

# BANNER

DECEMBER 2024

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2024 Year-End

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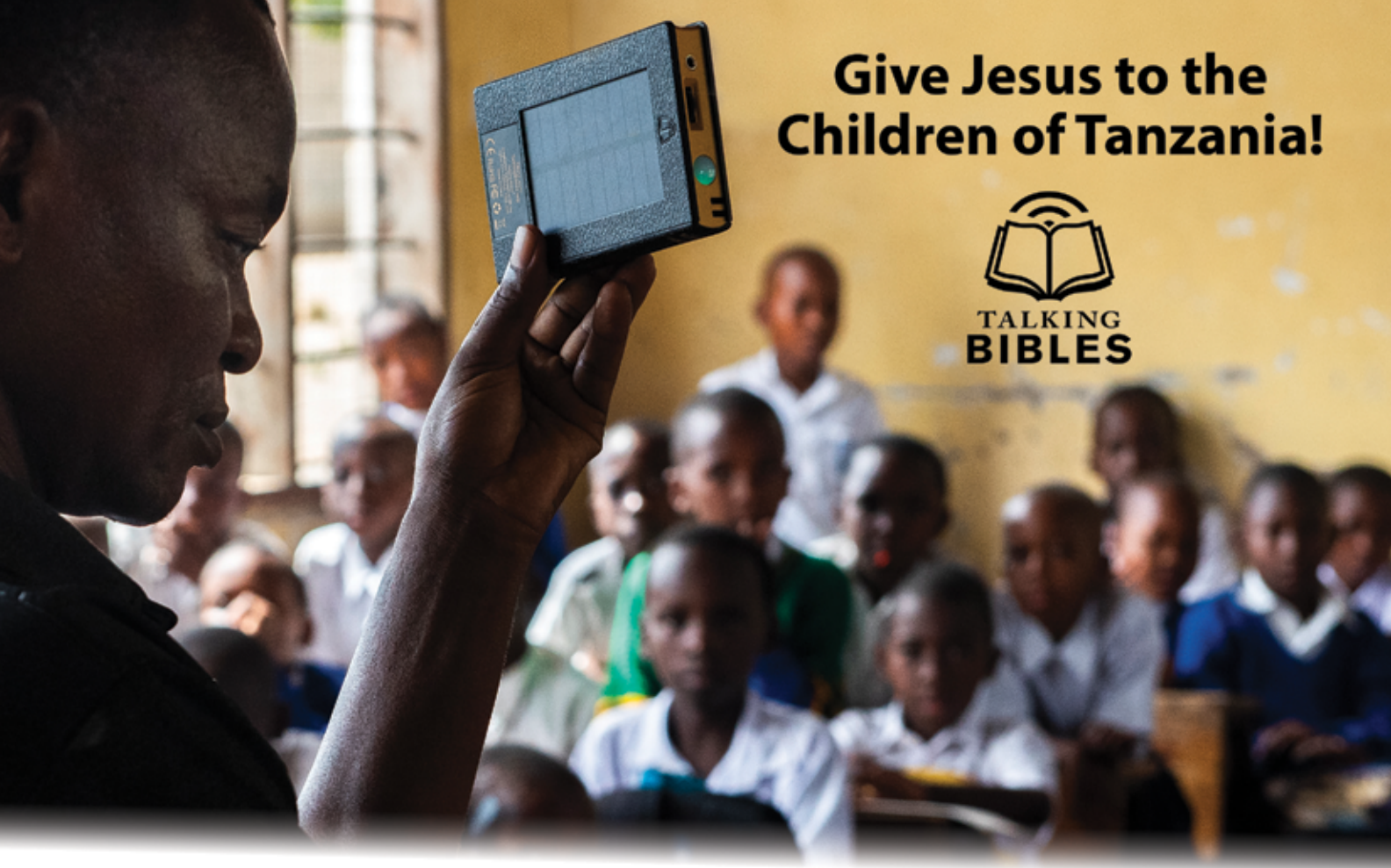
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## BY THE NUMBERS

The annual denomination survey asks respondents to select from 28 phrases in response to the prompt “To me, the term ‘Christian Reformed’ means ...” In 2024, 11 phrases were selected by at least 30% of respondents. Here are those top terms, with the ones chosen by the highest percentage of respondents most prominent. Christ-centered 80.5%; Scripture-centered 76.7%; Conservative 56.8%; Faith formation for all ages 56%.

### Christian Reformed means...



Surveys conducted by DataWise Consulting LLC with 1,397 respondents in 2024

## WHAT'S ONLINE

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

- » News: Back-to-back Hurricanes Unusual for Bradenton, Fla.
- » Documentary: *For Our Daughters*
- » Book: *Evangelicals and Abortion*, by J. Cameron Fraser
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*The Banner* is the magazine of the Christian Reformed Church. Opinions expressed in *The Banner* are not necessarily those of the editor or the CRCNA.

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**We can't do this work without your support. Make a year-end donation before Dec 31. Scan now or donate at [crcna.org/Thrive](https://crcna.org/Thrive)**





# Anti-Echo Chamber

Christ brings  
his peace, not  
through coercion  
or silencing other  
voices, (but) with  
words and deeds  
full of grace  
and truth.



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).

이 기사의 한글번역은 [TheBanner.org/korean](http://TheBanner.org/korean)에서 보실 수 있습니다.

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

**IN OUR DIVIDED WORLD** and divided church, we need media that break down divisions, not reinforce them. This is my vision for *The Banner*: to be an anti-echo chamber for the Christian Reformed Church. In news media and social media, an echo chamber is an environment where someone encounters only information or opinions that reflect and reinforce their own. Echo chambers amplify certain ideas or voices and minimize or silence dissenting ones. They increase polarization and conflict between ideological tribes.

In this goal of being an anti-echo chamber, we are also maintaining *The Banner's* legacy as the “kitchen table” of the denomination. This is where diverse voices in the denomination can share ideas, stories, and words that revolve around the Word made flesh, Jesus, and embody his grace and truth. Though we will have varying degrees of success and some missteps, this is what we aspire to.

Maintaining a fair forum requires humility, tolerance, and vulnerability. It is difficult. It is risky. Some may say it is idealistic. But I believe this is the way of Christ, the Prince of Peace.

At Christmas, we celebrate the Word becoming flesh in Jesus (John 1:14). When the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, it also became, at least temporarily, one human voice among many other human voices. The divine, almighty Word became a human word that could be silenced, that could be drowned out by louder words, that could be mocked, argued against, or even ignored—a humble, vulnerable word.

This is how Christ brings his peace—not through coercion or silencing other voices. Christ brings his peace with words and deeds full of grace and truth. **B**

**DEAR READERS**, would you join us in this journalistic ministry of fostering peace by being a humble anti-echo chamber?

**Starting in 2025, we will be merging our January and February print issues into one, as we do for our July/August print issue.**

This is one step toward the goal of becoming entirely financially self-sustaining by 2027. Over the next three years, our portion of denominational ministry share dollars will gradually reduce to zero. That means more ministry share dollars will be available for CRC agencies such as Thrive, Resonate, and ReFrame. But we cannot achieve that goal simply by this one move of merging these two issues. More than ever, we need your partnership to sustain our mission.

We are most grateful for your generous support over the years. More than 4,000 of you have donated this year. If you are one of them, thank you! However, our fundraising projections for this year are tracking lower than last year's.

**If we do not raise another \$200,000 by Dec. 31, 2024, we might need to make further changes to our print distribution and frequency. Would you please consider giving again?**



You can use the enclosed envelope, scan the QR code at left, or go online to [thebanner.org/donate](http://thebanner.org/donate).

If our ministry's vision resonates with you, please give to keep the conversations going. May you experience God's peace this Christmas season.



## REPLY ALL

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

### Slippery Slope

After receiving the July/August 2024 *Banner*, I read its content until I got to page 16 (“Resounding Words”). Then I quit, not wanting to read once more how Synod 2024 threw away Reformed principles. Then I received the September issue and read your editorial “Slippery Slope?”. It restored my hope that the Christian Reformed Church can yet be rescued and that I can read the whole *Banner* again.  
» Frederick Wind // Whitby, Ont.

You speak about a slippery slope away from grace, but I would argue your approach leads to a slippery slope away from holiness/truth. Jesus said, “You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything” (Matt. 5:13). The synod decision does not close the doors of the church to those who believe or act differently; it requires members and preachers to agree on what is biblical. All are welcome, as they should be, but not everyone can be a member. If the church allows broad versions of belief to be sufficient as a faith statement in members and preachers for fear of lack of grace, it will lose the definition that makes it Christian. Grace does not allow us to call evil good. It demands that we love and forgive, and then teach what is biblical truth (consider 1 Cor. 13, especially v. 6).  
» Tara Vreugdenhil // Hannon, Ont.

Thank you for this editorial in which you remind us that the basis of our salvation is not correct behavior or correct beliefs, but God’s love shown through Jesus’ sacrifice alone. Secondary and tertiary beliefs should never become the basis for the “un-fellowshipping” of individuals or congregations. What are the primary beliefs? Those are contained in our creeds, such as the Apostles’ Creed. I fear the CRC has taken a huge turn, one I see as following the divide in our (U.S.) political arena, one that tries to separate us from each other by demonizing those who do not adhere to the strict “black and white” on issues. Why is it so hard for Christ followers to show grace? Please continue to shine a light and provoke us to think differently.

» Joanne de Bruyn // Raleigh, N.C.

*Banner* editor Shiao Chong suggests that, though well-intentioned, synod’s zeal to discipline members who behave differently or believe differently might inadvertently suggest that God’s favor is conditional on acting correctly and believing correctly. This year’s synod reiterated its position that Scripture unequivocally says same-sex sexual relationships are sinful. Yet Chong fears that the CRC’s position is “slipping into drawing boundaries for God’s love rather than gratefully exploring the depths of God’s love.” Believers are to stand on the inerrant word of God, saying in Romans 16:17, “I urge you, brothers and sisters, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them.” This is reiterated in 2 John 1:10.

» Joe A. Serge // Oshawa, Ont.

### A Stagnant Church

I usually read my copy of *The Banner* from back to front. As I made my way through the July/August 2024 issue, I became increasingly sad and almost despairing. The harshness and suddenness of the synod decisions made me grieve for the denomination and for all the people affected on all sides of these issues. Fortunately, I had unknowingly saved the best for the last. The article “A Stagnant Church” was a needed call to reconciliation and was only exceeded by the hope and promise offered in your editorial. I know that this editorial was not crafted quickly or easily. Thank you for your call to faith and kindness for all of us.  
» Lorri Vander Roest // Ann Arbor, Mich.

### Aliens and Earth

I am writing concerning your Q&A about whether aliens are real (“Big Questions,” October 2024). I would like to think that they are real because I can’t believe that God would put life on only one planet and not on others. What I am more concerned about is that we humans are doing everything in our power to destroy this one planet that we do have when we should be doing all we can to fix the mess we have created. I strongly believe that the biggest issue today, more than ever, is money. We have become a society that wants more and more while appreciating nothing, thereby quickly filling the planet with garbage. By doing this we are missing out on the peace and calm of knowing God.  
» Linda Parent // Port Perry, Ont.



