feel like any job is better than



Illustration for *The Banner* by Gisela Bohórquez

nothing. Even so, taking the time to research the job and searching for positions in companies or institutions that would be a better fit is a wiser way to spend your time than submitting many applications, especially if the applications are poorly written and not likely to be noticed.

Last of all, do not forget that applying for jobs takes a lot of time and energy. It is normal to feel discouraged during the process. It helps to have people who can encourage you, pray for you, and even help you search. And hopefully, these same people can celebrate with you each time you are asked for a job interview and when you finally land a job.

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

### Digital Life

**What are three of your current favorite apps?**

Here are three of my current favorite apps and a bit about why I like them. Search for them online by name if you want to check them out.

**Merlin Bird ID:** I'm not a birder, but this app could make me one. Offered free by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, Merlin Bird ID uses artificial intelligence to identify each species, displaying in real time a list and photos of the birds that are singing or calling. When you're outside with your kids or grandkids, try to guess what birds you hear

and then use the app to tell you if you were right.

**Google Docs and Sheets:** Created in 2005 and evolving ever since, Google Docs stripped down what had become bloated office applications and then added the ability for two or more people to edit and add comments in the same document at the same time, saving the files as you go. It's perfect for a Christmas gift list you share with your spouse, a worship planning document for your worship team, or maybe a to-do list for your kids that they can see and you can add to whenever. Documents can be viewed and edited on all your devices.

**Yahoo Weather:** I know there are lots of weather apps out there, but this one has an uncluttered design and the smarts to display a photo of your weather from Flickr's public photo file.

**Notion:** I know you only asked for three, but I need to throw Notion in. If you're trying to organize a lot of information, and a spreadsheet isn't enough but a full-blown database is too much, Notion is beautifully and intuitively designed. It comes with a number of templates to get you going, but the real fun starts when you create your own online tracker. Great for personal goals, lists of any sort—you name it. It's a great data keeper.

Dean Heetderks is co-director of Ministry Support Services of the CRC and art director of *The Banner*. Wondering about any part of the digital side of your life? Tell him about it at [dean.heetderks@gmail.com](mailto:dean.heetderks@gmail.com).

**Church Life****Are officebearers in the Christian Reformed Church required to teach only penal substitutionary atonement theory, or may they explain other atonement theories?**

The Christian belief that Jesus satisfied God's wrath against our sin at the cross is commonly called penal substitutionary atonement. But that is not the only theory of atonement or the only theology of the cross. Other theories have been taught throughout the history of Christianity that emphasize the victory of Christ, or his moral influence, or themes of ransom, liberation, and reconciliation.

Penal substitutionary atonement emphasizes the wrath of God regarding our sin and Jesus' substituting for us in taking the punishment for our sin. That theory of the atonement is clearly taught in the Reformed confessions.

Out of concern that other theories are being taught in CRC churches instead of PSA, Classis Illiana asked Synod 2022 to declare the denial of penal substitutionary atonement to be a heresy and to consider those who deny it worthy of discipline. Synod 2022 also received a helpful report, commissioned by Synod 2019 after it declared Kinism to be a heresy, addressing the proper and ongoing definition and application of the word "heresy."

After considering all this, Synod 2022 did not declare the denial of PSA to be a heresy but did declare that "it is a serious deviation from the teachings of the confessions of the Christian Reformed Church" and that "any officebearer who explicitly denies penal substitutionary atonement is worthy of special discipline." The focus of

synod was on the denial of PSA, not the other theories of atonement.

So it's fine to teach other views of the atonement—in fact, this is typically part of Reformed Christian education at the high school, college, and seminary levels. We ought to be well informed about these traditions and various ways of understanding the cross and its meaning. But given Synod 2022's decision, an officebearer who denies PSA would then be worthy of discipline. Such discipline is always administered through the discernment of the church council to which that officebearer belongs.

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 CRC in Grand Rapids, Mich.

**Bible/Doctrine****Do our prayers get answered if we don't believe they will?**

When it comes to prayer, there are several biblical themes we ought to hold together. We are told to pray expectantly, with confidence that we are heard and that our prayers make a difference (Mark 11:24). We are also told that there are things that can hinder our praying, such as selfish motives (James 4:3) or lack of concern for the poor (Prov. 21:13). Finally, we are given testimonies of unanswered prayers in the life of the faithful (2 Cor. 12:8-9).

When we hold these themes together, it shows us that prayer is not just about asking of God, it is also about aligning with God. We need to know that our prayers make a difference, but prayer is not magic or manipulation. It is an invitation to believe that all things are possible but also to surrender to the wisdom of God; to confess our faith,

but also to confess our doubt after the pattern of the one who prayed, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!" (Mark 9:24).

I love what the Heidelberg Catechism says: "God will certainly hear our prayer for the sake of Christ our Lord, as he has promised us in his Word" (Q&A 117). This reminds us to place our trust in the Father's heart toward us. It is not the fervor of our prayer or the strength of our faith that gives us confidence, but the God to whom, in whom, and through whom we pray. Indeed, Paul says that we do not know how to pray, and so the Spirit prays for us with groans too deep for words (Rom. 8:26).

That means that we can offer up every prayer with whatever measure of faith we can muster and with hope in the One "who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine" (Eph. 3:20).

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](mailto:editorial@thebanner.org) with "Big Questions" in the subject line.

# Minnesota CRC a Refuge for Train Derailment Responders

## NEWS

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Photo by Raymond Fire & Rescue Department

**Derailed and burning tank cars in Raymond, Minn., drew responders and repair crews to the small town in late March. Raymond CRC offered what it could to help.**

Raymond (Minn.) Christian Reformed Church sits less than a quarter-mile from railroad tracks running through the small Minnesota city. At 1 a.m. Thursday, March 30, when a train carrying ethanol derailed and caught fire 200 yards from downtown, the church was called on to serve. The town’s 764 residents were displaced to nearby Prinsburg for 11 hours while emergency services fought the flames. While the town was evacuated, emergency service representatives needed a place to gather. They called Raymond CRC’s pastor, Aaron Greydanus. By 6 a.m., Greydanus and several other volunteers were in the church’s kitchen, cooking pancakes and preparing coffee for the emergency response crews.

Greydanus said U.S. Sens. Amy Klobuchar and Tina Smith and State Rep. Michelle Fischbach visited Raymond CRC to be briefed by emergency services before touring the accident site and meeting with the press.

“God used us in service to others,” Greydanus said. “He brought people from all over the nation.”

—Sarah DeGraff



Photo by Michelle Greydanus

**First responders to the Raymond, Minn., train derailment receive refreshment at Raymond Christian Reformed Church.**

## 'Blankets of Love' Attracts CRC Quilter

Blankets of Love Foundation for Mental Health, a compassionate quilt ministry founded in 1996 by a nurse from the Edmonton, Alta., area, has attracted the attention, time, and more than 50 donated quilts, of West End (Edmonton) Christian Reformed Church member Jody Groenendyk.

Groenendyk, a research associate studying cancer research at the University of Alberta, was drawn to the mission of Blankets of Love and founder Sheila Ethier's openness about mental illness.

"I started quilting in 2020 during an extremely difficult time, and with the added stress of COVID isolation, my mental health was fragile," Groenendyk said. "Therapy and quilting helped me achieve some balance in my life." Groenendyk now serves on the board of Blankets of Love. In addition to the more than 50 quilts she made herself, she offers longarm quilting—using a longarm sewing machine to attach a donated quilt top to its batting and backing—to finish quilts for others.

When Ethier started Blankets of Love, she was inspired by how her own quilt, made by her grandmother, brought warmth and comfort while she received treatment for major depression in the psychiatric ward at the University of Alberta Hospital. Ethier writes on the organization's website: "I was always cold and looking for more blankets. One afternoon, while at home, I came across a quilt my grandmother had made for me when I was a young girl. ... I covered myself with my quilt made of love. ... In those quiet, comforting moments I knew Blankets of Love would help other people. And so the program began."

Ethier and her contributing quilters began by sharing quilts with that U of A psychiatric ward and also with Alberta Hospital. Now they ship quilts to several hospitals across Canada. With the help of hundreds of volunteer quilters, Blankets of Love has donated over 3,500 quilts.

"I am comforted by the fact that I can provide a quilt to someone who is lonely, sick, and distressed," said Groenendyk, "and I hope they realize that somewhere, someone is thinking of them."

—Janet A. Greidanus



**A quilt by Jody Groenendyk, made for Blankets of Love.**

## Noteworthy

**Makoto Fujimura**, a contemporary artist focused on "slow art," **was awarded the 2023 Kuyper Prize** at Redeemer University in Ancaster, Ont. This is the first time Redeemer has hosted the Kuyper Conference and presented the prize. Both are administered by Calvin University and Calvin Theological Seminary in Grand Rapids, Mich. The conference, which Calvin intends to share with other institutions every other year, is named for Dutch theologian Abraham Kuyper and celebrates excellence in Reformed theology in public life.



Photo by PC Windrider Productions

**Makoto Fujimura**

"The Kuyper Prize affirms my calling as an artist to see art as an essential part of our public theology," Fujimura said. "Rather than seeing art only as a utilitarian 'tool' for evangelism and discipleship, this prize preserves the sphere of art to offer up 'wisdom of beauty' to the world, simply because it is an extension of God's creation and delight."

Rachel Bouman, **a member of Elmhurst (Ill.) Christian Reformed Church, has launched a nonprofit program geared to teaching young women in high schools across the United States the basics of leadership.** Bouman was inspired to incorporate Lead Like a Boss after creating a class of the same name for a group of female students at Timothy Christian Schools in Elmhurst as part of its high school's Renew interim program.



**Rachel Bouman**

"I never imagined what would come out of this class," said Bouman, who worked for years for the federal government as an attorney and is now a leadership coach. Colleagues encouraged her to help prepare the younger generation after her experience with the Timothy students. "I realized they wanted to know they could belong as leaders," Bouman said. "I saw that I could help them step into leadership more confidently and sooner than might otherwise happen."

Meeting May 3-5 in Grand Rapids, Mich., the Christian Reformed Church in North America's Council of Delegates and the U.S. and Canada ministry boards made appointments, met new staff, and passed along items to synod, on whose behalf the Council works.

## Director of U.S. Ministry Operations Hired; Vision for Future of U.S. Office Building Approved

The **U.S. ministry board interviewed and appointed Dan DeKam**, a Christian school administrator in Muskegon, Mich., as its first permanent U.S. director of ministry operations. Joel Huyser has been serving as interim director since the board established the position in May 2022. The role manages the affairs of CRCNA's U.S. ministry organization and supervises the central services departments of the U.S. ministry office.

DeKam starts in the role July 3.

"I think there's a ton of similarities in the organizational structures," he said of moving from the West Michigan Christian Education Collaborative, where he is executive director, to this

operations he will report to the U.S. ministry board, just as Al Postma, transitional executive director-Canada, reports to the Canadian ministry board. DeKam and Postma will work in partnership with Zachary King, the CRC's general secretary, which is an ecclesiastical position that reports to synod.

### The board also **approved a vision for reshaping the denominational building at 1700 28th St. SE in Grand Rapids.**

Without mandating a particular path, the board affirmed the building task force's direction to seek a facility that would be more "accessible and flexible," offer a "ministry showcase," and pursue "more shared spaces and resources." The board had previously empowered its executive committee to make decisions about the property. An \$11 million overhaul that had been green-lit in October 2019 was put off and then canceled during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Canadians Introduce World Renew, Advancement Staff; Will Continue Annual Broad 'Conversations'

### **World Renew-Canada director Jamie McIntosh, who was appointed in January, was welcomed to lunch with members of the Council of Delegates.**

Canada at-large delegate Melissa Van Dyk introduced McIntosh, asking him about his history as an ordained pastor and the link between ministries of mercy and justice and how they serve local churches. McIntosh, who is ordained with the Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada, said he has ministered to more congregations outside of his denomination than within after his many years working in the nonprofit sector, including founding International Justice Mission. Recognizing that local churches are rooted in the vine that is Christ, he said he "wants to see the rich roots support and sustain the branches that go out." Before coming to World Renew, McIntosh served



**World Renew-Canada director Jamie McIntosh, who started in January, met members of the Council of Delegates during the Council's May meeting in Grand Rapids, Mich.**

Compassion Canada as chief programs and partnerships officer.

**The Canada ministry board also welcomed Roshani Morton as the new Canada advancement director for the CRCNA.** Morton started in the position, which has been vacant since July, on April 24. Julie Cruickshank, director of human resources CRCNA-Canada, introduced her to staff in an email, saying, "Roshani has 10+ years of senior leadership experience working with faith-based organizations leading various advancement initiatives." Morton began her work in philanthropy in 2012, coordinating a missionary team serving the Cabecar people in Central America.

**The Canada ministry board reviewed the work of its Canada-wide conversation organizing committee and decided to continue to host these "constituent engagement" gatherings** each January and to ask classes to solicit four representatives at their fall meetings.

The chairs of three mercy and justice ministries in Canada—the Canadian Indigenous Ministries Committee, the Committee for Contact with the Government, and the Decolonization and Antiracism Collective—communicated with the board their disappointment and



**New director of U.S. ministry operations Dan DeKam (left) is interviewed by U.S. ministry board member Steve Bussis (Classis Yellowstone) at the board's May meeting.**

ministry context. "One of the things I've enjoyed over the years is bringing people together," he added, and translating that to the CRCNA will mean "seeking ways we can become more interdependent."