## Peace on Earth?

**WHEN JESUS WAS BORN**, angels sang: “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests” (Luke 2:14). It’s unfortunate that the King James version—“good will toward men”—has become the standard wording, especially at Christmastime. It can create the impression that Christ’s birth signaled the end of human conflict and the beginning of world peace, which obviously has not happened yet.


But that’s not what the angels sang about. Nor did Jesus promise peace on earth for all men (or women). He warned of wars and rumors of war that would precede his return, as well as persecution for believers. He said he had “not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to turn ‘a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law—a man’s enemies will be the members of his own household’” (Matt. 10:34-36).

That’s the everyday reality for countless believers around the world who are disowned, persecuted, or even beaten by their own family members because of their faith in Jesus. But what Jesus promises to such persecuted believers is peace in the midst of the storm through the presence of his Spirit. That’s why in his farewell address to his disciples in John 14, he moves from talking about the promised Holy Spirit to the promise of his peace. That’s how his peace is realized: by the presence of his Spirit. In giving us his peace, he is giving us himself, and his presence with us is realized by his Spirit living in us.

Paul says that Jesus himself is our peace (Eph. 2:14). Jesus came to bring peace between us and God (Rom. 5:1) and among believers of all backgrounds (Eph. 2:15-16), to bring personal peace in the midst of trouble (John 16:33), and to “give you peace at

### In giving us his peace, he is giving us himself.

all times and in every way” (2 Thess. 3:16). But Jesus didn’t just teach about and model peace. He won it for us on the battlefield of the cross in mortal combat with the root cause of our troubles. He triumphed over death and hell and Satan (Col. 2:15) by overcoming our alienation from God caused by sin (2 Cor. 5:18-21). And Jesus will come back again to bring all our remaining troubles to an end when “the God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet” (Rom. 16:20).

Yes, one day there will be peace on earth. But in the meantime, our privileged calling is to be agents of that peace by proclaiming and practicing the peace of Christ as those on whom God’s favor has rested, who in God’s unfathomable grace received a peace the world cannot give or take away. “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you,” Jesus said. “I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid” (John 14:27). 



J. Cameron Fraser, D.Min. is a retired Christian Reformed pastor in Lethbridge, Alta., who now concentrates on writing as well as occasional preaching. His latest book is *Evangelicals and Abortion: Historical, Theological, Practical Perspectives*.

### Encouragement

We send you our encouragement as you continue to edit *The Banner*. Know we appreciate and are inspired by your editorials as well as the work involved in keeping *The Banner* as an important tool of our denomination. Our prayer is that God will continue to provide you with the wisdom to carry out this important mission. Our thoughts are also with your colleagues that work on this publication. May your team always work to the honor of our King.

» Deb & Tony Vandekraats //  
Calgary, Alta.

### As I Was Saying

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

- » Reflections From a Departing CRC Campus Minister
- » Synod 2024: An Appraisal and a Vision
- » How Running Has Instilled a Deep Sense of Gratitude Within Me



# 5 Program Ideas That Will Encourage Dialogue at Church

By Todd Pheifer

**B**e honest. Do you prefer light topics when talking with your fellow church attenders? Would you rather stick with polite, safer discussions that include the weather, local sports, and upcoming social gatherings? Does the idea of openly addressing politics, theology, or polarizing social issues make you uneasy? If so, you aren't alone—but that doesn't mean such feelings should be embraced.

When it comes to dialogue in the church, we know how we are supposed to answer the question about conversation preference. We are encouraged to pursue conversational depth, personal growth, and opportunities for discipleship. But these encounters can be awkward. We might struggle to articulate our viewpoints in public settings or in some cases, if we're honest, we might actually be unsure of our own beliefs. We tend to avoid topics that might make us feel vulnerable or appear uninformed.

For churches who want to encourage deeper dialogue, programs can play an important role. But what looks good on paper will not simply leap from the page and stimulate profound shifts in

institutional culture. (If only program planning were that easy!) A playbook or script requires willing players. Programming will not lead to meaningful change without thoughtful and resolute commitment from leadership and the congregation. Designed programs can be a good framework for change, but mission is driven by interpersonal relationships and actions that sync with messaging. With that in mind, here are some program ideas to consider:

## Books

Admittedly, a book group or all-church study is not a particularly novel idea, but the key in today's society is its facilitation. Some groups have a leader who recaps and expands on each chapter, perhaps with some form of a lecture. This format can be valuable when content needs additional explanation, but it doesn't always encourage dialogue or questions. This is why prepared discussion questions and the ability to facilitate conversation is a key qualification for group leaders if dialogue is the goal. One other factor to consider is the alignment (or lack thereof) of book content with the core values of the church. This is a more complex discussion, but it is reasonable to suggest that Christians

should regularly engage with diverse content that challenges their thinking. This provides opportunities to evaluate personal worldviews and examine pathways of apologetics. In other words, book groups in a church should consider titles that explore a wide range of ideas and use them as an opportunity for thoughtful discernment (Phil. 1:9-11).

## Panels

Panels are another familiar program option that can have interesting effects on dialogue in congregational life. Outside panelists can be considered, but it could be a wonderful opportunity for congregation members to share some of their experiences and thoughts on various topics. Some level of expertise on the subject obviously helps, but part of discipleship is about individuals being willing to tell their stories and be more transparent in a public forum. This type of format might be awkward for some, as there are people in the church who prefer to keep some of their viewpoints private. But panels can deepen relationships and provide opportunities for panel members to research, articulate, and evaluate their own perspectives. Rotating panelists will diversify the voices being heard



and add value and depth to this type of program.

### **Voices**

Speaking of voices, bringing in outside speakers can have multiple benefits. They can inject expertise that might not exist in the congregation, which increases knowledge and works against groupthink. But the challenge when inviting outside speakers is striking a balance between endorsement and education. As with Scripture, one needs to discern whether what's being said is recommending or simply reporting. Therefore, some leaders might offer a disclaimer that the views of a speaker do not necessarily reflect that of the church. Even with a disclaimer, though, a church that brings in a speaker to cover a particular topic might automatically be viewed as favoring the speaker's perspective. Regardless, an outside speaker can provide an opportunity for post-talk analysis through which leaders can again walk the congregation through a process of biblical discernment and reactions to what was shared by the speaker's message (1 Thess. 5:19-21). (One additional caveat: Congregations should be mindful of their nonprofit status when it comes to certain topics.)

### **Connections**

Humans tend to homogenize. This is a fancy way of saying that people tend to seek out individuals who are similar to them. Hanging out with those who have common interests is not necessarily a bad thing, but it can limit collective knowledge and perspective. Therefore, churches might consider a program that facilitates social connections among two to four individuals who would not normally socialize. These gatherings would not have to be long, and they could be either open-ended or guided by a list


Programming will  
not lead to  
meaningful  
change without  
thoughtful and  
resolute  
commitment  
from leadership  
and the  
congregation.

of get-to-know-you questions. The ultimate goal would be to expand relationships, find commonalities, and begin to foster a level of trust that might lead to better conversations down the road. Conversations might be awkward at first, but that is the reality of many relationships. Dialogue has to start somewhere.

### **Responses**

For better or for worse, we live in a society where people can leave feedback or participate openly in many different discussions. This includes forums such as the comment sections of online articles or chat functions in video conferencing services. Sermons, on the other hand, are generally a non-participation sport. What would it look like for congregants to submit questions digitally during the sermon and have the pastor answer a few at the end? If that puts too much pressure on the pastor to think on their feet, are there ways for congregants to have questions answered during the week or in the following Sunday's service? Leaders should ask themselves if there is a clear, consistent culture of encouragement for the congregation to treat

the sermon as a dialogue rather than a one-way transmission.

In closing, it is important to revisit the concept of commitment. There are many causes, movements, and beliefs that people verbally identify as important. That doesn't mean people will put those expressed views into action. For dialogue to become a part of a congregation's culture, there must be diligent encouragement from leaders and buy-in from the congregation. This might require more than just emails from the office, bulletin notes, and announcements from the pulpit. Those are part of the process, but they are also passive. Obviously churches do not want to coerce people into participation, but there is something to the idea that enthusiasm should be contagious. Dialogue must be modeled and continually linked to mission. This includes personal invitations to participate. Ready? Let's talk! 



Todd Pheifer teaches in the School of Business and Management at Azusa Pacific University and is director of development at Kingdom Causes Bellflower. He lives in southern California and attends Bethany Christian Reformed Church in Bellflower.

*Editor's note:* This article is the third in a three-part series by Todd Pheifer, the author of *Let's Talk!: A Guide to Awkward Conversations and Unifying Dialogue in the Church*. Pick up the book on Amazon and follow along on *The Banner's* Facebook page for discussion about the book and its important topic.

**BOOK CLUB** **THE BANNER**

## BIG QUESTIONS

### Vocation

#### Should I do more school?

We often see the purpose of school as preparing us for a particular job. Yet good education should also prepare you with other life skills, like engaging honestly and graciously with people with whom we disagree, participating in our church and neighborhood, or even being more financially competent. School is the most straightforward way to get this kind of education, but it's not the only way nor even always the best way. We can also learn these skills through family members and friends, through experience, or by taking classes outside of school.

Before deciding whether to do more school, you should measure the cost (Luke 14:28). When we think of cost, we usually consider financial cost, especially with the growing cost of university and the odds of getting a certain job or salary. Yet other costs include time and changing relationships, and further study can change you and the direction you might go. On the other hand, there are also potential costs from not doing more schooling, such as loss of experience, relationships, independence, and skills.

Many see university as a time of being exposed to new ideas and people from different backgrounds. It is an opportunity to develop lifelong friendships and grow in independence within a fairly structured environment. Yet there are creative ways of obtaining these things outside of university too, such as participating in the life of the church, being invited to participate in family finances, or volunteering in your neighborhood. It is wise not to take on unnecessary debt, especially as this can hinder how and where you might be able to serve God in the future. If you're not sure if university



Illustration for *The Banner* by Gisela Bohórquez

is a good fit, taking a year to try something else can be helpful. It can help you recognize what you like and better know what you might gain or lose from university.

For those wondering about graduate school, there's a real possibility that you might not get a job in academia or in your chosen field. Knowing this, is the program still worth investing your time, energy, and money in? As for a professional degree, the likelihood of a job is much higher, so it's often seen as a better financial investment. In either case, it's helpful to consult with people in the field and in the program to be aware of potential challenges.

It is a gift to be able to expand our understanding of ourselves and the world as well as to learn skills and knowledge that help us better serve God and others. As you discern how best to do that, I encourage you to have conversations with those who know you and care about you.

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

### Church, Bible, Doctrine

#### Years ago, it seems, we spent a lot of time in church listening to sermons about or studying apologetics, but these days not so much. Why?

Apologetics is the discipline of responding to challenges to the Christian faith. We might think of the instruction of Peter to always be prepared to "give an answer" (*apologia*) to those who ask about the Christian hope and to do so with gentleness and

respect (1 Pet. 3:15). In this sense, apologetics is always relevant and necessary anytime we encounter others with a different vision of the world. Apologetics can help believers address their own doubts and can help remove barriers to belief for outsiders who are investigating the Christian faith.

In many Christian circles, the apologetic discipline is going strong. But there has always been suspicion about apologetics. Can we argue anyone into faith? Or simply give testimony to what God has done? Some of the contemporary suspicion relates to the ways that the discipline of apologetics has been taken captive by the logic of culture war. When this happens, apologetics becomes more about winning than witnessing. And if winning is what really matters, then we just need to learn the arguments and memorize scripts: If someone says that, then I say this.