DeKam is married with five children and is a member of Bethany CRC in Muskegon. As the director of U.S. ministry



difficulty with the action of Synod 2022 to “affirm its position to recognize same-sex behavior as sinful, as well as affirm this position as ‘confessional,’ meaning that members of the CRCNA are expected to hold this view.” They also wrote, “For the processes of reconciliation and justice to unfold, we’ve learned that ongoing listening, reciprocity, and dialogue is paramount. The weaknesses in the process of the human sexuality report, and the provisions for confessional status, create barriers to listening to dissenting voices and the voices of ‘the other.’ ... (W)e name aloud the incongruence between the decisions of Synod 2022 with our commitment to advancing public dialogue and promoting the faithful work of justice in our churches.” The board received the letter and agreed “to invite the chairpersons from each committee to a future board meeting or another opportunity for further dialogue.”

## Actions of the Council of Delegates

The Council of Delegates is **forwarding to Synod 2023 changes to both the U.S. and Canadian World Renew bylaws that clarify that the relief agency’s relationship to the Christian Reformed Church in North America** is one that is connected, but not directed.

The bylaws and accompanying ecclesiastical mandate letters stipulate the organization remains an agency of the Christian Reformed Church—World Renew board members will continue to be appointed by classes (regional bodies of churches)—but they clarify that decisions made by the organization do not have to be approved by synod. U.S. and Canadian ministry boards for World Renew had earlier voted to approve the changes. Tyler Wagenmaker, Classis Zeeland, said the changes “make clear” that World Renew is its own stand-alone entity.

“I just want to make sure that our churches are more aware of that,” Wagenmaker said. “I think many of our

churches, and even pastors, don’t think about World Renew in that way, even though that’s how it was set up.”

The Council **dissolved the Collaborative Church Planting Team** it had established in 2019. Resonate Global Mission and Congregational Ministries, which formed part of that team, reported that they are able to pursue their intended goals together without an additional external standing committee.

The Council acknowledged that **“Thrive” is the new name for the congregational ministry agency** that carries out the work of the formerly independent ministries of Race Relations, Diversity, Chaplaincy, Disability Concerns, Faith Formation, Pastor Church Resources, Safe Church, the Office of Social Justice, and Worship. The Council endorsed a mandate for this agency in February and is recommending it to Synod 2023 along with a request “that synod conclude the synodical mandates and directives given to the previously separate ministries.”

Synod 2022 had asked the Council to **review “Ministry Shares Reimagined,”** the recently revamped system by which member congregations contribute to shared denominational and ministry expenses. A report to be forwarded to synod noted, “In the United States, direct giving to agencies and ministries has increased since 2015, but the subtotal of ministry shares has declined over time. Churches have started to directly give to agencies and ministries, rather than funding general ministry shares,” and “Canadian ministry shares have declined (11%), but not at the rate at which membership is declining (15%).” The report recommends three adjustments:

- » provide greater flexibility in the pledge process cycle;
- » determine a base amount, which covers core denominational costs; and
- » provide more information on pledges and giving results to the churches and classes.

—Alissa Vernon, News Editor



**Council of Delegates members finishing their terms as of June 30: (back row, from left) Frederick Wind (Classis Quinte), Jose Tony Lara (Arizona), Harold Caicedo (California South), Daudi Mutisya Mbuta (Grand Rapids North), Andy de Ruyter (B.C. North-West), Arnie Stolte (Northern Illinois); (front row, from left) Elsa Fennema (U.S. at-large delegate), Wendy de Jong (Niagara), Jeanne Engelhard (Grand Rapids East), and Sheila Holmes (Hackensack).**

# Synod 2023: What to Watch For

The Christian Reformed Church's general assembly—synod—convenes June 9-16 at Calvin University in Grand Rapids, Mich. The denomination's 49 classes, or regional assemblies, have elected their delegates—188 of them (eight classes aren't sending the full delegation of four)—but if you aren't delegated to synod, here's a brief on what to watch for from afar.

Visit [thebanner.org/synod](http://thebanner.org/synod) for a longer "Guide to the Agenda for Synod 2023."

## Venue, Personnel Changes

First, synod is meeting in a new location. When synod has convened on Calvin's campus in the past—most recently 2018, 2019, and 2022—plenary sessions have been hosted in the 1,011-seat Covenant Fine Arts Center auditorium, but this year the sessions will be in the smaller Calvin Chapel. "We began looking at the chapel for financial reasons," said synodical services director Scott DeVries, "but quickly realized that moving to the chapel might be even more important because it is designed and used as a sanctuary for worship and participation."

This is DeVries's first synod as the director of synodical services, and he's not the only leader in a new role for 2023: Zachary King, general secretary, and Shirley De Vries, chief administrative officer, are serving synod for the first time in those positions.

## Prayer

Synod 2023 continues a prayer focus initiated by those preparing for Synod 2022. A 40-day prayer guide using Philippians 2:1-11 and reflecting Synod 2023's theme, Longing to Be Like Christ, has been offered to anyone in the CRC. Jon Hoekema, prayer shepherd, said times of corporate worship and prayer will happen more often at Synod 2023, not just at the start of each session. Volunteers with the prayer team "will also be intentional this year about stopping to pray with the



**A window from the Calvin University Chapel, where synod will meet for the first time.**

committees while they are meeting, with the officers of synod, with synod staff, CRC staff, and others," Hoekema said.

## Reports

Two synodical task force reports released at the same time as the human sexuality report and deferred an extra year to accommodate the heavy agenda in 2022 are finally getting their hearing at Synod 2023. The Ecclesiastical Marriage Task Force recommends "that synod strongly advise pastors of the CRC" not to solemnize marriages "as sanctioned and solemnized solely by the church to the exclusion of the state (civil government)." The Study of Bivocationality Task Force includes a recommendation that synod encourage committees providing financial aid for seminary students "to treat those who are in or anticipating bivocational or other nontraditional ministry arrangements in the same manner as those who are in or anticipating full-time arrangements."

## Code of Conduct

The Council of Delegates has revised the Code of Conduct for ministry leaders that was presented to last year's synod. Synod

2022 requested a pause in implementation of the Code to receive feedback from churches. The Council incorporated the feedback, but there are still requests for synod to reject the Code, make it non-mandatory, or implement even stronger steps with its adoption. Synod will have to decide how to proceed.

## More of 2022 Revisited

The council of Neland Avenue CRC is appealing the decision of Synod 2022 to instruct Neland "to immediately rescind its decision to ordain a deacon in a same-sex marriage." The appeal asserts that an assembly, such as Neland's council, has the right to appeal a body's decision to the assembly next in order—in this case appealing a decision of synod to a subsequent synod.

Three other requests ask synod to reiterate the instructions to Neland and to Classis Grand Rapids East. There are also six calls for more discipline and 12 requests to clarify confessional alignment in the CRC. A couple of requests suggest redistricting all of Classis Grand Rapids East or shepherding congregations into more-aligned denominations

if they can no longer in good conscience align with the CRC's confessional position on human sexuality. A few more overtures request synod and congregations to engage in deeper listening, commit to grace in disagreement, and address harm to LGBTQ+ persons. There are also many calls to reverse, delay, or revise the decision to recognize the prohibition on homosexual sex as confessional. One overture requests that synod affirm the CRC's doctrine of marriage as confessional and one asks to "reconsider our (1973) stance that homosexuality (as orientation) is not sinful" (Overture 33).

## New Business

Requests related to the decisions of Synod 2022 aren't the only overtures on Synod 2023's agenda. Delegates also will consider making a statement on assisted suicide; declaring that a virtual church is not a church; addressing the trend of membership decline; and adopting the Belhar Confession as a confession of the CRC. The last two considerations are updated requests from 2017.

—Alissa Vernon, News Editor

## Groups Watching Synod 2023

Four groups, three of which were already observing and reacting last year, are producing content and prayerfully waiting for Synod 2023's deliberations.

**The Abide Project**, which began in fall 2021 and promotes a "biblical, confessional, and historical understanding of human sexuality," plans to offer regular live updates from synod, with commentators describing the happenings of the day as they did at Synod 2022. Two West Michigan Christian Reformed pastors, Tyler Wagenmaker and Cedric Parsels, will offer the updates, but without consulting with delegates, according to spokesperson Aaron Vriesman. Vriesman is a delegate, as are two other pastors on Abide's leadership team.

Abide intends to host a conference in August, as it did last year. No official meeting of Abide members during synod is planned.

**All One Body**, a West Michigan-based organization that began in 2011 and promotes "unrestricted participation in all areas of church life by all members who confess Christ as Savior and Lord without regard to sexual orientation or gender identity," is gauging logistics for a campus demonstration similar to its presence at synod in 2022. All One Body members gathered outside the fine arts building where Synod 2022 was meeting when the human sexuality report was first discussed (the gallery was closed to observers). Board member John Chapin said the organization will consult with Calvin University security to find a new location to gather because synod will be in the Calvin University Chapel.

"We want to offer emotional and spiritual encouragement and prayer," said Chapin. "This is a painful and distressing time for some delegates and observers. We want to be there as witnesses and support."

One of the All One Body board members is a delegate to Synod 2023.

**Better Together**, which began in early 2023, promotes a "a third way ... committed to creating space for disagreement on ethical issues that do not determine our salvation in service to maintain the prioritization of the mission of the gospel and protect the unity of the church." During Synod 2023, Better Together plans to offer email and Facebook updates but will not advocate for any specific response by delegates. "We are resisting political leaning," said Nate DeJong McCarron of the Better Together steering team.

Better Together's advisory council, released April 20, includes former CRCNA management-level staff, including Colin Watson Sr. (executive director emeritus) and Andy Ryskamp (retired World Renew director). Two of the named members of the advisory council are delegates to synod.

**The Hesed Project**, which began in spring 2022, promotes exploring the implications of the CRC's human sexuality report, considering alternatives to the CRC's past approaches, and fostering discussion that includes the voices of those most affected by the report. Though Hesed works with All One Body, its supporters are more geographically dispersed. Hesed "will provide a summary analysis of all the overtures, as we did last year," said organizer Kathy Vandergrift. "This is to inform everyone. It is not a lobby."

Among Hesed's online resources is a map showing estimates of the numbers of same-sex-marriage-affirming or -welcoming churches in various regions of the Christian Reformed Church. The map indicates 54 such churches (not identified) in Canada and 26 in the U.S.

Hesed does not publicize its members or leadership, so *The Banner* cannot determine if any people connected with Hesed are delegated to synod.

—Roxanne Van Farowe

## English Classes at a Wisconsin Church Develop More Than Language Skills

Adult students studying English as a second language at First Christian Reformed Church in Oostburg, Wis., work hard with their tutors to complete one book a year in the program that covers reading, writing, speaking, and listening.

Recently First CRC celebrated that achievement for several students at a bilingual church service highlighting the English-language ministry. Tom Soerens, a retired pastor and



Photo by Sandy Gartman

missionary to Costa Rica who founded the program five years ago with a local educator and fellow member of First CRC, delivered his sermon in English and Spanish. Two students read Scripture and prayed in both languages, and the congregation sang hymns and songs with at least a chorus or a verse sung in the other tongue.

### A tutor with two ESL students at First CRC in Oostburg, Wis.

Sandy Gartman, the educator behind First CRC's language program, said it was a joy-filled service.

Gartman is a tutor and organizer for the ESL classes that have 13 church members participating as tutors and child-care providers. When Gartman, Soerens, and another church member envisioned the program in 2018, they were trying to meet a gap for community members. Gartman had noticed some parents in her school district, where many newcomers from various countries find work in manufacturing or agriculture, needing translators to communicate with teachers.

Classes began with five students, and by September 2022 about 20 students were attending each biweekly meeting.

The program has been a blessing on many levels, Gartman said: "Friendships have been made. A tutor helped practice driving with a student. Tutors and students have invited each other to their homes. One family has joined the church." And the changes haven't benefited only church members. "Now that employers locally noticed the language barrier decreasing," Gartman said, "connections for employment have been made, bilingual Bibles (have been) handed out, and one of the students is now a tutor."

—Alissa Vernon

## Colorado Church Gets Creative With Discipleship-minded Worship Services

Since September 2022, those who worship at The Journey in Longmont, Colo., a Christian Reformed congregation of about 60 people, have been experimenting with new (and sometimes old) ways to practice discipleship in nontraditional worship services once a month.

Called "Discipleship Sundays," the practice started in part because the church's part-time worship leader stepped down, and a shift to volunteer-led worship left one Sunday a month without a volunteer.

Rick Ebbers, the pastor who planted the church 23 years ago, said, "It was born out of that necessity, but we very quickly shifted to, 'How can we be intentional?' Maybe this is an opportunity that God is giving us to think intentionally about what worship and discipleship can look like."

So far services have included a *sanctus*, or "holy" service that involved different stations of spiritual practices; a Colossian Forum meeting focused on having conversations around sensitive topics; and two service-oriented times of cleaning up the greenway next to the church or assembling care packages for those in their community experiencing homelessness.

Ebbers said he hopes Discipleship Sundays might help worshipers connect with God in new ways. "I get excited that we might actually help someone get out of the routine rut and be able to have God meet them in that moment in a way that they might not be open to in another typical worship service," he said.

Some people told Ebbers that they come to Discipleship Sunday with anticipation, while other people in the church are more inclined to value the familiar and find the services a little disruptive.

The church intends to continue with the Discipleship Sundays until September 2023, when they will re-evaluate before determining how to move forward.

—Kristen Parker



The Journey's Trail Life Troop and other worshipers spent a January Discipleship Sunday assembling care packages for those in their community experiencing homelessness.