Although there might be settings where this sort of rhetorical combat is fitting, under ordinary circumstances apologetics take place more organically and humanely. Any apologetic defense we offer should come under the larger project of discernment. Whenever we meet a challenge to faith, we should be seeking what God might be up to in the person who is bringing the challenge.

It is important to be grounded in what we believe and why we believe it. It is valuable to learn how Christians have wrestled with various objections and what sort of responses we might give. But people are more than "brains on a stick," so any apologetics discussion worth its salt will seek to engage

the whole person with the hope of the gospel, not just to win the argument.

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.

### Science

**I am an elderly Christian who occasionally discusses burial plans. When I share that my remains will be donated for medical research, some react negatively. Please comment.**

Thank you for donating your remains. Donated bodies are essential to medical training and research. Medical students gain first-hand knowledge of the human body by studying remains. Like organ donors, you are helping to save lives with your donation.

Reformed tradition agrees with most Christian denominations and organizations: Donating remains or organs is an act of love and charity.

As Christians, we hope for heavenly bodies after the resurrection when Christ returns. This hope is not at all threatened by the condition of our earthly remains. Paul wrote, “For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 8:38-39).

Common Christian practices around traditional burial are designed for the comfort and hope of family and friends. Some negative reactions you experience when discussing your plans might come from anxiety that anything nontraditional would diminish that comfort and hope. Yet for those who choose donation, a memorial service can provide much of the

same comfort to their family and friends. Churches typically leave these choices up to the individual and/or his or her family. With planning, you and others who donate their remains can provide comfort to loved ones while also helping save the lives of strangers.

Loren Haarsma is a lifelong member of the CRC and is currently a professor in the physics and astronomy department at Calvin University.

### Digital Life

**In the office I manage, I want employees to use certain computer apps to do their work (in this case, the messaging app Slack), but some are resisting. Should I require it?**

I hear you. This can be a problem in businesses, in our personal lives, and even in the church office.

According to a Gartner survey, the average number of applications a desk worker uses nearly doubled from six in 2019 to 11 in 2023. People are being asked to absorb new tech tools at a fairly fast rate.

To your question, lots of factors need to be considered: the size of the company, the amount of file sharing among employees, the training requirements to keep staff up to date, and the cost of purchasing or subscribing to more and different programs.

Sometimes, though, these factors get in the way of acknowledging that different people work in different ways. And what should we be most concerned with? The results. For example, might there be people in your group who are far more effective on the phone than they are typing in an online chat? Does it matter if they feel more comfortable in Google Sheets than in Microsoft Excel if they are getting the work done? It may

make you feel better knowing every one of your remote workers has Slack open at all times, but for some, might the constant chatter be a distraction that is keeping them from doing their most important work?

As the portability of files from one application to another increases along with people’s growing ability to adapt to new methods, some of our past rules about everyone using the same tool need to be relaxed. And perhaps more sharing with each other about what works best and why is better than “laying down the law.”

*Scam Update:* In the October issue I included some ways to prevent falling prey to scammers. I should have taken my own advice this past week when I received a call from my sister saying our nephew had been in a crash. He was allegedly not at fault, but because it involved a pregnant mother in critical condition, he was in jail. His mouth was wired shut from the accident, and bail money was needed immediately. Without a second thought—our emotions took over completely—we were quickly working out how to transfer the money. Fortunately, my sisters took a breath and asked each other a few more questions. What seemed at first to be entirely believable started to break down. A quick call to a perfectly fine and accident-free nephew confirmed we had been scammed. I’m not proud of this, but I include it as a reminder to you to be more skeptical than we were.

Dean Heetderks is co-director of Ministry Support Services of the CRC and art director of *The Banner*. How have you resolved the battle over apps at work? Tell him at [dean.heetderks@gmail.com](mailto:dean.heetderks@gmail.com).



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.



# Joel Vande Werken Appointed Director of Ecclesiastical Governance

## NEWS

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**Members of the Council of Delegates lay hands on and pray for Brandie and Joel Vande Werken as Joel is appointed director of ecclesiastical governance for the CRCNA.**

The Christian Reformed Church’s Council of Delegates has appointed Joel Vande Werken as the denomination’s first director of ecclesiastical governance, a role that replaces the previous director of synodical services position. Vande Werken, 49, served as temporary associate director of synodical services from April to August during the illness and following the death of synodical services director Scott DeVries, who died of cancer April 27. The role of director of ecclesiastical governance was to start in mid-November.

Most recently pastor of Fairlawn CRC in Whitinsville, Mass., Vande Werken was ordained in 2007 and first served Sussex (N.J.) CRC, where he joined the interim committee of Classis Hudson just six months into the pastorate. Vande Werken told the Council of Delegates in an October interview that he believes in the importance of “setting up conversations well in our church assemblies” and sees the guides of Church Order and Rules for Synodical Procedure not as “hoops to jump through or boxes to check off, but as wisdom literature”—advice from the past set in place to help the church now to discern well.

In reviewing the denomination’s needs for the senior leadership position, the Office of General Secretary decided to remove some logistical duties and focus the new

position more on ecclesiastical support of governance, including for classes, the CRC’s regional assemblies. Ashley Medendorp, a senior administrative assistant with synodical services, has moved into the role of coordinator of synodical operations, taking care of the logistical details of running synod and coordinating the Council of Delegates’ gatherings.

In the new role of director of ecclesiastical governance, Vande Werken will encourage collaboration across agencies and ministries, provide leadership and support of synodical study committees, standing committees, and other teams, and liaise with stated clerks of classes to connect the classes with the denomination.

“I love pastoring,” Vande Werken told the Council of Delegates, but “I’m stepping into a season of still serving the church, but in a different way. I hope I can take congregational experience that I have and people who have shaped who I am and take that into this position and use it as a framework for how God has called me and shaped me to serve the church as a whole.”

Vande Werken, his wife Brandie, who was present for the Oct. 18 interview, and their five children between the ages of 4 and 15 intend to relocate from Massachusetts to Michigan.

—Alissa Vernon, News Editor

## Advent Prayer Stations Offer Place of Quiet

Grace Community Christian Reformed Church in Oak Lawn, Ill., set up eight prayer stations featuring passages from Isaiah as an opportunity for people to pray and interact with Scripture for Advent 2023.

Worship coordinator Diane Ritzema said the church wanted to offer this because “sometimes people need a reason to quiet themselves.”

The church has used similar prayer stations for about 10 years, creating interactive prayer prompts for the congregation and community about four times a year, often during Advent and Lent or with a particular sermon series, Ritzema said.

Ritzema referred to a few books when planning the stations, particularly *Sacred Space: A Hands-On Guide to Creating Multisensory Worship Experiences for Youth Ministry*, by Dan Kimball and Lilly Lewin, then set up the spaces in small classrooms throughout the church. One station focused on Isaiah 9:6-7 and encouraged people to pray while using letter tiles to spell out names of Jesus that are meaningful to them. Different objects were used at other stations to engage the senses while people followed the prayer prompts.

A station focused on Isaiah 7:14 encouraged people to eat one of five different foods, each symbolizing a different characteristic of Jesus: granola for humility, beef jerky for patience, power bars for discipline, bread for honesty, and chocolate for grace. There was also a station for coloring, one with desert images, and one for praying for the world using maps.

Ritzema plans to create new prayer stations for Lent, which begins March 5.

—Kristen Parker



**Grace Community CRC set up a prayer station with images of the desert to encourage people to talk to God about the desert places in their lives.**

## Minnesota Church Sings and Serves



**Trinity Hill CRC combined its 2023 Cookies and Carols event with a household goods drive for Love INC Carver County.**

Trinity Hill Christian Reformed Church’s Cookies and Carols event in Chanhassen, Minn., raised more than \$500 for Love In the Name of Christ Carver County in December 2023—enough for the congregation to want to repeat the effort this season. The congregation plans to host a hymn sing and donation drive in early February 2025.

The church first hosted Cookies and Carols in 2022. Pastor Kyle Sandison said the idea came from a desire to have a fun event that would be a blessing to the community. The church, which has an average worship attendance of 40 people, hosted some 60 people at the first Cookies and Carols event. About a dozen of those were not Trinity Hill members.

In 2023, the church thought to connect the event to Love INC, an organization that helps communities with career opportunities and daily needs and with whom Trinity Hill partners several times a year.

“We asked them what we could do to help,” Sandison said. He explained that Love INC is so busy during the holiday season that donations of everyday items such as toilet paper, toothpaste, and diapers get overlooked. Trinity Hill combined its Cookies and Carols event with a drive for these everyday items. Bringing a donation “wasn’t required to attend,” Sandison said, “but we ended up with a mountain of donated household products.”

This year’s event was moved to February to accommodate the schedule of The Galactic Cowboy Orchestra, the band Trinity Hill had booked for previous events. Though the event won’t be called Cookies and Carols, there will still be food and singing, Sandison said.

—Callie Feyen

# Council of Delegates October Meeting News

The October meeting of the Christian Reformed Church's Council of Delegates included a discussion of the One Family Conversation approach to classis leadership, updates on some tasks from synod, and a look at some sobering financial numbers.

The Council serves as the denomination's ecclesiastical governance board and meets three times a year, acting on behalf of synod in between meetings of synod. It's made up of one delegate from each of the denomination's 49 classes (regional assemblies) and some at-large members. It met Oct. 16-18 at Cascade Fellowship CRC in Grand Rapids, Mich.

## Supporting Ethnic Diversity

Thrive staff Reggie Smith and Lesli van Milligen reintroduced delegates to One Family Conversation, an approach approved by the Council in 2023 to help classes move toward having leaders of different ethnicities leading as one family and not as "insiders and outsiders." Smith and van Milligen challenged delegates to get up and move around to converse with people they didn't already know while discussing three different case studies with the guiding document "Three Stages of Building One Family." "It's not necessary for us to have everything put together, but it's all about relationships," Smith said. Van Milligen added, "Sometimes we have to feel awkward because it reminds us that many of our brothers and sisters feel awkward."

## Synod Matters

General secretary Zachary King reported on progress on tasks set by synod, including:

- » a refresh of the Our Journey ministry plan that synod extended to 2030
- » a delay on the work of the Global Vision Implementation Team to prioritize a review of CRCNA agency support of ethnic minority groups



Photo by Alissa Vernon

**Lesli Van Milligen and Reggie Smith reintroduce One Family Conversation.**

- » resources for churches and classes regarding Synod 2024's discipline decisions
- » expected reports from the Virtual Church Team and Assisted Suicide Task Force in February
- » work begun by the Multisite Church Taskforce, Team to Clarify the Categories of Synodical Pronouncements, and team to provide theological reflection on church membership

The Council also made some decisions and some recommendations to Synod 2025. The Council:

- » approved the prayer and worship theme "Journey With Jesus," based on the Emmaus Road story of Luke 24
- » approved starting Synod 2025 and future synods with a virtual convening to elect officers
- » recommended that Synod 2025 forgo the creation of a separate legal entity to house the Office of General Secretary. (In May 2022 the Council recommended "a new ecclesiastical corporation ... be established for the office of the general secretary" as part

of the restructuring proposals involved in the Structure and Leadership Taskforce report. The Council now says that step is not necessary. "It seems prudent to wait until the need is evident before adding a legal layer of complexity to our environment," the recommendation says.)