## Neighbors Work Together in Philadelphia to Make Climate Difference



**Graduates from Vocation Career Prep High School's first class of solar installation crew training.**

A regional organizer with the Christian Reformed Church's Climate Witness Project has been part of community transformation projects in Philadelphia's Hunting Park neighborhood, including a collaboration with a Christian vocational school to train workers as solar installers.

Allen Drew, a commissioned pastor supported by the Christian Reformed congregation Spirit and Truth Fellowship, helped form the Hunting Park Community Solar Initiative. The group used two Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection environmental education grants to start a training course with the Vocation Career Prep High School, which has now graduated 10 students. "Our intention is to continue growing this program and offering it twice a year," said Drew, the Climate Witness Project's Eastern U.S. regional organizer.

Drew described how the initiative worked to connect 10 low-income Hunting Park residents with a publicly funded home update program. "Each of them will have their homes repaired, weatherized, and given a rooftop solar array," Drew said. The upgrades allow the homes to better retain heat or stay cool and to generate their own electricity, reducing residents' costs. It makes a difference in this section of the city, where lots of blacktop and fewer trees create a heat sink.

Various community projects, including Hunting Park's efforts to plant trees and grow local produce, are highlighted in a recent video production from the Climate Witness Project.

"I grew up hearing 'The earth is the LORD's and the fullness thereof,'" said Fred Harvey, pastor of Spirit and Truth Fellowship, who appears in the video series. "If this is true that the earth belongs to God, and everything in it, then it matters to God how we engage it."

—Callie Feyen

### IN MEMORIAM



*Rev. Peter William DeHaan*

1947-2023

Pastor and workplace chaplain Peter DeHaan died April 13 from complications of Alzheimer's disease. He was 76. A friend and music director at a church Peter served reflected, "He was comfortable interacting with gang members and grandmas, the houseless as well as those with houses on the shorelines. ... He was faithful to preach the catechism yet not reluctant to bring current issues and church family cares into his sermons. He loved the Christian Reformed Church and, importantly, he loved people more."

Born in the Netherlands, Peter immigrated with his family to Iowa in 1953. After graduating from Dordt College (now University) and Calvin Theological Seminary, he was ordained in 1972, then served First CRC, Hospers, Iowa; Zion CRC, Oshawa, Ont.; and Maranatha CRC, Woodstock, Ont.

In 1991 the DeHaans moved to Holland, Mich. Peter served Maple Avenue CRC and Maple Avenue Ministries before becoming a part-time workplace chaplain from 2000 until 2019. During that time he also pastored Bravo CRC in Fennville, Mich. Peter continued to make pastoral visits after retirement and volunteered at Ditto Resale Store, which supports Holland and Zeeland Christian Schools.

He is survived by June, his wife of 54 years; three children and their spouses; and five grandchildren.

—Janet A. Greidanus

### IN MEMORIAM



*Rev. Henry (Henk) Numan*

1941-2023

Henry Numan genuinely loved people and had the gift of making everyone feel they mattered. He cared deeply, was generous, kind-hearted, devoted to his family, and deeply rooted in faith. Henry, 81, died April 6.

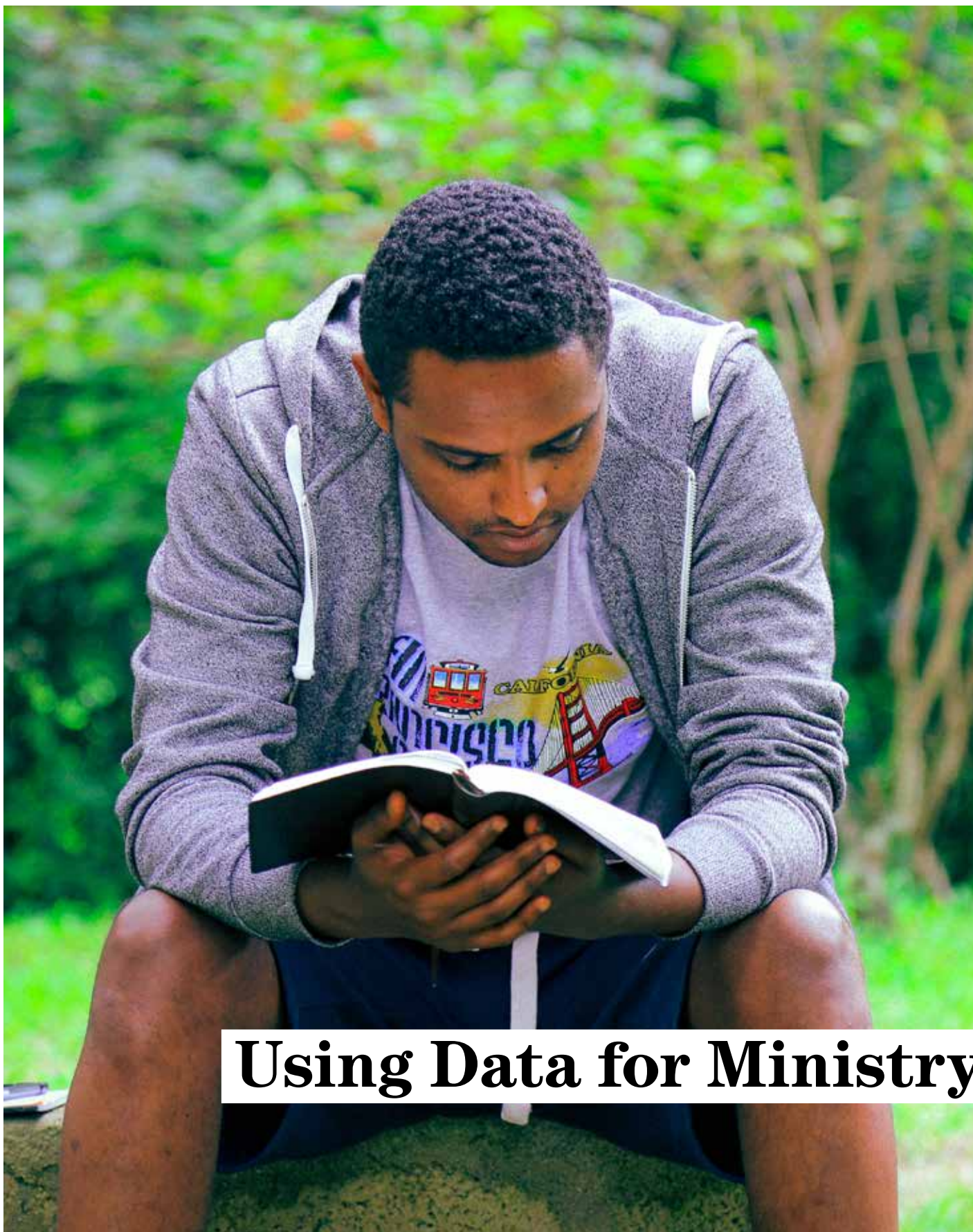
Born in the Netherlands, Henry immigrated with his family in 1952 to Ontario, Canada.

After high school, desiring to follow in his father's footsteps as a pastor, he graduated from Calvin College (now University) and Calvin Theological Seminary and was ordained in 1967. Together with his wife, Aileen, they aspired to their motto "to be Christlike with a servant heart" and served the following churches: Cephass Christian Reformed Church, Peterborough, Ont.; Bethel CRC, Brockville, Ont.; First CRC, Vancouver, B.C. (two different times); Trinity CRC, Abbotsford, B.C.; Third CRC, Lynden, Wash.; and Mundy Park Christian Fellowship, Coquitlam, B.C. He retired from ministry in 2012, one year after Aileen, his wife of 47 years, died.

Henry will be remembered for his green thumb and his beautiful patio gardens, his love of books and trains, and his deep appreciation for music. He was a pipe-organ enthusiast.

Henry is survived by three daughters and their families, including four grandchildren, a stepgranddaughter and two step-great-grandchildren.

—Janet A. Greidanus



# Using Data for Ministry

Photo by Gift Habeshaw on Unsplash

By Kristen deRoo VanderBerg, CRC Communications

**L**ove them or hate them, surveys are part of our everyday life. From government-endorsed censuses to customer feedback forms, we are regularly asked to provide input to help inform and improve products and services. Employers use surveys to measure employee engagement and satisfaction. Even churches use surveys to gather information that can be used to help us going forward.

The Christian Reformed Church in North America sends out regular requests to congregations, pastors, and ministry leaders asking for feedback in a variety of areas. Ministries also note what resources are being used, what websites are being visited, and what questions are being asked.

But what is this information used for? And is it really worth it to participate? The following pages show a few examples of data the denomination collected and how that information has been used to improve ministry.

### A Church Yearbook

- » *Research type*: denominational *Yearbook* survey of individual congregations
- » *Frequency*: once per year in August or September
- » *Types of information*: pastor name, title, and contact information; church mailing address, phone number, and email address; average attendance, church membership, baptisms, and deaths; languages spoken during worship; accessibility features such as sign language, hearing loop, and barrier-free access; safe church policies and procedures

“There are so many reasons for churches to participate in the annual *Yearbook* survey,” said Rebekah Vanden Akker, *Yearbook* coordinator for the CRCNA. “Membership statistics change from year to year; staff changes happen; service times, websites, and email addresses are frequently updated. The annual survey allows congregations to confirm or update information to make sure that the public listing is accurate.”

The public listing Vanden Akker refers to includes the Church Finder tool on the denominational website ([crcna.org/churches](http://crcna.org/churches)). The page is visited every year by people looking to find a Christian Reformed congregation to attend. By typing in a city and state or province, visitors to the site can see all of the congregations within a certain geographical radius. They can

According to the CRCNA annual survey, 43% of CRCNA members read the Bible daily; 10% say they read it more than once a day; 22% said they read Scripture several times a week, 12% said they read it weekly; and 13% reported reading the Bible less than once a week.

also filter their search by language or accessibility features, and they can find accurate information about worship times and which congregations offer services by livestream.

In 2022, the church finder page was visited 42,585 times, and individual congregation pages received 271,534 visits.

But the *Yearbook* survey is also used to calculate minister pension amounts, capture an accurate count of congregations with safe church policies, paint a picture of how well we are meeting the needs of those with disabilities, and much more.

“Every year, we receive requests for copies of past membership numbers from churches, pastor search committees, specialized transitional ministers working with churches, and others. We are only able to provide that information if the church has regularly submitted the *Yearbook* questionnaire,” said Vanden Akker.

Recently, the Council of Delegates spent time looking at *Yearbook* data that showed trends in church growth and membership decline. They noted that the growing edge of our denomination is in non-English-speaking churches. (Of the 19 new ministries recorded in the 2023 *Yearbook*, six were Spanish-speaking and five were Korean-speaking.) They also noted a decline in overall membership numbers over recent years and asked CRCNA ministries to put together a proposal for how to address church renewal and growth.

### The Survey Says

- » *Research type*: denominational survey
- » *Frequency*: On a rotating schedule, every congregation is surveyed once every five years. The survey opens in February and runs through March.
- » *Types of information*: church health, worship components, individual spiritual practices, support for denominational initiatives, support for Christian education, church satisfaction, demographic information

How often do members of your congregation read the Bible or have personal devotions? Do young people in your church feel as if they are adequately involved in making decisions? Which CRCNA ministries have the greatest impact on your congregation? How healthy is your church in comparison to others?

These are the types of questions on the annual CRCNA denominational survey. The survey began in 1987 and was conducted every five years by what was then Calvin University’s Social Research Center.

In 2017, the survey shifted to an annual cycle, but it’s sent to only one-fifth of all CRC congregations each year. This way data

is collected every year, but each church is asked to actively promote the survey only once every five years. DataWise Consulting, an external social research provider, conducts the survey and analyzes the results to help ensure that information is kept confidential and that the data is properly understood.

Every congregation that solicits at least 20 responses from their members and attendees can request a personalized report that is specific to their church. This helps congregational leaders receive honest, anonymous feedback about the spiritual health and well-being of members and evaluate areas for congregational improvement.

The survey results also help to shape the future of CRCNA ministries, the denominational ministry plan, and the types of resources and programs that are needed to assist congregations.

“One of the most interesting questions to me on the annual survey is about evangelism,” said Amy Schenkel, a regional mission leader for Resonate Global Mission. “The question asks survey participants if their congregation is involved in planting new churches and discipling communities. Only 24% of respondents said that this was ‘true’ or ‘mostly true’ in their context. Another question asks if respondents themselves intentionally build relationships with non-Christians. While this answer was up to 51%, that still leaves 49% of our church members not actively participating in evangelism.”

As a result of these low numbers on recent surveys, church planting became a key emphasis in the denomination-wide ministry plan, *Our Journey 2025*. In addition, Resonate Global Mission produced *Witness*, a free downloadable curriculum designed to help churches lead five small-group sessions about missional practices that help us witness in word and deed to our 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. 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,” Schenkel said about the idea behind the curriculum.

Since it was made available in September 2021, *Witness* has been downloaded 278 times.

#### How Did You Know I Needed That?

- » *Research type*: contact interactions database
- » *Frequency*: ongoing
- » *Types of information*: which congregations denominational ministry staff have visited, what information was presented, what questions were raised, and what resources were requested

“When the right hand doesn’t know what the left hand is doing, it can not only lead to inefficiency and duplication of efforts, but it can also mean missed opportunities,” said Chris Schoon, U.S. director of Congregational Ministries. “That’s why it is essential that CRCNA ministries work alongside congregations. We track the types of work that we are doing.”

To do this, employees and volunteers log interactions in a central database. While details of conversations are kept confidential, general information is recorded so that trends can be observed.