## Money Matters

Synod 2024 asked the Office of General Secretary to provide a clearer mandate for the synodical advisory committee assigned to financial matters "about its role with respect to the denominational financial reports" (*Acts of Synod 2024*, p. 901). The Council of Delegates accepted a proposed mandate to be sent to Synod 2025 indicating that the advisory committee would receive for information the consolidated financial records, reports on adherence to policies, and annual budgets but would have oversight of the ministry share system (pledges received from member congregations to contribute to shared ministry of the denomination). The committee would "make recommendations to the COD regarding ministry share revenues, projections, and budget process for the upcoming year if needed."

The CRC's chief administrative officer, Shirley De Vries, gave the Council of Delegates a high-level view of some sobering numbers. Compared to the first quarter of the 2023-24 fiscal year (July to June), combined U.S. and Canadian ministry shares are down 3%. While there are a fair number of unknowns, De Vries said, "finance staff are monitoring and communicating with leadership" about the trends they are seeing.

Looking ahead, six churches that in the last year said they were in the disaffiliation process represent a likely loss of \$127,000 in ministry share giving and \$45,000 in additional giving, De Vries said, but "a number of (other) churches are having conversations about starting or increasing ministry shares."



## Noteworthy

De Vries said it could take two or three years “to figure out where we are.” She encouraged Council delegates to “speak up” in their contexts about the value of ministry shares. “Ministry shares is a way we go together, and it lets us go a lot further than we could on our own,” she explained. She compared the contributions to denominational programming to the dial tone on a phone landline: “It (denominational services) has to be provided all the time so that when churches do need something, it is there for them.”

The Council also approved an updated policy on reducing programs and staff.

### Ministry Boards

For part of the three days of meetings, the U.S. and Canada ministry boards met individually to cover their own country-specific operational agendas. Canadian board members heard that a process to hire a new director of intercultural ministry is nearing completion. Dan DeKam, director of U.S. ministry operations, announced the completion of the sale of the former denominational property at 1700 28th St. SE in Grand Rapids, Mich., which, after costs of the purchase and renovation of the new ministry support center at 300 East Beltline Ave. NE in Grand Rapids, clears about \$1.7 million that the U.S. board agreed to invest as a building maintenance fund for the new property.

The boards and the Council also heard reports from the directors of the CRC’s ministries—Resonate Global Mission, Thrive, and ReFrame Ministries—and from Jamie McIntosh, executive director-Canada for World Renew, as part of the rotating schedule of presentations from the CRC’s partner organizations.

—Alissa Vernon, News Editor

Photo courtesy of Calvin University



**Greg Elzinga**

**Greg Elzinga was appointed as Calvin University’s 13th president in October.** He had served as interim president since the departure of Wiebe Boer in February and as vice president of advancement before that. An announcement from Calvin said the appointment by the board of trustees was unanimous based on a recommendation of the 16-member search committee: “The board and search committee agreed that Elzinga’s proven ability to navigate challenges with resilience and his dedication to Calvin’s mission make him the best leader for this moment.”

Elzinga and his wife, Jacqui, have been members of Cascade Fellowship Christian Reformed Church in Grand Rapids, Mich., for 21 years, and he has served terms as elder, deacon, and most recently vice chair of the church’s council.

Banner file photo



**Moses Chung**

**Moses Chung, Resonate Global Mission’s program and strategy director, is no longer with the agency as of Oct. 3.** The minister of the Word and former director of Christian Reformed Home Missions, which merged with World Missions to form Resonate in 2017, had worked for the agency for 13 years. The Oct. 11 announcement from CRC Communications included a farewell message Chung wrote to Resonate staff: “My greatest blessing has been in seeing God at work and working alongside many passionate and mission-minded people who have been my coworkers and friends. I will continue to remember you in my prayers as you navigate some of the toughest challenges ahead in joining God’s mission at this critical moment in history.”

Photo courtesy of Council for Christian Colleges and Universities



**Shirley Hoogstra**

**After 10 years of leading the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities, Shirley Hoogstra retired as its president emerita in October.** She is succeeded by David A. Hoag, former president of Warner University in Florida. Hoogstra still serves as a trustee of Calvin University.

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

# Classis Watch: Fall 2024

Two or three times each year, Christian Reformed churches send representatives to their classis, or regional assembly. The following are actions taken by classes, guided by articles of Church Order, since July 2024. (This report reflects meeting minutes received as of Nov. 7.)

## Welcomed Into Ministry in the CRC

Candidates **examined and approved for ministry in the Christian Reformed Church** (Arts. 6 and 10): Josiah Huisman, Nick Vander Ploeg, Micah VanDyken, Sarah VerMerris, Matthew D. Timms, Patrick Y. Lin, Austin D. Kammeraad, Caleb Harper, Daniel Unterkofler, Rebecca Bokma, and Yohan Lee.

Ministers welcomed **from other denominations**: Revs. Kyung Phil Kim, Insuk Shin, and Yeontae Kim (Art. 8-c) and Frank Gipson (Art. 8-b).

**Ordination reinstatement** (Art. 14-e): Rev. Daniel Gregory.

Classis Ko-Am **reinstated the credentials** of Rev. Young Wook Kim, mistakenly released by Classis Hanmi in 2019.

## Other Actions for Pastors

Ministers **loaned** (Art. 13-c): Revs. Josiah Huisman to First Reformed Church (Reformed Church in America), Zeeland, Mich.; and Fred DeJong to First Reformed Church (Kingdom Network), Orange City, Iowa.

**Ministerial loan extended**: Rev. Caleb Lai.

**Ministers released from ministry in a congregation** (Art. 17-a): Revs. Stephen De Wit from Alger Park CRC in Grand Rapids, Mich.; Ram Aryal from Maranatha Fellowship CRC in Farmington, N.M.; and John Cleveringa from Haven CRC in Zeeland, Mich.

**Declared eligible for call**: Rev. Enrique Gomez.

**Eligibility of call extended**: Revs. Marcel Kuiper, Joshua Amaezechi, Adam Stout, Greg Kett, and Kyung Lok Jang.

## Leaving Ministry in the CRC

*Classes may end a pastor's ordained ministry status guided by Church Order articles 14 and 17 and indicating a designation reflecting the manner and spirit in which the minister acted during the time leading up to and including resignation from office.*

**Honorably released** via Art. 14-b: Steve Dozeman, Benjamin Schaefer, Heidi DeJonge, Steve Hasper, Peter Rockhold, and Jeff Kroondyk; via Art. 14-c: Suzanne McDonald, David Bouma, Aaron Winkle, Chad Vandervalk, and Joseph Kim.

**Released**: Michelle Vandenberg (Art. 14-b), Daniel Joo (Art. 14-d), Bryan Van Soelen, and Phil Covert (Art. 17-c).

**Ministers retiring/granted emeritus status** (Art. 18): Revs. Jesse Powell (effective June 30, 2022), Daewoo Park, Henry Lengkeek, Neal Plantinga, Kasey Vander Veen, Jin Choi, Sun Il Kim, Mark Deckinga, Jack VanderVeer, Charles Gregg Lawson, Joan DeVries, Aldon Schaap, Barb Sanders and Paul Sausser (effective Dec. 31), Doug De Groot (effective Jan. 1, 2025), Joseph Vanden Akker (effective Feb. 3, 2025), Randy Ledebouer (effective March 1, 2025), Tim Hoekstra (effective March 4, 2025), John Greydanus (effective March 15, 2025), and Vicki Cok (effective May 1, 2025).

## Commissioned Pastors

**Approved as commissioned pastors called to specific roles within their classes** (Art. 23): Stephanie VanRooyen (Ontario Southwest), Tyler Kirkbride (Huron), Ben Petersen (Columbia), Kenny Yu (California South), Morne Marais (Grand Rapids South), Jon Coupal (Central California), Zacchary Harrison (North Cascades), Kyle McKrill and Nicole Davis (Thornapple Valley), and Moises Pacheco (Northern Illinois, transferred from Chicago South).

Bryce Langley (Illiana), DonJin Polo Kim (Atlantic Northeast), Aaron Au (Alberta North), Emily Hull (Thornapple Valley), and Nick Lang (Arizona) were **honorably released**, and Nate Rusticus (Grandville) and Matt Tuininga (Grand Rapids East) were **released** from ministry as commissioned pastors (Art. 24-d).

**Commissioned pastor emeritus status** (Art. 24-e) was granted to Carol Sue Kuipers (Central California).

## New Ministries and Ministry Changes

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

Na Sung Gloria Church in Los Angeles, Calif., received **organized status**.

**Closed**: Spring Rain Church in Malden, Mass., and the emerging congregation of Southern California Marathon Church in West Hills, Calif.

**Disaffiliated**: The Table Church, an emerging congregation in Tucson, Ariz., merged with Alta Vista Bible Church and is no longer a CRC church plant.

**Affiliated**: Pleasant Valley Reformed Church in Holland, Iowa, pending receipt of its revised articles of incorporation and bylaws to reflect its move from the Reformed Church in America to the Christian Reformed Church.

Churches in the process of affiliation or disaffiliation are not reported until the action is complete and accepted by classis. Emerging churches may disaffiliate or close without an action of classis.

**Name changes:** The merged congregations of Friendship Community Church in Toronto, Ont. (now disbanded) and All Nations Christian Fellowship in North York, Ont., are renamed **Friend of Nations Church**. Love Global Vision CRC in Clifton, N.J., has changed its name to **Global Vision Church**.

**Classes Hudson and Hackensack have dissolved their joint ministry association, Mid-Atlantic Ministries**, which began in 1918. Assets were distributed among both classes so that each can form its own home missions committee.

**Classis Alberta North dissolved the Northern Alberta Diaconal Conference**, intending to “reevaluate the need for a ministry like NADC in 2027.”

—Alissa Vernon, News Editor

*A longer version of this story, including classes' appointments of study teams and approaches to Synod 2024's instruction to include an annual signing of the Covenant for Officebearers, is available at TheBanner.org.*

## IN MEMORIAM



*Rev. Norman  
Edmund Jones*

1931-2024

A humble man who served only for God's glory, Norman Jones, 93, died Sept. 25.

Born and raised in North Wales, Norman graduated from the University of Wales and later from the University of Toronto. He was initially ordained in the Calvinistic Methodist Church of Wales (a denomination closely affiliated with the Presbyterian Church) and served three congregations.

He immigrated to Canada in 1965 and served Bayham United Church in Straffordville, Ont., and Rowntree Memorial United Church in London, Ont., before moving to St. Paul's United Church in Aylmer, Ont., where he ministered for the next 27 years. Described as “a beloved pastor to the entire town of Aylmer,” Norman officiated at hundreds of weddings and funerals, often for those without a church connection.

After retiring in 2003, Norman was ordained in the Christian Reformed Church. He served London (Ont.) CRC (now Talbot Street Church) as pastor of visitation for seniors, and he preached at several southwestern Ontario churches.

Norman and his wife, Tiena, enjoyed traveling in North America, Europe, and the Caribbean.

Predeceased in 1985 by his wife, Brenice, Norman is survived by Tiena, his wife of 34 years; a daughter, a son, and two stepdaughters; 10 grandchildren; and two great-granddaughters.

—Janet A. Greidanus

## IN MEMORIAM



*Rev. Jacob Peter Heerema*

1937-2024

Jake Heerema's passion was being like Jesus to everyone he met. “He was kind and would go out of his way to connect with people that most of us would overlook,” his daughter said. One colleague commented on his “gentle spirit and warm demeanor, and that never changed over the years of knowing him.” Jake, 87, died Oct. 11.

Ordained in 1968 after graduating from Calvin College (now University) and Seminary, Jake pastored New Hope Community Church, Fort Lauderdale, Fla., and served as chaplain in Seoul, South Korea. He was the Dean of Men at Reformed Bible (now Kuyper) College for two years and served the community of Pine Rest Christian Mental Health Services in West Michigan as well as the congregations of Calvin Christian Reformed Church, Grand Rapids, Mich.; Covenant CRC, Grand Ledge, Mich.; and Bethany CRC, Holland, Mich.

From 1994 to 2002, Jake directed the CRC's Chaplaincy Ministries—“a caring and compassionate pastor to chaplains and their families,” a Chaplaincy colleague said. He then became a pastor of visitation, first at Bethany CRC for 13 years and then at Calvin CRC. He retired in 2020.

Predeceased by Marian, his wife of 64 years, Jake is survived by his son and daughter, three grandchildren, and five great-grandchildren.

—Janet A. Greidanus

READ MORE ONLINE



# Faith-based Disaster Relief Groups Provide Long-term Hurricane Recovery

The Banner has a subscription to republish articles from Religion News Service. This story by Bob Smietana was published Oct. 17, 2024, on religionnews.com. It has been edited for length and Banner style. The Banner added the last three paragraphs to provide context for the Christian Reformed Church.

With the one-two punch of Hurricane Helene and Hurricane Milton within two weeks of one another in September and October, faith-based disaster groups prepared a long, slow recovery that might take years. "It's going to take a long time," said Bruce Frank, pastor of Biltmore Church in Asheville, N.C., a congregation working closely with North Carolina Baptist Disaster Relief.

In Boone, N.C., staff and volunteers from Samaritan's Purse, an evangelical humanitarian group led by the evangelist Franklin Graham, worked to clear debris, set up water filtration systems, and deliver food and other supplies by helicopter to communities cut off by the storm.

In rural communities, the group set up some 50 Starlink kits to restore internet service and furnished generators to supply power. "We've also set up oxygen shelters," said Graham, for patients unable to receive their usual supplies, "and refilled more than 1,000 oxygen tanks."

By mid-October more than 16,000 volunteers had shown up to help, close to home in North Carolina and at Helene recovery sites in Georgia and Florida. More help will be needed in the months to come, said Graham.

Volunteers already on the scene have installed culverts to drain water and helped to temporarily restore gravel roads washed out by the storm. Plans for long-term rebuilding include recruiting leaders and arranging with suppliers for rebuilding materials, Graham said.

The nondenominational Christian volunteer group Eight Days of Hope set up mobile feeding sites as well as trailers



Photo by World Renew, DRS

**Volunteers from West Michigan working with World Renew's Disaster Response Services clear storm debris in Bluefield, W.Va. in late October.**

with laundry and shower equipment as part of a rapid response to both Hurricane Helene and Hurricane Milton.

The group's more than 250 volunteer leaders nationwide specialize in mobilizing large numbers of disaster relief volunteers, working with churches as well as long-term recovery leaders in local communities.

"We come in and we're like an adrenaline shot," said Hannah Fletcher, a spokesperson for the group. "We do a bunch of work on all the homes as fast as we can, and then eight days later, we're gone. Then the long-term recovery group kind of carries the rest of those houses to the finish line."

Todd Unzicker, executive director of the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina, said that as of mid-October more than 2,000 of its volunteers had been deployed to assist with recovery from Helene, but he is telling churches and volunteers who are ready to help right now that there is plenty of work ahead.

"The challenge is saying 'Hold on,'" he said. "We are going to need you a month from now and six months from now."

Unzicker said that 1,100 of the convention's 3,000 churches are in communities affected by Helene.

He also said that Baptist disaster relief is working closely with state, local, and federal officials in the aftermath of the storm. Those leaders are doing all they can, Unzicker said.

Some regions not directly in the path of Hurricane Helene had damage but no federal help. World Renew's Disaster Response Services, an agency of the Christian Reformed Church, sent a cleanup team to Bluefield, W.Va., Oct. 28.

"Although affected by Helene's remnants, West Virginia has not received federal funding for Hurricane Helene and is scrambling trying to find ways to help communities recover," said Chris Gibson, DRS's groups program manager. The agency's volunteers will be doing a lot of chainsaw work to remove debris and clean up what they can of an estimated 1,000 downed trees.

"Based on our commitment to help overlooked and underserved communities," Gibson said, "DRS is grateful for the invitation to take projects from the city manager of Bluefield."

—Religion News Service



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# Pushing Back the Darkness



By Brian Clark, ReFrame Ministries

*“The Bible presents God as the one who pushed back the darkness with this first light.”*

—Today devotional, Dec. 2, 2024

**A**lthough much of the world is shadowed by fear, division, and uncertainty, the light of Jesus Christ offers a beacon of hope. During Advent, the *Today* devotionals offered by ReFrame Ministries explore the theme of light breaking through darkness.

For many believers, particularly those living in regions suffering persecution, war, or isolation, this light of Christ is a lifeline reminding them of God’s love, strength, and ultimate victory over darkness.

ReFrame Ministries, the global media ministry of the Christian Reformed Church, plays a pivotal role in ensuring that this light reaches even the darkest corners of the world. Through radio broadcasts, social media, and devotional publications, ReFrame is equipping believers to share the message of hope found in Jesus.

As darkness encroaches, the light of Christ continues to shine through ReFrame’s international media ministries, bringing peace to those in desperate need. The following pages explore that theme using excerpts from December’s *Today* devotions.

### Hope Despite War

*“God had seen their misery, heard their cries, and was moving to rescue them from their suffering and oppression in Egypt after more than 400 years.”*

—Today, Dec. 5

The ongoing war in Ukraine has displaced millions, leaving families torn apart and communities destroyed. For Marianna and many more young mothers like her, the daily reality of conflict is a seemingly endless cycle of loss and despair.

Raising two little children by herself while her husband fights in the war, Marianna struggles with anxiety, panic attacks, and sleep loss.

Ukrainian women have faced unique hardships. Many are stuck in conflict zones, unable to reunite with loved ones or return to their homes. During this devastation, ReFrame Ministries is shining a light of hope.

Just as God’s light pushed back the darkness at creation, the light of Christ continues to bring hope to believers in the darkest corners of the world. Through ReFrame Ministries, this light reaches those in need of peace and salvation.

ReFrame’s ministry team in Ukraine has launched a new chat hotline that displaced women and others affected by the war can call to speak with Christian psychologists.

This hotline offers not only emotional support, but also spiritual guidance by connecting individuals with local churches where they can find community and hope. Marianna was connected to a support group for military wives, a link to a Christian course, and counseling on how to handle panic attacks.

“It’s amazing how God is using this hotline to reach people,” said one of ReFrame’s partners in Ukraine. “These are women who are stuck in unimaginable circumstances, yet through these conversations, they are encountering the hope of Christ.”

Additionally, ReFrame’s Russian-language ministry continues to share the gospel through social media, radio, and personal outreach. These platforms allow individuals to access God’s Word safely and securely, even in the midst of the war.

“We’ve seen people come to faith in the most extraordinary ways during this war,” said Sergei Sosedkin, ReFrame’s Russian ministry leader. “Amid the destruction, there is renewal in Christ.”

As Dec. 5’s *Today* states, “The very instruments of war used to control (God’s people) will be destroyed. All of these signs point to freedom and new life that the people could not achieve on their own.”

This message of freedom, achieved only through Christ, is exactly what ReFrame is working to share with those affected by the horrors of the war in Ukraine and in other parts of the world.

### Bringing Light in Persecution

*“By extending the benefits of God’s redemptive work far beyond the borders of Israel’s imagination, God’s faithful servant disrupts Israel’s comfortable, self-focused peace.”*

—Today, Dec. 13

Christians around the world are facing persecution and other barriers to their faith. Dec. 13’s *Today* reminds us to be mindful of these harsh realities and to pray for those in such circumstances.

In China, for example, government scrutiny has intensified, and churches and Christian websites have been shut down or censored. Similarly, in nations like India and Burkina Faso, growing anti-Christian and anti-Western sentiment has made it dangerous for believers or seekers to practice their faith openly. Despite these challenges, ReFrame

Ministries continues to find innovative ways to spread the light of the gospel.

In China, where state pressure has forced many churches to close, ReFrame is working to equip Chinese-speaking church leaders with newly published books that provide spiritual resources and guidance during these difficult times. These books help nurture the faith of believers who are forced to gather in secret or operate underground.

“These resources are a lifeline for our church,” one Chinese pastor said. “With government scrutiny increasing, we’ve had to adapt, but God’s Word remains our anchor.”

In India and West Africa, where hostility toward Christianity is growing, ReFrame’s social media and audio programs offer a safe and accessible way for believers to engage with God’s Word and share it with others. Despite the very real threats of persecution, Christians in these regions are finding strength and hope through these programs.

“Even when we are isolated, we are not alone,” said a Christian woman from India who listens to ReFrame’s audio devotionals. “These messages remind us that God is with us, and his light will never be extinguished.”

The Dec. 13 *Today* devotional reminds us that God’s mission is not confined by human borders or limitations. His redemptive work extends far beyond what we can imagine, welcoming all people into his peace—even in the face of persecution.

### Unity Brings Light

*“God reassured Israel that his redemptive work across the world would lead to a different relationship between his people and those of other nations. Instead of war and violence, the nations would come seeking the light of God’s presence.”*

—Today, Dec. 14

Unity in the body of Christ is a powerful force. It is through the collective efforts of believers worldwide that ReFrame Ministries is able to continue its work in regions facing darkness and despair. Through partnerships with local churches, global donors, and ministry teams, the light of Jesus is being shared with people in need.

In Japan, where social norms often discourage individuals from attending church out of fear of ostracism, ReFrame has launched *The Church in My Town*, a video series that allows viewers to explore Christian churches from the comfort of their homes. This innovative program helps people feel more at ease with the idea of visiting a church in person by allowing them to first see the community and its values online.

“We’ve found that many people are hesitant to walk into a church because they fear judgment or isolation,” said Masao Yamashita, ReFrame’s Japanese ministry leader. “This program helps break down those barriers and shows them that the church is a welcoming place.”

As the Dec. 14 *Today* devotional notes, God’s work is leading to a new relationship between God’s people and the nations. Instead of conflict and division, ReFrame’s partners are fostering unity and understanding through these creative initiatives.

### The Light Will Not Be Overcome

*“The light that God calls us into in Christ is not simply to help us see God more clearly but also to help people around us to recognize God’s goodness through us.”*

—Today, Dec. 21


Despite the growing challenges faced by Christians around the world, John 1:5 reminds us, “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.” This is the foundation of ReFrame’s mission: to ensure that the gospel continues to shine brightly, offering hope to those in the deepest darkness.

In North America, where prisons are overflowing, we remember the need for hope.

Copies of ReFrame’s *Today* devotional have made their way into many of these correctional facilities, providing inmates with daily encouragement and biblical teachings. One inmate shared, “Reading *Today* has changed my perspective. It’s brought me peace in a place where peace is hard to find.”