“In the area of pastor-church relationships, we’ve seen an increase in the number of calls we’ve received over recent years,” said Sean Baker, ministry consultant with Congregational Ministries. “Each call is unique and requires its own specific type of response. This is all kept highly confidential, but we do note the number of calls we are receiving and the types of issues they represent. Pastors are feeling burnt out. There is more tension between pastors and their councils. Tracking this data was part of the impetus behind the development of the Challenging Conversations toolkit, Quick to Listen initiative, and the Next Steps discernment process.”

The database also helps staff see where they have been focusing their time and energy and what gaps might exist. For example, in the 2021-22 ministry year, CRCNA staff interacted with 81.73% of all CRC congregations (over 820 churches). These interactions might have included a physical visit to the church to provide training, a webinar or online training on a topic of interest to the church, or a phone call to answer questions and provide assistance.



More than one-third of all Christian Reformed congregations identify as an ethnicity other than Anglo/Caucasian. The largest group of these is Korean congregations, which make up 11.5% of the denomination (115 churches). There are also 109 multiethnic churches, 43 Hispanic/Latino, 22 South East Asian/Pacific Islander, 16 Native American/Indigenous, 12 African American, 10 Chinese, one Albanian, one Arab American, and one Haitian. (The remaining congregations did not indicate an ethnicity.)



Lastly, the log helps different staff members understand the full picture of what a congregation might be interested in.

During the height of the pandemic, denominational ministry staff were mobilized to reach out to all CRCNA congregations by phone or email. Staff recorded those interactions with a subject line indicating it was related to the pandemic and made notes about questions, challenges, and opportunities that churches were experiencing. Those notes were used to share stories of what was working well in some congregations, to raise better awareness of the most relevant denominational resources, and to create new resources to help churches get through.

Now that most COVID mandates have lifted, denominational staff have again mobilized to call and email pastors to get a picture of what the church looks like post-pandemic and how CRCNA ministries can walk alongside congregations.

“As I spent time meeting pastors on Zoom, a frequent theme that came up was how congregational needs had shifted,” said Becky Jones, regional catalyzer for the CRCNA in the Canada East region. “What has been exciting in the midst of these conversations is hearing from one pastor how they have navigated certain challenges and then listening to another pastor who is just starting the process in a similar situation. Several times we have realized that we have the capacity to connect pastors who may not otherwise be aware of each other’s work. Being able to link pastors to get support from one another has been so gratifying!”

### Bytes and Cookies

» *Research type:* website analytics

» *Frequency:* ongoing

» *Types of information:* number of visits, page visits, average visit length, pages shared, search terms used

Every time you visit a website or type in a search term, it generates data that can be helpful to the hosts of that site. This is true for the CRCNA and its ministries too.

“There is a lot of data that you can collect to understand how people interact with your website and identify opportunities for improvement,” explained Tim Postuma, who manages the denominational website ([crcna.org](http://crcna.org)). “You can track overall traffic, where that traffic is coming from, new and returning visitors, time spent on site, and much more. This in turn helps us learn how we can improve the user experience and make resources and answers easier to find.”

Consider *The Network* ([crcna.org/Network](http://crcna.org/Network)). It was launched in 2010 as a forum for CRC members to ask ministry questions, share best practices, and find support for their work in local congregations. Today, the site gets about one million page views each year and annually receives more than 3,000 contributions from people across the denomination.



The most popular post on *The Network* in 2022, with over 4,300 views, provided a creative idea for congregations to help parents encourage faith formation in young children all summer long.


When the site was redesigned in October 2022, user analytics were used to decide which broad topics (e.g., children and youth, church administration, church strategy and mission, spiritual formation, leadership, justice and inclusion, specialized communities, and worship) were needed to organize posts.

“We wanted to organize *The Network* around broader, more intuitive topics, and we used web analytics to figure that out,” said Staci DeVries, *Network* administrator. “As a result, the homepage now features a clean and simple navigation bar with topics that make sense in the context of the local church.”

*Network* staff also recognized the popularity of the site’s job listings page, so they made that its own section. In addition, the “ministry questions and answers” portion became much more prominent in the redesign to foster more church-to-church conversation.

“Back-and-forth ministry sharing is what *The Network* is all about,” DeVries said. “The redesign simplified the ‘Ask a Question’ form and gave Ministry Q&As homepage prominence. I am happy to report that over 90% of questions asked on the site receive an answer, usually within a very short amount of time.”

As for the most searched for items on *The Network*, that varies over the course of the year.

“In 2022, we saw a lot of searches for resources and posts related to synod and the human sexuality report,” said DeVries. “What is surprising, however, is that the most popular search term was about organizational restructuring, with ‘SALT report explained’ searched over 220 times! Other popular search terms were ‘church order,’ ‘sermons,’ ‘worship,’ and ‘baptism.’” 

**The View From Here**

# The Simple and Counterintuitive Truth about Church Growth

**AT THE END OF HIS GOSPEL**, John remarks: “Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written” (John 21:25).

Much is written about Christianity and church growth. I’ve read a lot of those books. Many of them present hard data to create a sense of urgency around the topic. And the numbers are discouraging: beginning in the 1960s, the number of those affiliated with churches in North America has been in a constant decline that has accelerated in the past decade.

This is true within our denomination as well. Once someone left a Christian Reformed Church notepad on my desk that proudly displayed the slogan “400,000 by 2000.” Some will remember that this was a rallying cry in our denomination in the 1990s, when our membership numbers were plateauing. Unfortunately, instead of achieving this vision, today the CRC has only around 200,000 members.

Good books on church growth continue to be written by smart, successful pastors and church planters. Meanwhile, many of us who love the church feel increasingly anxious and confused.

I wish I had a solution to our church growth enigma (living off book royalties sounds like a pretty sweet deal!). Still, without claiming extraordinary charisma or spiritual insight, I can share two non-negotiable characteristics of a healthy, growing church. They are not rocket science, and they come

God promises  
to grow his  
church, and he  
will do it in his  
way and time.

directly from the most amazing story of church growth ever recorded: the Acts of the Apostles.

First, as we read Acts, Luke reminds us that a growing church is filled with people thirsty for a deep relationship with God through the Holy Spirit. Great movements of evangelism and explosive growth in Acts occur after times of sustained prayer and intercession, when the Holy Spirit empowers the disciples.

This truth is so simple and yet counterintuitive. It’s simple because we recognize that people come to faith because they encounter Jesus, who offers them hope in the midst of hurt and despair. We know that Jesus, through his Spirit, is present in a community that longs for him.

This truth is counterintuitive because we often assume it is our activity that brings people to God—our events, our programs, our facilities. People might be attracted to good programming, but they will want to stay in a Spirit-filled community where people are meeting Jesus and being fed by his Word.

Second, in the book of Acts we see a church animated by God’s boundless love for lost people. The disciples

gathered together for fellowship, prayer, and worship, but they were also constantly oriented outward: preaching the gospel, healing the sick, and sharing their belongings with the needy.

This too is both simple and counterintuitive. It’s simple because any movement will grow only insofar as it seeks to share its message with those outside it. However, it is counterintuitive because we are most comfortable among people like ourselves. Loving lost and hurting people who are different can be unpredictable and disruptive. Yet it is for such as these that our Savior died.

The growth of our churches is something I pray for and long for continually. God promises to grow his church, and he will do it in his way and time. There is no foolproof recipe that will provide an answer to our struggles. However, we know that growing churches passionately seek the presence of God through his Holy Spirit and they passionately seek to share Christ with lost and hurting people. May that be true of us. **B**



Rev. Zachary King is the general secretary of the CRCNA. He is a member of Fuller Avenue CRC in Grand Rapids, Mich.

Spanish and Korean translations of this editorial are available at [TheBanner.org](http://TheBanner.org).

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## Witnessing for Christ in Russia



One hundred Russian young people recently attended a two-hour master class on using literature and arts as tools for Christian witness.

**IN RUSSIA**, most Christians don't think to use literature and arts as tools for Christian witness. A church in St. Petersburg, Russia, is hoping to change that. The congregation recently asked ReFrame Ministries' Russian-language ministry team to host a workshop on the subject.

While some on the team were initially skeptical about the turnout for such a specialized workshop, after prayer and careful consideration, they decided to move forward with the event.

The master class was led by a member of ReFrame's Russian ministry team. Igor\* is a popular radio host and author known in Russia for his award-winning blog on the intersections of Christian faith and culture. Igor has a monthly readership of 60,000, and his writings and broadcasts reach non-believing students and young intellectuals who are searching for meaning and purpose in life. His daughter, Dasha, a university student, co-hosted the class.

### The Surprising Turnout: Young Russians Eager to Learn

The surprise came when nearly 100 young Russian Christians—mostly in

their late teens to early 20s—showed up for the two-hour event, with hundreds more watching online.

The war in Ukraine has sparked many negative changes in Russia. The political climate has worsened and the economy has faltered.

However, despite the potential dangers, young Russian believers are still eager to effectively share the hope and love of Christ with those around them. They recognize that only the good news of the gospel can overcome the evil of war and hatred.

### Building Bridges: New Approaches to Evangelism and Outreach

Igor began by explaining that in today's highly secular world, we can't witness effectively by simply quoting our favorite Scripture passages because the secular culture doesn't value the Bible. Instead, we must learn how to build a bridge between the gospel and the ethos of the early 21st century.

Literature from authors such as C.S. Lewis, Charles Dickens, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Leo Tolstoy, and some

contemporary authors can help establish an initial connection and point people to the Bible and, ultimately, to Christ.

Dasha shared about her ministry at a local church, where she regularly speaks to the youth group about biblical motifs in the works of famous artists.

The participants then had the opportunity to ask questions, such as which books they should read first and which authors are good recommendations for non-believers who refuse to turn to the Bible yet. Other questions included whether there is space for Christian faith in contemporary literature, what the dangers of modern culture are, and when the best time is to point a seeker to the Bible.

### Emboldened to Share Christ

The master class flew by, with attendees sharing their enthusiasm and encouragement at the end. One student, Inna, said she now feels emboldened to bring up Christian faith in conversations with her non-believing friends and in her social media posts. Dmitry, a young public high school teacher, found the suggestions for books with strong Christian themes to be very helpful.

Throughout the class Igor stressed that it is the work of the Spirit to use our testimony to bring others to Christian faith, but it is our responsibility to employ all the tools at our disposal to witness about Christ. Thanks to the Christian Reformed Church's faithful support, ReFrame Ministries has equipped young Russian Christians with the tools they need to effectively share the gospel in today's world.

—Sergei Sosedkin,  
ReFrame Ministries

\* Last names have been withheld for security reasons.

## Integrated Living in Leadership

**SARAH VISSER** occasionally jets out of her office a few minutes early. It's not that she's uncommitted to her role—she loves her work with students and faculty at Calvin University as the executive vice president for student experience and strategy. But every now and then, Visser runs from work prematurely to catch a glimpse of her daughter's fifth-grade volleyball game.

It's a delicate balance of caring for her three children while shepherding the almost 4,000 students and faculty at Calvin. And it's a role she doesn't take lightly.

"As a woman in leadership, I'm often asked about work-life balance. I find it nearly impossible to strike absolute balance, but I'm drawn to the concept of integrated living," Visser explained. "I am a whole person, and that means that I bring all of who I am into everything I do. I can't compartmentalize different areas of my life."

How she leads as a mom, she noted, spills into how she leads as a professional. And how she leads as a professional makes a difference in the way she parents. The two go hand in hand.



Sarah Visser is the executive vice president for student experience and strategy at Calvin University.

As a woman in a high-visibility position, Visser said, she uses her role to mentor and come alongside the other women in her purview. She encourages them to bring their entire selves—as mothers, daughters, sisters, wives, and friends—into the workplace.

"Your vocation is not a job," Visser explained. "It's who you're called to be. Where is God asking you to lead in your life?"

Much of Visser's leadership philosophy is undergirded by the concept of *imago Dei*: everyone is created in God's image. Regardless of one's gender, she said, fully "showing up" in one's leadership roles is an act of faithfulness and points others to God's creativity and complexity. We all benefit when every individual recognizes her or his unique calling as an agent of renewal in God's world.

"Organizations and communities are healthier when we have the full spectrum of voices around the table," Visser said. "Without women or other forms of diversity in leadership speaking into things, we are not able to fully live into all God has designed."

When Jesus faced his darkest days, it was the women who surrounded him, who joined him at the foot of the cross, and who were the first to testify to the empty tomb. Indeed, women's faithful leadership is honored throughout the biblical narrative. Visser sees this in her own story as well.

"I have seen that women can often sit in the emotion of things. They can walk toward the hard conversations and approach work conflicts with poise, grace, and warmth. Many of the women leaders I admire have demonstrated an ability to navigate challenges with grace, presence, and hope. ... God uses all components of our lives to help us lead and complete the work he's set before us, whether that's in the home, the workplace, the community, or the church," she concluded. "I may not be sufficient to complete the tasks at hand, but that's OK. When I lean into Jesus, I am reminded that he is more than sufficient to help me complete everything he's called me to do."

— Calvin University staff

## Hope in an Embrace

**I JOINED WORLD RENEW** during COVID-19 lockdowns. As restrictions eased in July 2022, I had the opportunity to join a learning trip to Honduras. Seeing World Renew's community development work in motion gave me new knowledge and a better understanding of the injustices in our world. But there is one memory that stands out.

In a room in a community building in the Honduran capital, Tegucigalpa, several women gathered to share with our group about all they gained from trauma healing sessions facilitated by World Renew's local partner, the Association for a More Just Society. Through a translator, some of the women shared their testimonies, telling about the scars inflicted on them by abusive partners or the shame they felt because of their alcohol abuse. As we said goodbye, one woman came up to me and hugged me. Smiling, she put her forehead against mine, and when I smiled back, she squeezed me tightly. She spoke no English and I no Spanish, but in her embrace, I understood her deep appreciation and the hope that healing from trauma had brought in her life.

About 13% of people worldwide have a mental health or substance use disorder. According to the World Health Organization, around 450 million people currently live with mental illness, making it the leading cause of disability worldwide. About 240 million people use alcohol problematically, and 15 million use injection drugs. And beyond these numbers, families and loved ones are also affected.

As World Renew walks alongside people living in poverty, we understand that for communities to achieve long-term food security and income stability, mental health issues must be addressed.



Several women gathered in Tegucigalpa, Honduras, to share how trauma healing sessions facilitated by World Renew's local partner, ASJ, have helped them.

Young single mothers in Lusaka, Zambia, are so ostracized by their families and communities that many—such as Joyce, who became a mother at age 15—contemplate ending their lives. A World Renew trauma healing program implemented through a local church in her community gave Joyce the tools to take on a new challenge: agricultural college. Now participating in an internship, Joyce feels useful and able to provide for her family.

In Laos, an addiction to opium left Kheo weak and unable to work. Her family did not know what to do. World Renew Laos helped get Kheo into a drug rehabilitation program. Today

she is healthy and works to support her family.

Support for those living with mental health conditions, trauma, and substance addiction is like the Honduran woman's hug: a warm and comforting acknowledgement of hope.

—Laurisa O'Brien



# One Gift. One Thousand Churches.

You have the unique opportunity to make an impact on all the congregations of the CRC with just one gift.

Your gift, in addition to ministry shares, ensures these twelve ministries have the resources to serve the one thousand churches of the CRC in their mission to share the love of God with their communities.

By supporting the CRC ministries, your gift reaches one thousand churches across North America.

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# An Impressive Feat

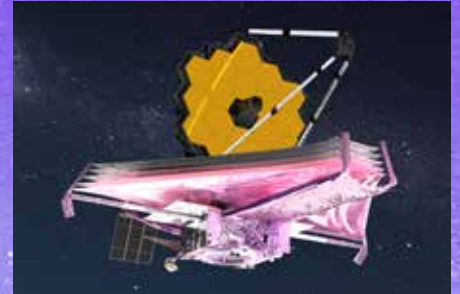
## The James Webb Space Telescope Shows Us Even More of God's Creation

**A TELESCOPE IS A TOOL** we can use to peer into God's vast universe. One of the earliest telescopes was made by the astronomer Galileo in 1609 and could be used to view Jupiter, Venus, and the craters on the moon. Telescopes changed the way people understood our place in this vast universe. They also teach us more about God's creation.

On Christmas Day 2021, the James Webb Space Telescope was launched. It helps us view distant galaxies, possible inhabitable planets, and the edges of the universe. It too will change the way people understand how amazing God is and more about this vast universe and our place in it. Telescopes help us discover God's order in the universe, and the people who designed them used God's laws for the universe to create these wonderful tools.

Galileo's telescope was a refractor telescope, which uses two types of lenses—convex (curved outward) and concave (curved inward)—to view objects far away. The inventors of these telescopes needed to understand God's rules for how light refracts, or changes direction, when it passes through different objects. They also had to create massive glass lenses without imperfections. The largest such lens was made in the 1890s and is 43 inches (109 centimeters) across—an impressive feat!

The James Webb telescope is a reflector telescope that uses several concave mirrors to view objects far away. The inventors of reflector telescopes needed to understand God's rules for how light reflects off mirrors. Some of these mirrors are more than 30 feet across—another impressive feat! But for the best views of faraway objects, telescopes need to be in space. The Webb telescope has 18 gold-plated



mirrors that folded together to fit in the rocket that sent it to space. When the mirrors unfolded, they made a single mirror spanning 21 feet. All the individual mirrors had to be perfectly placed in order to work—and they do! Another impressive feat!

To use the James Webb telescope in space, scientists not only have to understand God's rules for light, but have to use God's rules for heat and orbital movement to know how best to use it. If the telescope becomes too hot, the images become distorted. So scientists created an aluminum-covered sunshield to keep it cool. Scientists also planned for the telescope to move in a three-dimensional halo orbit meant to keep it out of the shadows cast by the earth and the moon. Scientists have successfully used God's order in the universe to see God's order in the universe! It's an impressive feat!

Isaiah 40:21 describes God "stretching out the heavens like a canopy and spreading them out like a tent to live in." With God's gift of order in light, we can create telescopes to help us view God's great big universe in unbelievable ways—an impressive feat! **B**



Albert Kok teaches eighth grade at Beacon Christian School in St. Catharines, Ont. He loves teaching science and exploring God's order in creation as he hikes the Bruce Trail with his family.



# The Culture War-ification of the CRC

By Brandon Haan

**I**n the days after Synod 2022, as I and many others were processing what had just happened, I wrote to a few friends:

“We just witnessed the broader culture war play out in the Christian Reformed Church. This is Trudeau vs. truckers. Trump vs. Biden. Vaxxers vs. anti-vaxxers. Republican vs. Democrat. White nationalism vs. Black Lives Matter. Secular humanism vs. civil religion—all the things that divide us, playing out in an ecclesiastical arena.”

I wasn't referring so much to the actual decisions of synod (which, full disclosure, I largely agreed with). Nor was I referring to the deliberations themselves (though any time delegates start shouting each other down, the culture war has reared its ugly head). Instead, I was referring to the tone and tenor of the denomination-wide

discussion that led up to and surrounded synod and, I assumed, would continue after synod.

In other words, the conflict over sexuality in the CRC is a symptom of deeper cultural divisions and disagreements and the way we do (or, more accurately, don't) talk about them.

## The Strategies of the Broader Culture

I highly doubt there was ever a CRC “golden age.”

I've learned over the years to distrust narratives of “golden ages” and “good ol' days,” first, because “good ol' days” are often “good” only for those in power and, second, because such eras are often more imagined than actual.

That said, there does seem to have been a time when the CRC functioned as a counterweight to the broader culture. At times aligning with one perspective, at others another, we

were a thoughtful, countercultural bunch who prided ourselves on being beholden to no one but Christ. Some might say that, given our historical penchant for nuance and depth, CRC folks might be able to make a real difference for the kingdom of Christ if we ever woke up and went beyond simply appointing multi-year study committees and making synodical pronouncements.

Given our current trajectory, though, I doubt we'll ever reach that full potential. The fact is that, far from functioning as a countercultural critic of the forces militating against Christ and his kingdom, we've instead adopted the strategies of those forces and, like so many others, become pawns in the broader culture war instead of serving as the thoughtful, prophetic critics we're called to be.

Our tactics prove this. It's not hard to see how we've increasingly imported



the strategies of the broader culture war into our denominational conflicts. Might-makes-right aggression, character defamation, cancel culture, relativized truth, “telling it like it is”—none of which is biblical—are now the methods we use to disparage, denigrate, and defeat each other, all in the name of winning whatever battle we think we need to win.

### A Post on Prayer

A little over a year ago I was invited to pray with Colin Watson, who at the time was the CRC’s executive director. We were in the run-up to Synod 2022, and, as a way of fostering trust, understanding, and unity, Watson had invited all the classes of the CRC, a few at a time, to join him in a weekly Zoom prayer meeting.

My call went fine. I don’t remember which other classes participated in this meeting, but a few of us from Classis Grandville joined and had a great experience.

I mentioned that to one of the organizers afterward and thanked him for helping to put the call together. He responded by asking me if I would consider posting about it in the “Pastors of the Christian Reformed Church” Facebook group (yes, that’s a thing) to encourage other pastors to attend. I told him I would, but I also told him how it would go.

You see, like posts everywhere else on the internet, posts in that group seem to follow a pattern:

Step One: Someone posts a thoughtful, nuanced question, comment, or idea, looking for advice, insight, feedback, or simply good conversation.

Step Two: Three or four people like the comment, engage constructively, and contribute to the discussion.

It’s not hard to see how we’ve increasingly imported the strategies of the broader culture war into our denominational conflicts.

Step Three: A new person comments. They post some sort of non sequitur, ad hominem attack, or semi-aggressive pushback that hijacks the conversation and takes it in an entirely new direction unrelated to the original post.

Step Four: Everything goes off the rails, the initial post gets lost in the mire, and the whole thing devolves into debating, attacking, and keyboard-yelling for the next two days.

That’s what I told the guy who asked me to post would happen—and that’s exactly what happened.

Here’s my original post from Feb. 7, 2022:

“Full disclosure: I rarely visit this page and almost never post, so I don’t really have chips to cash in here (feel free to ignore this post), but, for what it’s worth, I would highly encourage you all to take part in the weekly prayer time

with Colin Watson when it’s your turn (they’re inviting a couple classes each week). We might not all agree as CRC pastors (as is often evidenced on this page), but we should at least be able to pray together (even with those we don’t like or agree with). If we can’t do that, then I humbly think there’s little else we’ll be able to do as a church either.”

It took two comments—two—before the devolution started.

Of the next 19 comments, only three had to do with the original post. All the rest turned into a debate over if and when people who disagree can pray together, what biblical texts might justify not praying together, and how many “false prophets” we have for pastors in the CRC.

I’m not making this up. The culture war couldn’t even leave a simple post about prayer alone.

### Implications

The results of this culture war-ification are hardly good (to say nothing of not being Christlike).

First, we’ve lost trust in each other. That’s what happens when you turn a church into a war zone. Everyone devolves into picking sides, virtue signaling, and litmus-testing each other into oblivion. Instead of seeing each other as brothers and sisters in Christ, we’ve chosen to give skeptical side-eyes to each other in congregation, council, classis, and synod meetings, wondering: *Who’s on our side? Who isn’t? Who’s right? Who’s wrong? Whom can we rely on? Whom can’t we?* That’s our attitude toward each other, and, as a result, we’ve lost trust in all but a select few.

Second, we’re splintering apart along ideological fault lines at an alarmingly fast pace.

The truth is we're fast becoming more allied to our respective interest groups and personal positions than we are to each other or to Christ. For instance, the formation of All One Body a decade ago, The Abide Project a few years ago, the more recent Hessed Project, and the most recent Better Together group are a few such examples. Their stated goals (depending on your perspective) are good, even admirable, but the result has been anything but. As each one publishes, posts, and podcasts, recruits members, and tries to convince others of their positions, we're becoming more and more divided, more and more angry, and more and more incapable of sitting across the table (or Calvin University's Covenant Fine Arts Center) from those we disagree with.

Finally, we seem to care more about winning than about people.

I'll be honest: in the wake of Synod 2022, a part of me was hopeful. I was hopeful we could finally start doing what we said we'd do in 1973, when synod said we must do better at ministering to people in the LGBTQ+ community. I was hopeful that, even as a non-affirming denomination with a traditional perspective on the Bible, we could begin the process of becoming the radically inclusive, hospitable, gracious, kind, loving denomination we said we'd become 50 years ago.

Unfortunately, in the time since, I've instead watched multiple people, groups, classes, and overtures seek to open up more fronts of the battle. "The fight continues, and we will fight on," seems to be the mantra, and, along the way we've completely forgotten the people—the image-bearers of God—we've left in our wake as collateral. In other words, we're so focused on winning that people no longer seem to matter.

### **What Next?**

So what do we do? Where do we go? How do we start to roll back the tide and fix this?

Well, none of these possible solutions is new. I know that. I also know from personal experience that none of them is easy. But if at least a few of us will try, we might at least be able to do some good.


First, we need to stop seeing each other as opponents or enemies to be defeated and instead as brothers and sisters in Christ. How do we do that? One way is to be curious. Check out the Colossian Forum. Stream Monica Guzman's excellent January Series talk. Or just watch that one amazing scene from *Ted Lasso* (yes, I know there's an f-bomb, but it's worth it). They all say the same thing: we need to be willing to sit down with those we disagree with, ask questions, and try—really try—to understand them. In a world as polarized and angry as ours is, curiosity is a balm for the soul, a force for healing, and a winsome witness for Christ. It might not bring us or keep us all together, but at least it can offer the dignity, value, and respect we all deserve.

Second, pray. Pray for our church. Pray for each other. Pray for those you agree with. Pray for those you disagree with. And regardless of what the "Pastors of the Christian Reformed Church" think, pray *with* them too. After all, if we really believe what we say we do—that God is sovereign and all-powerful and that the Holy Spirit changes hearts—then prayer is our best strategy for healing, hope, and transformation.

Finally, don't lose the forest for the trees. We are a gospel-centered denomination. We exist to point people to Jesus. And we are called to love them in the process. The discussions and debates we're currently

having matter. I'll be the first to say they do. There is much at stake for people on all sides, and I understand that. But if we come to a point where we care more about winning an encounter, a battle, or a war than we do our mission, we've lost something. If, in the process of being "right," we engage in unChristlike or unbiblical tactics, harm or hurt others, or make it so that others can't believe in God or God's church, then we're wrong.

My friends, it's time to lay down our arms. It's time to call a ceasefire. It's time to end the war.

After all, that's what our Savior did. He didn't hammer the nails. He took them. And I humbly believe that, following in the way of our Savior, it's time we do the same. 



Brandon Haan serves as the Senior Pastor at Ivanrest Church in Grandville, Mich. He lives in Grandville with his wife, Sarah, and their two sons, Levi and Titus.

1. How do you view the "Culture War" in the United States?
2. Have you witnessed similar incidents on social media, or in person, where conversations on seemingly innocent topics devolve into a "culture war" argument? How did it devolve? How did you feel?

**READ MORE ONLINE**

## ChatGPT Blues

I'd like to think  
that life and  
learning are  
about making  
connections  
with people.