With every prison cell, war zone, and persecuted community that receives God’s Word, the light of Jesus shines a little brighter. As Dec. 21’s *Today* devotional reminds us, the light of Christ is not only for personal illumination; it is meant to be shared, helping others recognize God’s goodness in our lives.

Through the support of the Christian Reformed Church, ReFrame Ministries can continue to ensure that the light of Christ is not hidden, but instead shines brightly in the lives of those who need it most.

“As we reflect on the challenges and triumphs of 2024,” ReFrame director Kurt Selles said, “let us embrace the call to be lights in a world longing for hope. Together, we can ensure that the light of Christ continues to shine, bringing hope, peace, and salvation to those who need it most.” 

## The Light of Knowledge

**IN PROVERBS 4:13**, Solomon pleads with his son to hold instruction firmly in his grip and not let go because “it is your life.” World Renew understands that learning can transform one’s life. In communities where World Renew works, limited or no access to opportunities to learn simple life skills or income-generating activities can keep families trapped in poverty. That’s why World Renew works to extend God’s love through the sharing of knowledge. One of World Renew’s local partners in West Africa, Showing Everyone Love,\* recognizes that ongoing religious persecution in the region makes it dangerous to visit communities in person, so it started sharing information about food security, income generation, and health through radio broadcasts. With funding from Baker Estate and Growing Hope Globally, SEL’s programs are broadcast in three languages on two radio stations across three countries.

Like many women in her community, Salamatou\* continued to work in the fields and did not seek regular medical care when she became pregnant with her first child. “Not only did I not get prenatal checkups,” she said, “but I also didn’t rest. I continued to garden, work in the fields, pound grain, gather wood, draw water from the well, and carry heavy loads, and I didn’t take the time to eat well.”

Salamatou’s delivery proved difficult, and she could not understand why she suffered so much.

One evening she tuned into a SEL radio program focused on best practices during pregnancy. “I learned that prenatal visits are important,” Salamatou said. “The narrator explained it beautifully, accompanied by testimonials and a skit.”

She also learned about danger signs in pregnancy and the importance of



World Renew’s partner Showing Everyone Love shares information on food security, income generation, and health via radio broadcasts because it isn’t always safe to travel to communities.


taking prenatal vitamins, eating nutrient-rich foods, and avoiding labor-intensive activities.

“After hearing this, I decided to put everything I learned into practice,” she said.

Now pregnant with her second child, Salamatou said, “I go for prenatal consultations. If I feel unwell, I’m taken to the health center to find out what the problem is. I don’t do hard work. I eat well and nutritiously too, and I rest. This has enabled me to be in good health. ... Now I’m in my eighth month of pregnancy, I’m doing very well, and I expect to give birth in good condition.”

Salamatou said her husband also appreciates the knowledge she gained through the radio program. He insists that she continues to practice all she has learned and that Salamatou give birth at a health center rather than at home.

“He asks that I continue to make visits even for future pregnancies. And if I feel unwell or go into labor, he will take me to the health center,” Salamatou said. “I’m very happy and I would like to thank SEL and its partner.”

Please pray for God’s protection for World Renew, SEL staff, and program participants in the face of persecution. 

*\*Names and locations have been changed or omitted to protect identity.*

— Laurisa O’Brien

## The View From Here

# The Big Question

**IS GOD WITH US?** This is perhaps the greatest question we face. It is often a question born out of our deepest pathos: at the bedside of our dying loved one, as the dust settles from an earthquake, or when we get a late-night call about a car accident.

Some might ask whether God even exists. But for the vast majority of humanity, the biggest life question is not whether God exists (in some form), but whether God is fundamentally oriented toward us.

“Is God with us?” is a defining question in the book of Ezekiel—yes, Ezekiel, the eccentric prophet who found himself on the banks of the Kebar River having visions of winged and wheeled cherubim covered with eyes, the same enigmatic figure who dug a hole through the wall of his house, lay on one side for 390 days, and didn’t shed a tear when his wife died. This same Ezekiel struggled with the question “Is God with us?”

Ezekiel found himself exiled to Babylon at the beginning of several decades’ worth of clashes between the tiny nation of Judah and the mighty Babylonian Empire. While Ezekiel was living in Babylon, these clashes came to a head with the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple, the conquest of Judah, and the deportation of its remaining residents in 587 B.C.

These cataclysms touched Ezekiel personally, but it is clear from Ezekiel’s prophecies that his biggest concern wasn’t his own situation. Instead, he worried whether God had abandoned his chosen people because of their sins of idolatry and injustice.

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In chapter 10, Ezekiel has a vision of God’s glory departing from the Jerusalem temple. This was the same glory that moved with God’s people throughout their wandering in the wilderness in Exodus. It was the same glory that entered the temple as it was dedicated by Solomon (2 Chron. 7). God’s glory in the temple had been an irrefutable sign that God was with the people of Israel in all their successes and failures.


Ezekiel’s vision was an end to that. Confirmation of Ezekiel’s vision happened when the Babylonian army pillaged and demolished the temple (Jer. 52:4-30). God had indeed left the building.

Though not many of us have been despoiled and exiled by war and famine, most of us have felt a sense of aloneness that occasions our asking if God is with us. Perhaps we feel it in our family, where a tense silence reigns in place of glowing love. Perhaps that is where some of us are collectively. It has been so long since we’ve felt the warmth of God’s presence in our communal worship and ministry.

There’s good news, friends. In Advent we are reminded that God is indeed fundamentally oriented toward us. God became flesh and made his home among us. Christ has come.

Ezekiel’s story ends on the shores of the Kebar River with a final vision in the 25th year of his exile (the 14th year after Jerusalem’s destruction). In that vision, Ezekiel sees a new temple dedicated to the pure worship of the Lord. Into that new temple the glory of the Lord enters and overflows, turning into a life-giving and nourishing river (Ezek. 43).

And what is the name of the city where that temple has been built? “THE LORD IS THERE” (Ezek. 48:35).

Brothers and sisters in Christ, may God bless you with his overflowing presence this Advent season. God is indeed with us. 



Rev. Zachary King is the general secretary of the Christian Reformed Church in North America. 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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## Engineering Class Strives to Meet Sustainability Challenges

**IN ENGINEERING 333** at Calvin University, students spend the entire semester answering a single question. For this semester's class, that question is, "What should be the design of a Calvin Solar Farm?"

Professor Matt Heun teaches Engineering 333 alongside physics professor Larry Molnar, structural engineering professor Len De Rooy, and Calvin's chief financial officer, Dirk Pruis. Heun said it can be intimidating for students to try to answer such questions, but it is inspiring, too. It's exactly the sort of work Calvin encourages its students to tackle. Heun and the other professors have high hopes—and high expectations—for the students involved in this year's project.

"Environmental sustainability is one of the grand challenges faced by humanity," Heun said. "In the case of engineering for environmental sustainability in the classroom, we instructors face a unique problem: Humanity doesn't yet know the answer to our environmental crises. So there is no established curriculum. I don't know how the students will answer the semester's question. I don't know how the semester is going to end. This is question-driven, inquiry-driven work."

The stakes are high, and the challenge is a call to innovation and collaboration. It is precisely the kind of work that brings out the best in Calvin's engineering students, and that gratifies Heun, Molnar, and De Rooy as educators and Pruis as an administrator.

"It's a very rich environment when I'm learning and engineering alongside the students," Heun said. "I can't wait to see the ideas they come up with. I'm consistently impressed by how hard they work. They're working to help



Students from Calvin University's Engineering 333 course present their projects.

solve some of the important sustainability problems for our campus and for the rest of the world. The discoveries they make and innovations they produce will have real, lasting value."

These classes also help support Calvin University's commitment to carbon neutrality. The professors explain that sustainability isn't an effort relegated to any particular group on campus. It's a posture of care for creation adopted by students, faculty, administrators, staff, and the broader community.

How do we better manage our energy resources? How do we better use them? How do we produce energy that pollutes less, or undo the pollution that has already occurred? These are all practical questions that desperately need to be answered. In fact, Heun thinks they're questions Christians in particular should be trying to answer.

"Sustainability is important for Christians to be invested in," Heun said. "I think all the students have an idea that we should take care of the environment when they come to Calvin, but they need a little encouragement to consider the next step:

What are the hurdles? What are the problems I can contribute to solving?"

The shift into practical engagement is at the heart of Calvin's hands-on, service-oriented learning approach. And this practical engagement extends to everyone at every level of Calvin's administration. Projects such as designing Calvin's solar farm are an invitation to collaboratively and faithfully serve God and the world no matter who you are.

"At Calvin, there's an understanding that we need to be engaged with the world," Heun said. "Our faith is not a retreat. It's a faith that gets its hands dirty and wants to serve and wants to help."

— Calvin University

# Calvin Theological Seminary Launches New Digital Resource

**AS PART** of looking forward to its 150th anniversary celebration, Calvin Theological Seminary asked alumni and supporters, “What is important to your continued development and growth?”

The response, said President Jul Medenblik, was an overwhelming desire for easier access to Reformed teaching and content that intersects with the questions and concerns all believers are facing.

“There is a strong desire for access to further training and the continual availability of our existing and additional resources that speak to these concerns from our distinctly Reformed perspective,” Medenblik explained. “In response to these requests, Calvin Theological Seminary is excited to announce the digital extension of our semi-annual magazine, *Forum*.”

Since its founding in 1876, Calvin Theological Seminary’s mission has been to serve the church. The school prepares students for biblically faithful and contextually effective ministry grounded in Reformed scholarship. This scholarship is shared not only in the classroom, but through continuing education opportunities, lecture series, and institutes such as the



A new digital version of Calvin Theological Seminary’s *Forum* will supplement the magazine by providing video content, podcasts, articles, events, webinars, book reviews, and other resources that address biblical and societal engagement from a Reformed perspective.

Center For Excellence in Preaching, The Institute for Mission, Church, and Culture, and more broadly through *Forum* and other publication platforms. The launch of the digital *Forum* will make many of these resources more readily available and accessible.

“Our community is wrestling with ideas and questions at the intersection of faith, culture, and Scripture, and we desire to meet them in those questions with accessible resources that faithfully pursue the answers,” Medenblik said.

The print edition of *Forum* will still be published, but the new digital

edition will supplement the magazine by providing video content, podcasts, articles, events, webinars, book reviews, and other resources that address biblical and societal engagement from a Reformed perspective. Both formats will serve as a trusted guide to Reformed thought for readers from all walks of life.

“As we look forward to the next 150 years of Calvin Theological Seminary, we invite all those who wrestle with the ages-long questions of mercy, justice, faith, and formation to join us,” Medenblik concluded—“not because we have all the answers, but because we believe how we pursue the answers matters.”

For information about the launch of the *Forum*, check out Calvin Seminary on Facebook and Instagram.

— Leah Jolly,  
Calvin Theological Seminary

## Mission at a Chess Club

**IT'S FRIDAY NIGHT** at Casa Adobe, a ministry house in Costa Rica, and the loudest chess club ever is meeting.

Resonate Global Mission missionary Micah Schuurman and his friend, José Mario, just explained how to check-mate with two bishops. As the kids start their games, birds chirp in the garden, a German Shepherd barks at the front gate, and someone strums a guitar nearby. But the kids are definitely the loudest.