Ilka Luyt attends Westside Christian Reformed Church in Kingston, Ont. She teaches writing courses at postsecondary universities in Ontario and New York.

**CHATGPT IS THE NEW** artificial intelligence tool upending higher education. It is a language-based computer model that simulates human thinking by generating language. By gathering language from different sources such as *Wikipedia*, books, websites, and other texts, it can predict a missing word and write short answers, paragraphs, and essays based on a few keywords. ChatGPT might mimic human language, but it lacks one element that distinguishes us as intelligent, spiritual beings: authentic voices.

Writing teachers show students that certain steps in the writing process cannot be skipped. Brainstorming, drafting, revising, and editing are all acquired but necessary skills. These steps are messy, they overlap, and sometimes they require repeated attempts, much like our spiritual journeys of repentance, salvation, and ongoing sanctification. It takes years to develop skills in a field, and it might take a lifetime to follow Jesus as we should, but each year, each “rough draft” or setback means that I am stronger than I was a day, a month, a year ago.

Authenticity means hard work, which is something ChatGPT doesn't know. For ChatGPT, authenticity means algorithms. It has a network of perceptrons—computer programs consisting of multiple inputs and outputs. Unfortunately, these perceptrons lack the spiritual perception and “heart knowledge” that comes with the hard work of living in relationships. King Solomon's heartfelt response to two mothers fighting over one baby (1 Kings 3:16-28) teaches us that value judgments based purely on hardened knowledge can never satisfy. Christians are asked to make nuanced decisions based on compassion and love for others, especially the marginalized.

I always encourage my students to develop their writing voices. A “voice” is a unique writing style that can be identified by the writer's word choices or sentence structure, but it also means that the writer has something important to say. Describing writing as truth-telling, Anne Lamott in *Bird by Bird* says, “You are desperate to communicate, to edify or entertain, to preserve moments of grace or joy or transcendence, to make real or imagined events come alive. But you cannot will this to happen. It is a matter of persistence and faith and hard work.” For Lamott, a writer's voice hinges on an idea or a story, not on predictive analytics. ChatGPT's data input ended in 2021, so it is unaware of current events or trends since that time. ChatGPT is in a perpetual time loop and simply reflects what others have plugged into its system. It is not generating original content coming from a hard-earned understanding of the old and the new.

I'd like to think that life and learning are about making connections with people. Living with others can reveal our fears and frustrations, but people, especially those who are different from us or who challenge our worldviews, can give us the most beautiful gifts. As Christ-followers, sharing these human connections is a messy process that takes time. ChatGPT might mimic human language, but it fails miserably at saying something significant because it works in isolation, far removed from a writer's real-world struggles. It reports rather than creates. Our own ability to create is a hallmark of our God-derived identity. Much like learning any skill, the process of becoming authentic Christ-followers is a long journey consisting of fits and starts and endless remarking. Focusing on this difficult process rather than a product needs to be honored. **B**

# Exploring the Divine Mystery

Walking the road  
of faith is not  
about knowing,  
but about  
staying curious  
about what we  
do not know.



Sam Gutierrez is the associate director at the Eugene Peterson Center for the Christian Imagination at Western Theological Seminary. More of his creative work can be found at [printandpoem.com](http://printandpoem.com).

**IN 1991**, a nationwide contest was announced.

The news spread through thousands of grade schools across the country. Children in classrooms penned their most creative essays, crossed their fingers, and hoped their submission would be chosen.

The engineers at NASA sifted through thousands of entries to find the perfect name to capture the spirit and mission of the car-sized planetary rover that would travel millions of miles to Mars to explore the alien surface. Finally, after months of deliberation, the engineers reached a consensus. They issued a news release and announced the name submitted by 12-year-old Clara Ma of Sunflower Elementary School in Lenexa, Kan.: *Curiosity*.

“*Curiosity*,” Ma had written, “is an everlasting flame that burns in everyone’s mind. It makes me get out of bed in the morning and wonder what surprises life will throw at me that day. *Curiosity* is such a powerful force. Without it, we wouldn’t be who we are today. *Curiosity* is the passion that drives us through our everyday lives. We have become explorers and scientists with our need to ask questions and to wonder.”

## Getting to Know the Trinity

Every year in the church calendar, we celebrate the gift of God’s life-giving Spirit on Pentecost Sunday. Then we are quickly ushered into the second half of the liturgical year, known as Ordinary Time. This lengthy and important stretch of time begins with Trinity Sunday. Trinity Sunday roots the church and its being to the mysterious, wonderful, all-encompassing life of the Triune God—Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer.

One of the ancient creeds that many Christians confess (besides

the familiar Apostles’ Creed) is the Athanasian Creed. It was named after Athanasius of Alexandria (293-373), a champion of orthodoxy against the heresies of his day. If you really want to make your brain hurt, spend some time reading the entire creed online. But if you want a quick summary of essential Trinitarian teaching, you can hold onto this concept: There is one God in three distinct persons who are equal in divinity. To deny any of these three things—oneness, distinctiveness, or equality—is to stumble headfirst into heresy (untrue statements or beliefs). The Athanasian Creed explains:

We worship **one** God in trinity and the trinity in unity, neither blending their persons nor dividing their essence. For the person of the Father is a **distinct** person, the person of the Son is another, and that of the Holy Spirit still another. But the divinity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is one, their glory **equal**, their majesty coeternal [emphases added].

When it comes to the mystery of the Trinity as revealed in Scripture, some have noted (with a hint of suspicion) that the word “Trinity” is never mentioned in the Bible—and that is true. However, like the NASA rover rolling around the Martian surface, carefully noticing subtle patterns and doing a deep dive with analytical tools, early theologians were curious about the repeating patterns of God’s revelation in three distinct persons found in Scripture. It’s not easy to name and describe a superior spiritual being, so it’s no surprise that it took the church almost 400 years to give faithful language to the God revealed in Scripture.



Photo: NASA

Clara Ma, winner of the contest to name NASA's Curiosity rover, in 2009 with an engineering model of the rover.

### Curiosity

After Clara Ma's name for the Mars rover was selected, she was flown to NASA's Jet Propulsion Lab in California to see the rover up close and sign her name on the vehicle's underside. Her signature represents every human name, a diverse humanity driven by a passionate curiosity—that powerful force that gets us up in the morning and motivates us to seek knowledge and meaning.


On the surface of Mars, the rover named Curiosity is slowly rolling around, exploring a strange and provocative planetary surface covered in red dust and jagged boulders. At

the start of Ordinary Time, the church is encouraged to embrace a spirit of patient curiosity as it participates in the mysterious life of the Trinity by seeking to know God and love God in all the ordinary moments of life and hungering to discover and learn where God is present and working.

But too often when we encounter a mystery, we get frustrated and give up, resigned never to know or fully understand. The Athanasian Creed encourages us to engage the mystery of God's self-revelation in a particular way when it says, "Anyone who then desires to be saved should think thus about the Trinity." Thinking our way to knowing can be helpful in one sense, but thinking hard about the Trinity will ultimately lead to a dead end. Only when we surrender to God's grace can holy mysteries become doorways that lead to never-ending discoveries.

In fact, all throughout our lives we are brave explorers of the divine, endlessly curious about the Trinity's inner landscape of grace and the subtle contours of God's self-giving love. This, in large part, is what it means to be a Christian. Walking the road of faith is not about knowing, but about staying curious about what we do not know. Faith is trusting that the divine mystery is a doorway that we can walk through

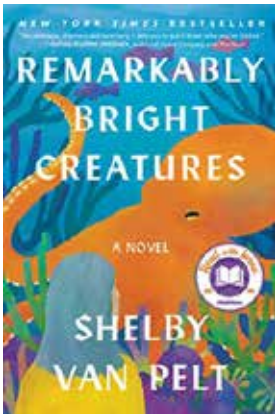
and explore endlessly with wild curiosity. As we participate by loving God and loving our neighbor, there are surprising discoveries along the way, and our knowledge of God indeed deepens and grows.

In Ordinary Time, the church goes into the world as the body of Christ. As it goes to every far-reaching corner, Trinity Sunday is at the beginning, reminding the church that it participates in the divine life rather than creating it. The work is fully trinitarian—Father, Son, and Spirit working to heal and bring about wholeness to a creation fractured and broken because of the devastating effects of sin. Through faith, by the power of the Spirit, the church participates in this good work while fanning a burning flame of curiosity about the God revealed in three persons—one God, beautiful and glorious, now and forever. 

1. Has your church typically observed Trinity Sunday of the Christian liturgical calendar? Or how has your church highlighted the doctrine of the Trinity in the past?
2. Have you been curious about the doctrine of the Trinity? Why or why not?

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# Summer Reading Guide: A Little Something for Every Bookish Soul



## Remarkably Bright Creatures

By Shelby Van Pelt

Reviewed by Lorilee Craker

It seemed as if everyone had this sweet, quirky debut on their list of top 10 books for 2022, and when I finally read it recently for my book club, I could see why. Starring Marcellus, a giant Pacific octopus, as part-time narrator and full-time wiseman (or “remarkably bright creature”), this novel winsomely takes on the challenges of aging, dying, grief, and messy family relationships.

We meet Marcellus as he contemplates his captivity at an aquarium, an imprisonment made more bearable by his friendship with Tova, the prim 70-year-old night custodian. How Tova solves the mystery surrounding her 18-year-old son’s long-ago death with the help of Marcellus and others is a marvel and a delight. Entertaining, insightful, and warmhearted, this mainstream book will easily make my top 10 list—for 2023. (Ecco)



## Lilith: A Romance

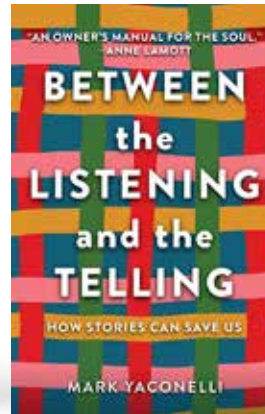
By George MacDonald

Reviewed by Sara Kyoungah White

George MacDonald’s visionary and dark novel *Lilith: A Romance*, first published in 1895, has been republished with a preface by poet Malcolm Guite and an introduction by scholar Kirstin Jeffrey Johnson.

Regarded by C.S. Lewis as one of MacDonald’s greatest works, *Lilith* follows the story of Mr. Vane as he passes between his haunted manor and the parallel worlds he discovers within it. Led by a ghostly, bird-like man he calls Mr. Raven, Mr. Vane embarks on an eerie and life-altering adventure through a Victorian multiverse, encountering a macabre host of characters who roam the gate between death and life.

“This is not a book to skim and discard, but the companion of a lifetime,” writes Guite. “This book is an always open door.” ([worksofmacdonald.com](http://worksofmacdonald.com))



## Between the Listening and the Telling: How Stories Can Save Us

By Mark Yaconelli

Reviewed by Sam Gutierrez

We live in a time of polarization. Mark Yaconelli believes he has a cure or at least a medicine with mysterious healing power: stories.

One day, while volunteering at a church food pantry, Yaconelli wonders if there could be a kind of “soup kitchen for the soul,” a place where folks on the margins of society—people full of longing and loneliness—could come to find nourishment. Inspired, he begins *The Hearth*, a local nonprofit with an emphasis on community building through story.

*Between the Listening and the Telling* is about the power of stories. The medicinal power of storytelling brings personal healing, helps us build bridges, and dismantles the fears and suspicions of our current age to create a more understanding and compassionate world and future. (Broadleaf Books)



## Taste and See: All About God’s Goodness

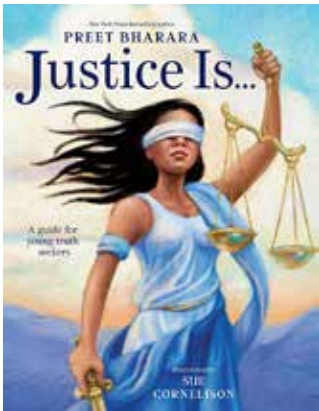
By Irene Sun,  
illustrated by

Hannah Y. Lu

Reviewed by Mary Li Ma

The verse “Taste and see that the LORD is good” (Ps. 34:8) connects our spiritual experience to that of eating food or feasting. As our basic subsistence, food is written about throughout the Bible, from fruit trees in Eden, manna in the wilderness, and bread and fish by the sea of Galilee to the final feast with God in the new heaven and earth. The satisfying emotions of eating good food foreshadow something infinitely more satisfying: “We are waiting for the feast, where the Lamb will be our peace.”

This children’s book offers an accessible lesson in theology. Using rhymes and biblical images, it teaches children that everything their hearts hunger for points to God and God’s goodness. (New Growth Press)



## Justice Is...: A Guide for Young Truth Seekers

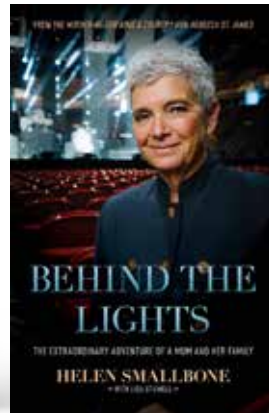
By Preet Bharara,  
illustrated by Sue  
Cornelison

Reviewed by Mary Li Ma

In this children's book, former U.S. attorney Preet Bharara introduces the important and complex concept of justice. The book begins with Frederick Douglass telling Abraham Lincoln, "Justice is important. It takes hard work ... and an open mind."

Children will learn about the unique contributions of historic justice seekers. For example, an illustration of journalist and anti-lynching activist Ida B. Wells documenting a Black man being captured is accompanied by this simple sentence: "Justice asks questions, lots of them." The book also teaches that justice can take time. A depiction of how an imprisoned young Nelson Mandela became a president with gray hair is paired with the statement "Justice can be slow."

Even so, the theme of hope shines bright: "Justice is always there—waiting for good people to find their voices." (Crown Books for Young Readers)

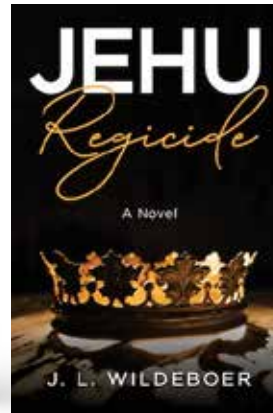


## Behind the Lights

By Helen Smallbone

Reviewed by Paul Delger

Helen Smallbone knows the Christian music business, yet she has never performed on stage, written a song, or recorded an album. She married a music promotions director and is the mother of three of the top names in Christian music: Rebecca St. James and Joel and Luke Smallbone of King & Country. *Behind the Lights* is a memoir of how Smallbone and her family moved from Australia to the United States and experienced God's direction through difficulties and victories. The Smallbone siblings—five men and two women—are a tight-knit bunch and live their lives with devotion to God, hard work, and using their individual gifts. Smallbone's delightful stories offer a glimpse of the joys and the challenging aspects of the Christian music industry. (KLOVE Books)



## Jehu: Regicide

By J.L. Wildeboer

Reviewed by Trevor Denning

Drawing from the events recorded in 1 Kings and 2 Chronicles, author J.L. Wildeboer weaves a story with George R.R. Martin-like intricacy.

In the era of Elijah and Elisha, Ahab and Jezebel, and the split kingdom, Israel and Judah are draining their resources fighting each other. The rulers of neighboring kingdoms Phoenicia, Assyria, Aram, and others look for an opportunity to topple both. Told from the perspectives of historical characters, this is the story of how God's people came perilously close to politicking themselves out of existence.

Readers will gain a deeper understanding of how God works through impossible situations and imperfect people to do God's will. (Resource Publications)



## Sparrow's Prayer

By Roger Hutchinson,  
illustrated by  
Ag Jatkowska

Reviewed by Adele Gallogly

Every morning, Sparrow stretches his wings, whistles a tune, and says a prayer of thanks to God. But one day he feels ... different. He is anxious and restless. Is it the dreary weather? A lack of sleep? Hunger? All he knows for sure is that when he tries to pray, "his words get tangled and knotted in his beak like old yarn and straw."

So begins *Sparrow's Prayer*, a lushly illustrated children's book with a story that is likely to resonate with readers of many ages.

Children navigating the mysteries of prayer might be heartened by Sparrow's discoveries and charmed by the woodland creatures. Adults too might be nourished by this simple yet spiritually rich book. Its final pages include discussion questions. (Beaming Books)



## Chicken Scratch: Lessons on Living Creatively From a Flock of Hens

By Ann Byle

Reviewed by Sonya VanderVeen Feddema

Author Ann Byle draws on the delightful, humorous, and at times sad real-life experiences of caring for a flock of chickens, and she skillfully forges parallels to the challenges, joys, and victories of people like herself who long to be creative in different ways. Byle's "dream for *Chicken Scratch* is that it inspires you to take the next right step in your creative life, to realize your creative dreams, and to move ever forward."

Byle's fun-to-read, exceptional creative effort includes resources for embracing creativity, stories of creative frustrations and failures, new insights and successes on the creative journey, tips for next steps to put creative principles into action, folktales about chickens, new creative activities that Byle undertook, scientific facts about hens, and hilarious and insightful quotes about chickens. (Broadleaf Books)



## The Secrets of Emberwild

By Stephenia H. McGee

Reviewed by Sonya VanderVeen Feddema

In March 1905, in Neshoba County, Miss., 28-year-old Nora Fenton lives with her mother and her dying father on Emberwild Horse Farm. For years, Nora has chafed under the social pressure to escape the perceived doom of spinsterhood and give in and marry. But she is convinced that it would be better for her to be "a spinster with freedom than a pretty rug to be wiped under a husband's boots." Besides, she's an accomplished horse trainer—even though no one takes her seriously because she's a woman—and feels "more at home surrounded by horse-flesh than humanity."

Brimming with Christian hope, *The Secrets of Emberwild* offers insights into the social restrictions faced by women in the early 1900s and the fascinating world of horses, county fairs, and horse racing. (Revell)



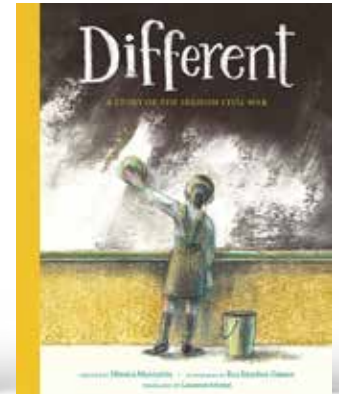
## The Story of Us

By Mitali Perkins, illustrated by Kristen Howdeshell and Kevin Howdeshell

Reviewed by Sonya VanderVeen Feddema

In sparse, lyrical prose, Mitali Perkins, a renowned Christian author of young adult novels and children's picture books, imagines God creating the world: "One day, Creator came— / to sort the mess, / using Them to make Us. / Air. / Water. / Earth. / Fire." Perkins then relates how, in the perfection of the Garden of Eden, the natural elements "were for Us. / We were for Them." Adam and Eve enjoyed the fresh air, the quenching rains, the fertile soil, and the flames of a cooking fire.

Kristen Howdeshell's and Kevin Howdeshell's vigorous artwork complements Perkins's narrative by capturing the joy and majesty of God's perfect creation, the despair and destruction of a fallen world, and the hope and expectation of a redeemed and restored cosmos. (Beaming Books)



## Different: A Story of the Spanish Civil War

By Mónica Montañés, illustrated by Eva Sanchez Gomez

Reviewed by Sonya VanderVeen Feddema

Based on the true stories of author Mónica Montañés' father's childhood during the Spanish Civil War (1936-39), this novel for middle-grade readers relates how the lives of 9-year-old Paco and his 7-year-old sister, Socorro, suddenly change when their father is forced to flee Spain because of his political affiliation with the old Republic.

Eight years later, when the children leave Spain with their mother and are reunited with their father in Venezuela, they realize how they have been changed by their experiences.

Eva Sanchez Gomez's contrasting light and dark oil pastel illustrations depict the gloom of war and the sorrow of displacement, but also the joy of family reunion and the lushness of a new land. (Eerdmans Books for Young Readers)



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

**Down**

- 1. Marcellus the \_\_\_\_\_, a “remarkably bright creature”
- 2. Newly appointed U.S. director of ministry operations
- 3. The simple and \_\_\_\_\_ truth about church growth
- 5. The rover Curiosity explores this planet
- 9. Winner of this year’s Kuyper Prize
- 11. A \_\_\_\_\_ lets us peer into God’s vast universe
- 13. A new artificial intelligence tool
- 15. Helen \_\_\_\_\_ is the author of a new memoir
- 16. City where a train derailed

**Across**

- 4. A free downloadable curriculum from Resonate
- 6. \_\_\_\_\_ Perkins, author of *The Story of Us*
- 7. We shouldn’t get hung up on perfectionism or \_\_\_\_\_
- 8. Capital of Honduras
- 10. One way to stop seeing people as enemies
- 12. We can do better at looking like a community shaped by \_\_\_\_\_
- 14. \_\_\_\_\_ Sundays are a new thing at The Journey church
- 17. Parable of the Good \_\_\_\_\_
- 18. Type of classes offered at First CRC in Oostburg, Wis.

Answers to the May 2023 puzzle



At Calvin University, you can dream bigger. Think deeper. Aim higher. Become part of a university that challenges you to go beyond what you ever thought possible as Christ’s agents of renewal in the world.

→ [calvin.edu/go-beyond](https://calvin.edu/go-beyond)



**DEADLINES:** Ads for the July/August issue are due June 12, 2023; September issue: July 31, 2023. Subject to availability. Details online at [thebanner.org/classifieds](http://thebanner.org/classifieds), or for display ads see [thebanner.org/ads](http://thebanner.org/ads). Advertising in *The Banner* does not imply editorial endorsement.

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### Congregational Announcements

**COVENANT HOPE CHURCH OF BATTLE CREEK** (formerly BC Christian Reformed; Riverwalk; Christ Community) will be having their final worship service on Sunday, June 4th at 10:00 am. The Congregation is thankful to God for 90 years of fruitful ministry. We wish to invite those with a previous history at Covenant Hope to join us for this final service.

### Denominational Announcements

**CALL TO SYNOD 2023** The council of Church of the Servant CRC, Grand Rapids, Michigan, calls all delegates to Synod 2023, elected by their respective classes, to meet in the chapel on the campus of Calvin University in Grand Rapids, Michigan, on Friday, June 9, at 8:30 a.m. All area CRC members are invited to join the delegates in worship at the synodical Service of Prayer and Praise on Sunday evening, June 11, 2023, at 5:00 p.m. at Church of the Servant CRC, 3835 Burton St SE, Grand Rapids, Michigan. All CRC churches across the continent are requested to remember the deliberations of synod in their intercessory prayers on Sunday, June 4, and Sunday, June 11.

Council of Church of the Servant CRC, Grand Rapids, Michigan

### Church Positions Available

**CAMPUS PASTOR** Geneva Campus Church (Madison, WI) is eagerly seeking to employ a full-time campus pastor or ministry director to fulfill its mission to the University of Wis-

consin. Visit our website for more information: [genevacampuschurch.org/jobs](http://genevacampuschurch.org/jobs). To apply, send resume with cover letter to [office@genevacampuschurch.org](mailto:office@genevacampuschurch.org).

**DIRECTOR OF WORSHIP & YOUTH** Aylmer Christian Reformed Church, located in Aylmer, Ontario, is seeking a full-time Director of Worship & Youth. The ideal candidate is a deeply committed follower of Jesus Christ with musical gifts and experience leading worship, as well as having a passion for working with youth. A complete job description is available on the church website: [www.aylmercrc.org](http://www.aylmercrc.org)

**FULL TIME PASTOR IN OREGON** Christ Community Church in Tualatin, OR is seeking a full-time pastor who desires to proclaim God's Word through preaching, discipling and in working with us to reach our community for Christ. Please contact Bob Brown at 503-939-8940 or [rbrown71@hotmail.com](mailto:rbrown71@hotmail.com). Our website is [crchurchtualatin.com](http://crchurchtualatin.com).

**FULL TIME YOUTH DIRECTOR:** Bethel CRC, Edgerton, MN is looking to hire a full time Youth Director to work with approximately 50 high school students. This individual must exhibit a genuine faith, hope and love in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord and have a passion and gifts necessary to build a strong youth program. A full job description can be located on the Bethel website, [www.betheledgerton.org](http://www.betheledgerton.org), under the resource tab. Send cover letter and resume to [bethelcrcedgerton@yahoo.com](mailto:bethelcrcedgerton@yahoo.com) or contact Bethel CRC for additional details.

**FULL TIME YOUTH DIRECTOR:** Faith CRC in Sioux Center, IA is a growing and dynamic congregation looking to hire a full time Youth Director. This individual must be organized with attention to details and ability to articulate and exhibit strong genuine faith, hope and love in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. Primary responsibility would be to provide vision and leadership for the youth group, Jr. high students, and other youth education in the church. A full job description of the position can be located at [www.faith-crc.org](http://www.faith-crc.org). Send cover letter and resume to [office@faith-crc.org](mailto:office@faith-crc.org) or contact us for additional details.

**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](mailto:janiceviss@sbcglobal.net)

**HIRING FULL-TIME SENIOR PASTOR** Tacoma Christian Reformed Community Church (TCRCC) is seeking a full-time Senior Pastor passionate about preaching the word of God and engaging a multi-generational congregation in pastoral care. Located in Tacoma, Washington of the Great Pacific Northwest—with views of the Puget Sound and Mt. Rainier—TCRCC emphasizes selfless service. This senior pastor will lead the TCRCC congregation in the Christian Reformed Church tradition. If interested in applying, visit [www.tacomacrc.org](http://www.tacomacrc.org).



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**LEAD PASTOR POSITION** Immanuel CRC located in the beautiful Hudson Valley of NY, seeks a Lead Pastor to take our growing congregation into the future. Please contact



**Covenant Hope Church of Battle Creek**  
(formerly BC Christian Reformed; Riverwalk; Christ Community)

will be having their final worship service on  
**Sunday, June 4th at 10:00 am.**

The congregation is thankful to God for 90 years of fruitful ministry. We wish to invite those with a previous history at Covenant Hope Church to join us for this final service.

Michael Tooth, Secretary of the Search Committee, at (347) 415-4969 or email him at mi.tooth@yahoo.com.

**WORSHIP COORDINATOR** Lakeside Community Church is a healthy and growing church in Alto, MI searching for a gifted part-time worship coordinator. Guitar skills are preferred. For more info, contact Dave Bosscher at pastordave@lakeside.church or 616-821-4548

### Church Anniversary

#### CHURCH ANNIVERSARY 100 YEARS

**A CHURCH ON THE MOVE** First Christian Reformed Church of Sioux Falls, SD will celebrate their centennial, 100 Years of Memories and Ministry, on September 9 & 10, 2023. For more information go to firstchristianreformed.org.