“Jokes, laughter, and victory dances are all pretty common,” Schuurman said. “When two kids finish a match, they might sit quietly and watch what’s happening in another game. But they’re just as likely to start distracting the other players with fart noises.”

Schuurman said that there are few extracurricular opportunities for children in Costa Rica who aren’t into soccer. That’s why he started the Friday-night chess club.

“A chess club is a place that can be hospitable to those who don’t necessarily fit in in other settings,” he said.

Schuurman started the chess club in 2016, a couple of years after he first moved to Costa Rica to serve with Resonate. He has spent many Friday nights with young people in his neighborhood, teaching them how to play chess, explaining new moves, playing games with them, and teaching them life lessons.

While Schuurman and Mario don’t preach the gospel verbally at chess club, they share it through their actions, such as praying before every meeting. The kids know the leaders are Christians, and Schuurman has seen God at work. Chess club is making a difference in the children’s lives.

Some come from unstable homes with few male role models. Schuurman



Resonate missionary Micah Schuurman and his friend José Mario started a chess club to provide a safe space for kids in their community.

and Mario have been able to mentor them—they listen to them talk about their lives and give them advice.

Some have faced hunger. At chess club, they get to fill up on snacks.

Some struggle socially in school. They’ve made friends through chess club.

Some have learning disabilities. Learning chess helped them improve their performance in school. Some students’ grades have improved, but mostly the kids have learned to work hard, persevere, and think positively. Schuurman said a number of kids have made the equivalent of the honor roll at school for the first time.

“I work pretty hard to encourage a growth mindset. It’s a big deal in education right now,” said Schuurman, who also teaches at a seminary. “Instead of focusing on innate ability, you focus more on hard work and how we’re always improving. There can be a hierarchy in chess—so-and-so is good or bad at chess—(but) we

try to keep the focus on celebrating improvements, no matter how small. We focus on celebrating hard work, not winning.”

As the kids come to more and more meetings, Schuurman said he sees kids display ownership of the club, responsibility, and a willingness to serve.

“Some are quick to volunteer to help mix the juice. Others help me bring in the bags of snacks. When it’s all done, they help with the clean-up without being told to do so,” he said.

Thank you for sending and supporting missionaries like Schuurman through Resonate and helping to make a difference in students’ lives, one chess game at a time.

— Cassie Marcionetti,  
Resonate Global Mission





PHOTO: WORLD RENEW

In the face of adversity, God provides us with the strength we need to carry on. The 4 agencies, 2 educational institutions, and 3 uniquely Canadian ministries of the Christian Reformed Church were started over the decades—some as many as 150 years ago—to help Christian Reformed people tap into this strength and respond to the challenges around them. Whether it is walking alongside people in poverty and those recovering from disaster, or supporting a congregation through a pastor church process, we are here to help. Thank you for making such ministry possible.



[crcna.org/Ministries](http://crcna.org/Ministries)





# Aquatic Engineers



Susie Vander Vaart is an environmental educator and ecologist who spends most of her time outside exploring creation.



**WHILE I WAS LIVING** in northern Alberta, one of my favorite places to go was the local beaver pond. I was guaranteed to find not only the beavers hard at work on their latest dam, but all their neighbors too: muskrats running and swimming, countless frogs hopping along the edges, herons stalking through the shallows, ducks nesting on shore, brightly colored dragonflies skimming over the pond's surface, and birds singing in the trees all around. It was beautiful. The beavers, stopping the flow of water, had unwittingly made a new habitat (or home) for countless other creatures they shared the forest with.

As odd as these large rodents (who can weigh up to 75 pounds) might look, they have been created to be the perfect underwater engineers. They have built-in nose plugs, ear plugs, and swim goggles (clear lenses protect their eyes), and they are able to chew underwater. Their webbed hind feet act like flippers in the water, while their front paws are like hands and are perfect for placing sticks and filling spaces with mud. Their big, flat tails help them pack the mud and sticks together and help them balance while they are using their extra-strong, iron-reinforced orange teeth to cut down building materials.

Beavers create water barriers called dams using only a combination of sticks and mud. As they clear trees to build their dams and lodges (houses) and to eat, they change forests into meadows. Over time their ponds become wetlands. Wetlands are important for filtering water and preventing floods, and they are an amazing source of life. Wetlands support all kinds of plants and animals—some living in the wetland, others using it for food or water. Wetlands are also a refuge in times of drought. Often beavers build dams in a series (the ones in my area were working on their sixth) to create not just one, but many wetlands. As the beavers move on and the dams begin to break, they leave behind another water-rich ecosystem: beaver meadows. Filled with grasses and shrubs, beaver meadows continue to hold onto water under the surface and support life even after the beavers have left.

Beavers fill me with awe. They remind me how incredibly complex creation is and how God designs and creates with purpose.

## Dig Deeper

Are there other lessons we can learn from the beavers? How do they form communities? What would happen if they didn't build their dams? What would happen if beavers disappeared?

## Try This

Try building a dam using only sticks and mud. Can you do it? **B**





# A CHARLIE BROWN CHRISTMAS

## Searching for Christmas

By Sam Gutierrez

**T**he 1965 animated special *A Charlie Brown Christmas*, developed by Charles M. Schulz, was predicted to be a flop.

The sponsor of the special, The Coca-Cola Company, was nervous. Reasons for a potential ratings disaster included bare-bones storytelling, a slow pace, no laugh track, religious references, children singing off key, a jazz soundtrack, and a main character (Charlie Brown) struggling with doubt and depression.

Charles Schulz, however, was determined to tell an honest and heartfelt story about the true meaning of Christmas.

With elbows firmly planted on a snow-covered stone wall, Charlie Brown says to Linus, "I think there must be something wrong with me, Linus. Christmas is coming, but I'm not happy. I don't feel the way I'm supposed to feel. I just don't understand Christmas, I guess. ... I always end up feeling depressed."

Feeling distraught and searching for answers, Charlie Brown finds his friend Lucy and sits down at her five-cent psychiatric help booth. After he expresses his feelings and tries to name his fears, Lucy is quick to give her advice. She concludes that the best medicine for Charlie's depression is a good dose of activity. "How'd you like to be the director of our Christmas play?" she asks him.

Taking Lucy's advice, Charlie heads to the auditorium, bumping into Sally and Snoopy on the way. They both offer him their thoughts about how to be happy at Christmas. Sally shares her wish list full of greedy demands for Santa. Snoopy enters a holiday competition and decks his doghouse with glitzy decorations. Both approaches to Christmas increase Charlie's sadness.

### Advent

Advent is a season of waiting, a season that anticipates the fulfillment of

promises of a Savior. In his book *Living the Liturgical Year*, Bobby Gross says that our Advent waiting is powerfully formative because it has a dual nature: it invites us to both groan and sing. Both practices are needed to get us ready to receive the work God is doing throughout the biblical narrative, culminating in the most special gift ever given.

First, let's consider the practice of Advent groaning.

After Charlie Brown shares with Linus about his depression, Linus responds, "Charlie Brown, you're the only person I know who can take a wonderful season like Christmas and turn it into a problem." But Charlie Brown has stumbled onto something essential about Advent. It's not that Charlie's looking for problems; rather, he's searching and straining to see past the tinsel, past the lights, beyond the activities and activism to get a clearer view of the important and real. In the same way, in the weeks leading up



to Christmas we are encouraged to take a long look at the brokenness all around us and inside of us. In Advent we stop, look, and weep over illness, poverty, chronic pain, estranged family relationships, abuse, injustice, political corruption, war, and the tragedy of another mass shooting. When we pause and peer through the sentimentality of the season, the clarity of sin we see evokes a deep sadness that stirs something inside—a longing in the depths of our spirit for intense goodness, beauty, healing, and wholeness.

But groaning for redemption is not the only practice Advent invites us into. Bobby Gross reminds us that practicing joy is equally powerful and important. To sing in Advent, however, is hard. To sing with real joy, we must get clear about what we want for Christmas.

Later in the story, Lucy identifies with Charlie Brown's depression, and in a moment of surprising vulnerability she says, "I know how you feel about all this Christmas business—getting depressed and all that. It happens to me every year. I never get what I really want. I always get a lot of stupid toys, or a bicycle, or clothes, or something like that." Feeling understood for the first time, Charlie responds hopefully, "What is it you want?" To his dismay, however, Lucy says, "Real estate."

Later, after some disastrous attempts at directing the Christmas play, Charlie Brown quietly leaves and goes searching for a stage decoration that will help focus the production. In a Christmas tree lot, he finds the only real tree among a dozen artificial ones and brings it to the theater. When his friends see it, they mock him, but Charlie intuitively knows he has found something that speaks of the true meaning of Christmas: a humble and weak tree, overlooked by

To sing with real  
joy, we must get  
clear about what  
we want for  
Christmas.

most, disdained by others, but beautiful to those with eyes to see and hearts hungry for the real.

Almost every modern seasonal song tells us directly or indirectly what we should want for Christmas. Although Charlie is never asked what he wants, his heart's intuition is fleshed out when Linus pauses in the middle of rehearsal and takes center stage. As the theater darkens, a spotlight illuminates Linus and his blanket as he recites the angelic message spoken to the shepherds in Luke 2: "Fear not, for behold, I bring you tidings of great joy that shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord."


The liturgical practices of groaning and singing are deeply biblical, described in passages such as 1 Thessalonians. Numerous verses from this short letter are often read during Advent because the situation to which they speak so closely mirrors our own. The author writes to a suffering church, waiting patiently in the middle of two promises. While they groan under the weight of sin, they are instructed to "rejoice always, pray continually, (and) give thanks in all circumstances" (1 Thess. 5:16-18). It can seem like a paradox to groan and rejoice at the same time, but it becomes possible when we get clear about what we want for Christmas and embrace with confidence the generosity of a God who "did not spare

his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?" (Rom. 8:32).

### Hope Fulfilled

When *A Charlie Brown Christmas* aired Dec. 9, 1965, it was viewed by an impressive 45% of those watching television that night. Immediately it received universal critical acclaim and became a yearly broadcast on network television until 2022—a remarkable 57-year run for a simple cartoon about a depressed boy straining to see past the superficial, searching for the true meaning of Christmas.

There is no right way to feel in the weeks leading up to Christmas. Like Charlie Brown, it's normal to want to feel happy, but the Advent practice of groaning and rejoicing means that while we wait in pain between two wonderful promises, we can rest in the knowledge that God will be present with us this year and every year until the sadness of sin is wiped from our eyes and our divisions are done away with once and for all.

On that day of promises fulfilled, flowing from our hearts will be rivers of joy as we rise, join the triumph of the skies, and with the angelic host proclaim, "Peace on earth and mercy mild—God and sinners reconciled!" 



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

# When Being Right Is Wrong

It's that distance  
between orthodoxy  
and orthopraxy  
that currently  
concerns me  
most in our  
denomination.



Brandon Haan serves as the senior pastor at Ivanrest Church in Grandville, Mich. He lives in Grandville with his wife, Sarah, and their three children, Levi, Titus, and Audrey.