### Retirement

**RETIREMENT ANNOUNCEMENT** The Council of Trinity CRC in Abbotsford wishes to announce the retirement of our Pastor Andrew Van der Leek after 37 years of ministry. Andrew has served 5 churches and has been on several denominational and classical committees. We will celebrate these years with Andrew and his wife, Irene, the evening of June 24th. Thoughts and words of encouragement may be sent to: Celebration, Trinity CRC, PO Box 2268, 3215 Trethewey Street, V2T4X2 or email office@trinitycrc.ca.

### Anniversary

#### WEDDING ANNIVERSARY 60 YEARS

**ROOS**, Ken & Margaret Of Ripon, Ca, will be celebrating their 60th anniversary on June 14th. We thank God for the blessing they have been to their family and pray that God will sustain them and grant them more wonderful years together. Please send notes of congratulations to 1457 Nikkel Way, Ripon, CA 95366



**VAN DER SILK**, Jack R. and Gertrude J. (Bonnie Bonnema) celebrate their 60th wedding anniversary on June 29, 2023. Married in Hilcrest CRC in Denver CO, their odyssey took them to East Lansing, MI (Michigan

State U), Carbondale, IL (Southern Illinois U), Palos Heights, IL (Trinity Christian College), Springfield, IL (U of Illinois Springfield). They retired to Port St. Lucie, FL, and now reside in John Knox Village at 5-A Westlake Dr., Orange City, FL 32763. Their married children are Franci Meredith (Rickey), Gary (Julie) Van Der Slik, and Randy (Denise) Van Der Slik. Jack and Bonnie have seven grand children and four great-grands. They will together celebrate their gratitude to God for His generous blessings with a gathering of family members in Orange City in July.

**VAN SOELEN**, Marion & Jan (Vander Wal) of 1908 Maple St. Hull, IA 51239 will be married 60 years on June 21, 2023. Children are Jerry & Kim Van Es, Tim & Jill Van Soelen, and Thomas & Julie Van Soelen. Blessed with 7 grandchildren & their spouses & 4 great grandchildren. Thankful to God for his love to generations!

#### WEDDING ANNIVERSARY 70 YEARS

**VANDER ARK**, Gordon and Saramae (Witt) celebrate 70 years of marriage on June 18. They are grateful for God's faithfulness in service: Gord in music education, special education, director of church choirs, and member of several choral groups; Saramae as church organist, piano teacher, accompanist for choirs, and leader of women's Bible studies. Their 5 children, 18 grandchildren, and 24 great-grandchildren rejoice with them. 2500 Breton Woods Dr SE, Unit 2050, Grand Rapids, MI 49512. Psalm 33:1-3

#### WEDDING ANNIVERSARY 75 YEARS

**BAZUIN**, Rev. Lugene (Archie) and Ellie will celebrate their 75th wedding anniversary on June 11. Our family praises God for many wonderful years of His faithfulness. We are grateful for their service to God, each other and their family. Well wishes may be sent to elliebazuin@aol.com or 10000 Columbia Ave. apt. 1204 Munster, IN46321

**DE YOUNG**, Harold and Edna De Young will be celebrate 75 of marriage on June 17. Their family is thankful for the Christian example they have shown over the years. Blessings can be mailed to PO Box 134, Allendale, Michigan 49401

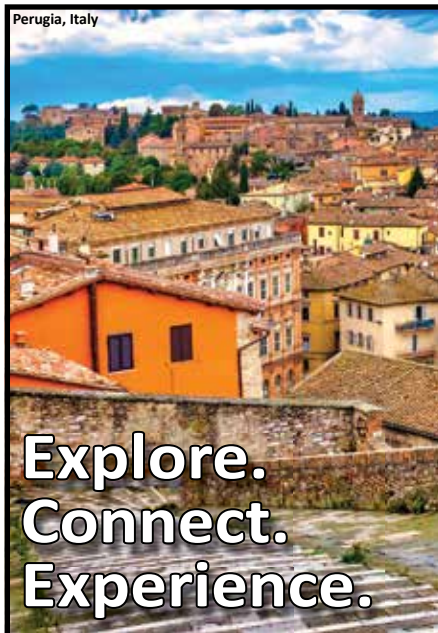
### Birthdays

#### BIRTHDAY 100 YEARS

**ALBERDINE (VAN BRUGGEN) SCHURINGA** will celebrate her 100th birthday on June 27. She was married to the late Jacob for 72 years and is a charter member of Palos Heights CRC. She is blessed with 2 daughters, Nancy (Dan) Switalski and Arlene (Ken) Werner, 5 grandchildren, and 6 great-grandchildren. Birthday greetings may be sent to 6955 W. 154th Pl. Oak Forest, IL 60452 Thankful to God for His abundant blessings!

### Obituaries

**BOER**, Joanne Mae, nee Zondervan of Grand Rapids, MI., peacefully slipped into the embrace of Jesus, her Lord and Savior on March 28, 2023 at age 85. She is survived by her husband, Warren, of 63+ years. her children Terry ( special friend Kim), Greg (Michele ), and Missy ( Todd ), six grandchildren, 1 great- grandchild, and in-laws Judy Boer, Randy and Pam Boer. She was preceded in death by her parents Bernard Zondervan Sr. and Wilma Zondervan; brother Bernard Jr. and Beverly Zondervan Jensen, and brother-in-law Roger Boer.



#### 2023 GUIDED ITINERARIES:

**CALL/CAA | THE WONDERS OF UTAH**  
Sep 14 – Sep 23 | *Ralph Stearley*

**ITALY'S GREEN HEART: PERUGIA & UMBRIA**  
Sep 17 – Sep 25  
*Denise Iarossi Taylor & Mike Bellomo*

**CROATIA CRUISE**  
Sep 21 – Oct 1 | *Mindy Miller & Eric Kuhn*

**COME & EXPERIENCE: THE FIFTH GOSPEL**  
Oct 19 – Nov 2 | *Jeff & Karen Blamer*

**COMING SOON:**  
**FOLLOWING IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF JESUS: ISRAEL & JORDAN**  
Mar 28 – Apr 9 | *Dr. Jeffrey A. D. Weima*

**IN THE LIGHT OF JESUS: PILGRIMAGE TO THE HOLY LAND**  
Apr 1 – Apr 13 | *Bill & Lyn Vanden Bosch*

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**HANNINK**, Lois Marie, age 95, of Grand Rapids, Michigan, passed away on Monday, April 10, 2023. She was preceded in death by her husband, Rev. Alfred Hannink and her infant daughter, Gloria Jean. Lois leaves behind her children Addi Moore, Rick and Elaine Hannink, Julie and John Kruihof; 8 grandchildren; and 9 great-grandchildren. She was a member of Alger Park CRC.



**HARINGA**, Theodore (age 90) passed into the loving arms of his Lord and Savior on Palm Sunday, April 2, 2023. He is survived by his wife, Marie A. (Wassenaar) Haringa, his four children: Barbara (Henry, deceased) Knapper; Steven (Ruth) Haringa; Jane (David) Buteyn; and Timothy (Lorraine) Haringa; 13 grandchildren, and 23 great-grandchildren. Theodore (Ted) dedicated many years of service to Fairlawn Christian Reformed Church, and his community in innumerable roles including at Unibank and Whitinsville Christian School. He cherished time with his family, their home serving as the hub for family gatherings. He and his wife enjoyed traveling, attending classical music performances, exploring nature, and generally staying in touch with friends and family. His kind, calm, honesty and inquisitive nature were his most remarkable characteristics that made such an impact on those around him, and he will be dearly missed.

**LOBBES**, Ruth Jeanne, age 84, of Grand Rapids, Michigan, passed away on Tuesday, April 18, 2023. She is survived by her husband Ken Sr; daughter Heidi Erwood; and sons Ken Jr (Kristen), Mike, Tim (Tracy), and Jeff (Kari). She is also survived by grandchildren Amanda Damsteegt (Jason), Rebecca Erwood, Matthew and Courtney Lobbes, Anna and Ian Lobbes, and Kolbe Vandenberg and her brother Bill Holmes. She was a member of Calvin CRC.



**MULDER**, Gerald (Gerry), 80, entered heaven on May 1, 2023. Loving husband to Muriel Mulder nee Stoub; Loving father of Timothy (Michelle), David (Julie), Jill (Joshua) Nadel, Christopher, and Nina (Nathan) Reeder, 12 grandchildren, and 5 great-grandchildren. Survived by his brother Rich (Bonnie).



**VAN VUREN**, Donald R. Van Vuren, age 92, passed away peacefully at his home on April 4, 2023. Dad was a faithful follower of Jesus Christ and looked forward to meeting his Savior. He adored his family and we miss him. He was our patriarch and we will miss him greatly. Don was the beloved husband of 66 years to the late Harriet A. Van Vuren, nee Klaassens (2018). Loving father of John (Rosanne), Donna (late Don Rietveld and the late Raymond Fuller) Rietveld, Calvin (Patty), Janice (Leonard) Schmidt and the late Karen (John "Butch") Borgman. Cherished grandfather of Matthew (late Rachel), Dennis (Dana), Kelli (Jason), Tim (Jenny), Sam (Tracey), Ken (Hilary), Angie (Jason), Dan (Jenny), Rachel (Josh), Sarah, Alicia (Cameron), Maria (Bob), Evonne (Zac), David (Montana) and Brandon (Emily). Dearest great-grandfather of 53, one of whom preceded him in death. Dear brother of Dirk Van Vuren and preceded in death by his sister Edith (late Melvin) Merriam and his brothers John (late Eva), Richard (late Anne) and David (Karen). Fond brother-in-law of Rosalynd "Tootie" (Richard) Loerop

and the late Lawrence (late Elizabeth "Betty") Klaassens. Loved uncle of many nieces and nephews. Don also served our country in the United States Army.

### Employment

**FULL TIME YOUTH PASTOR/DIRECTOR** Maranatha CRC of York, ON (25 min south of Hamilton) is a congregation blessed with growing youth programs, and is seeking a dynamic full-time Youth Pastor or Youth Ministries Director. If interested, please email office.york-crc@gmail.com or call (289) 757 4114 or visit our website www.maranathacrcyork.ca

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## Doing vs. Being

Just like we can be prone to perfectionism, we can also be hung up on productivity.



Jasmine Duckworth works as a community development manager for Christian Horizons, a developmental services organization in Ottawa, Ont. She attends The Meeting House Ottawa. She is a mother, wife, and obsessive knitter. She writes at [disabilityandfaith.org](http://disabilityandfaith.org).

**LAST NIGHT I DID** what I do every night as the day winds down: I mentally went through my day and noted all the things I didn't get done. The list was long. Although the tasks should have been easy, they had been insurmountable. Chronic pain, disability-related muscle fatigue, and breathing difficulties can make regular work and family life feel like just too much.

I felt like I had failed at life, and this was a familiar feeling because this is a familiar routine.

I started thinking about neuroplasticity—the idea that our very thoughts can shape our brain. I know that choosing different thought patterns can reshape my brain, so I made the mental switch that I often do and started listing the tasks I did accomplish.

I felt better, but it wasn't enough. Either way I was equating completed tasks with success, which isn't actually changing my thought patterns. I needed to move beyond checking off boxes—or not—in my mind.

I remembered listening to accessibility advocate Chantal Huinink at a conference years ago, and one of her points has always stuck with me: Just like we can be prone to perfectionism, we can also be hung up on productivity.

That was an “aha moment” for me. Whenever perfectionism has come up in sermons or seminars I have always felt a bit smug because that's not a struggle for me. I'm comfortable with things being a bit rough around the edges. I'm OK with things being a tad raw.

But this concept of *productivism* that Huinink spoke about hit me hard. I am absolutely a productivityist. I love lists and crossing things off. I multitask as much as possible, and my favorite pastime is knitting because even my leisure needs to be productive.

This is what I need to rewire in my brain. Being productive is satisfying, but is it where I want to derive my self-worth? What is more important than productivity?

I remember a line from a training course at work: “We are human beings, not human doings.”

What does it mean to be a human being? How do I want to be?

I knew the answer immediately.

Love. To be is to love.

Scripture tells me that “if I have a faith that can move mountains but do not have love, I am nothing” (1 Cor. 13:2). Moving mountains would be the pinnacle of productivity and might even be a testament to one's faith, yet without love, it would be meaningless.

So I asked myself: *Was I loving today?*

I mentally went over my interactions with people during the course of the day. Was I loving with my family? With my coworkers? With the friends I saw when we picked up our children from school? I carefully considered each scenario and evaluated my actions and attitudes. In some places I identified places to improve, but in others I could honestly answer yes. Yes, I had been loving. And what's beautiful about love is that it can be given and received. I had most definitely received love.

What a difference this realization made in my mental state as I closed out my day. Rather than feeling like a failure, I felt like I had succeeded—and succeeded in a more meaningful way than if I had done the dishes (nope) or folded the laundry (partially).

So this will be my new routine. I will focus on being loving rather than falling into the trap of productivity, and I will reshape my brain until, I hope, my very *being* is oriented toward love. **B**

# The Heidelberg Diagnosis

I tested positive for sin.  
I could no longer hide  
the pride and greed and lust  
polluting my soul,  
disregarding and disobeying God,  
poisoning my relationships.

I tested positive for grace.  
Like yeast permeating the dough,  
grace slowly and silently  
softened thoughts and attitudes,  
melted my vain arrogance  
and stanching the flow  
of selfishness and spite.

I tested positive for love.  
The grace-filled, nurturing Spirit  
birthed the budding fragrance  
of joy and peace, unfolded  
the blossoms of patience,  
kindness, and goodness,  
then yielded the mature fruit:  
faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.



Daniel Boerman is a disciple of Jesus, a perpetual student, and a freelance writer. He is a member of Forest Grove Christian Reformed Church in Hudsonville, Mich.

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