**BACK IN 2005**, singer-songwriter Jack Johnson released the song "Good People." It opens with these lines:

*Well, you win, it's your show now,  
so what's it gonna be,  
'cause people will tune in.  
How many train wrecks do  
we need to see  
before we lose touch?  
Oh, we thought this was low;  
it's bad, getting worse, so  
where'd all the good people go?  
I've been changing channels;  
I don't see them on the TV shows.  
Where'd all the good people go,  
We got heaps and heaps of  
what we sow.*

Even though this song lamenting the disappearance of character, kindness, and goodness in our society is almost 20 years old now, its lyrics could have been written today. Where have all the good people gone? From sports to the academy to politics to social media and even the church, it seems like good people of character, humility, and fruitfulness (as in the fruit of the Spirit) have disappeared, and in their absence, we indeed have heaps and heaps of what we sow.

## Tellin' It Like It Is

For instance, let's take our deeply held cultural value of "tellin' it like it is."

Put simply, we seem to possess a collective admiration for shooting from the hip, assessing the damage later, and speaking our own truth, no matter the cost or damage. We think we can say what we want, when we want, how we want, to whom we want, no matter what or how it makes people feel. "Just tellin' it like it is," we say. It's hardly a biblical approach to the tongue, but in a culture that cares more about the well-timed jab and landing verbal shots, it often wins out over carefully weighing our words.

As Christians, though, it shouldn't. After all, where in the Bible do we find that value? The simple fact is: we don't. "Tellin' it like it is" is an American cultural value that we've read into the Bible, but it's not something we find there on its own. In fact, when you read Scripture and what it says about the tongue, it actually says the exact opposite: You shouldn't always say whatever you want, speak your own truth, or "tell it like it is." That's not always the gracious or Christ-like thing to do. Rather, you should weigh your words carefully and sometimes not say what you think, because it turns out that's actually the most beneficial thing to do.

## Orthodoxy and Orthopraxy

You see, there's a difference between being right and being good. "Orthodoxy" and "orthopraxy," theologians call them. And it's important to get the balance between those two right.

Put simply, orthodoxy is right belief. It's right doctrine. It's holding all the right ideas, believing all the right things, and generally being right about the positions and opinions you hold.

Orthopraxy, on the other hand, is right practice. It's right behavior. Right action. It's doing all the right things, living them out, and putting them into action.

And while those two things usually go hand-in-hand, correctly balancing them is by no means guaranteed. There can, at times, be a bit (or a lot) of distance between them. And it's that distance between orthodoxy and orthopraxy that currently concerns me most in our denomination.

## Not Just Being Right

Put simply, I see a lot of emphasis on orthodoxy in our denomination right





now. I see people who think they're right, say they're right, and will seemingly stop at nothing to convince others they're right too.

Yet the way they go about that is anything but right. That's because, whether they intend it or not, I sometimes see them come across as self-assured, arrogant, and willing to bully into submission those who don't agree with them. In short, they seem to care more about orthodoxy, believing the right things, than *orthopraxy*, living or acting the right way.

**Which Matters More?**

What's more important, though? Orthodoxy or orthopraxy? Believing right or acting right? Which is more biblical? Which is more Christlike? Which is the more important value for us as Christians?

The answer, I think, is both. They're both important. They're both biblical.

As Jesus says, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 7:21, emphasis mine). Likewise, James wrote, "Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says" (James 1:22, emphasis mine).

You see, being right and acting right are both important. They both matter. They're both biblical. If, in the process of being right, we turn into people who rage against, cut down, criticize, and generally seek to condemn those we think are wrong, then the truth is we're not actually "right" either. We might still be "orthodox" in the strict doctrinal definition of the word, but we're no longer orthoprax. And that's just as wrong, just as unbiblical, and just as sinful as someone believing the wrong things too.

I'll admit I don't always strike this balance perfectly in my own life. For instance, just this morning, as I was trying to get my boys out the door and on the way to their nanny's house, my 2-year-old started unpacking the bag of nanny-house supplies I'd just put by the door. He did that because, 2-year-old that he is, he wanted to play with the Paw Patrol toy I'd just put in it.

I'm ashamed to say that at that moment my orthopraxy went right out the window. Instead of understanding that my son simply needed a bit of gentle correction as I repacked the bag, I started yelling instead. Now, was I "right"? Sure. Kids should listen to their parents and not unpack the things their parents are trying to get ready, even if that really fun toy is right on top of the bag.

But even if I was "right" in what I wanted or expected, I was wrong in how I handled it. I was wrong to get angry and yell at my son. I was wrong to expect a 2-year-old to understand or act any differently. And I was wrong to think, even for a second, that my right belief, my getting-out-the-door orthodoxy, justified my lack of orthopraxy, my unkind reaction toward my son.

The same is true for us. Orthodoxy matters. I'll be the first to say that it does. But orthopraxy matters too. And if we prioritize one over the other, then the fact is, even though we think we're right, we might very well end up being wrong. **B**

## God and the Unknown

I believe one of the things God calls us to do is explore and understand.

By trade, I am a science teacher. As a human, I am constantly curious. It's one of the reasons I do what I do. Telling me something simply isn't enough; I need to understand. I think that's true for many of us, and I think this drive to understand could be one of the attributes of being created in the image of God.

Let me start at the beginning.

As a science teacher, most of my career has been based on Article 2 of the Belgic Confession, "The Means by Which We Know God":

We know God by two means:

First, by the creation, preservation,  
and government  
of the universe,  
since that universe is  
before our eyes  
like a beautiful book

in which all creatures,  
great and small,  
are as letters  
to make us ponder  
the invisible things of God:

God's eternal power and divinity,  
as the apostle Paul says in  
Romans 1:20.

All these things are enough to  
convict humans  
and to leave them without excuse.

Second, God makes himself known  
to us more clearly  
by his holy and divine Word,  
as much as we need in this life,

for God's glory  
and for our salvation.

This tells us that the first way we can know God is through creation. I often tell my students that the greatest part of my job is teaching about the God we see in creation—and creation is fascinating. There are lots of things we can explain and understand.

However, despite our advanced knowledge, there are also a lot of things we do not understand, things we cannot figure out.

Take, for example, the mechanics of flight. Something many of us have probably experienced continues to be debated among physicists. There are two leading arguments for what causes flight. One is Bernoulli's principle, which essentially states that faster-moving air has less pressure than slower-moving air. Airplane wings are shaped to make the air flowing over the top of the wing move faster than the air flowing under it, causing lift.

The second leading theory on flight is based on Newton's third law of motion: For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. In this case, the angle of the wing causes the wind to push against the bottom of the wing, and the shape of the wing causes the air to flow off the back at a downward angle, creating motion in the opposite direction—lift.

Either theory can be used to explain flight, and scientists still debate which one actually does it. Maybe it's a combination of the two!

Another example of something we don't fully understand yet is gravity, even though we experience it every day and can very accurately measure it. Even on their way to the moon, astronauts were still affected by gravity from the earth and from the moon.



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

There is significant debate over how gravity actually works. There is debate over what causes it. It's one of the most observed and experienced phenomena in all of creation, yet there's no definitive explanation for it.

### **Questions and Answers**

When we read the Bible, though, we sometimes get unique insight into what's actually going on behind the scenes. The book of Job is one example. This ancient tale starts with a conversation between God and "the accuser" (Job 1:6) about Job's faithfulness, and God allows the accuser to cause great suffering in Job's life to see how Job will respond. The kicker of that story is that Job never finds out why all those bad things happened to him. I wonder if he even found out after his life ended. That's a question the Bible doesn't answer.

This is true in our own lives too. We wonder why bad things happen. We ask why God would allow the mobility of a young man to be taken away in a car crash that was no fault of his own. We wonder why a father, whose presence is still needed on Earth, is taken away unexpectedly. We all have questions and issues that we struggle with throughout our lives.

We can trust that God has it figured out and that God's view is very different from our views. But that doesn't mean we don't question and ache and wonder why.

I've always told my students that I have a big list of questions to ask God, either when I get to heaven or Jesus returns to Earth. My hope has always been to sit down with God (or God's representative), share a beverage, and discuss some of the scientific and theological questions I have had all my life.

However, the older I get and the more I reflect on the nature of God that I see

in creation, including our own human curiosity, I begin to wonder if that will ever happen. Maybe I will automatically know the answers, or maybe the answers won't matter. But I'm not sure that will be the case, especially in a renewed creation.

Throughout history, humans have been driven to explore and had a desire to understand. The Bible tells us that "God blessed them and said to them, 'Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground'" (Gen. 1:28). I believe one of the things God calls us to do is explore and ask questions, and I wonder if this God-given drive to explore and to question rather than simply understanding and knowing will persist in the perfect new creation.


And that makes me reflect on my theology. The older I get, the more questions I tend to have, and I think that's OK. The older I get, the more I tend to think that when somebody has all the answers, the reality is they just might not understand all the questions very well.

That gives me great comfort in my discomfort. It makes me believe it's OK to be uncomfortable, to not know all the answers. It's OK to be in the "I'm not sure" camp.

But what is important, even in the face of the unknown, even amidst the questioning, is being Christ to other people—letting them know that they matter and that they are loved, sharing in the suffering they might be facing, and offering comfort and empathy in their questioning or pain even when we don't have all the answers. The term "Christian" should be an action verb, not an adjective, and I will try to err on that side of the equation every time, even when I don't have the answers.

Scientific and theological debates and discussions can be fascinating, but they should never distract us from nor get in the way of the life Christ modeled for us.

The older I get, the more I try to get comfortable with not knowing, and the more importance I place on being Jesus to the people around me.

Maybe someday I'll even find out the "why." 



## Birth of the Chosen One: An Indigenous Retelling of the Christmas Story Delights and Stirs Hope

**AS THE WEATHER COOLS** and family life shifts indoors, our Navajo community gathers for winter stories. What better time to share the story of the birth of our Savior? Terry Wildman weaves a retelling of the birth of Jesus into the oral Indigenous tradition in his new children's book, *Birth of the Chosen One*. Wildman, editor of *the First Nations Bible* (InterVarsity Press), shares the joy of the Christmas story as seen through First Nations storytellers.

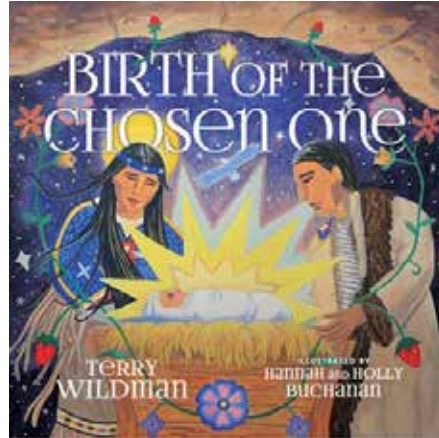
My 5-year-old granddaughter, Rosaleigh, and I took in the fullness of this ancient story together. The familiar characters sprang to new life with their Indigenous names rooting them in time and place. Wildman connects the biblical significance of each place and person with the traditional storyteller's description.

Rosaleigh asked many questions about the names of Bitter Tears (Mary), He Gives Sons (Joseph), and the House of Bread (Bethlehem). She particularly loved the image of the Creator's Mighty One (Gabriel) spreading the wings of the Holy Spirit over Bitter Tears with power and protection.

As the story unfolds with Bitter Tears and He Gives Sons looking for a place to rest and deliver the Chosen One into the world, we notice how similar the buildings in the House of Bread (Bethlehem) looked to Pueblo adobe structures in New Mexico.

Babies are cherished in every culture. Rosaleigh completely understood why the Seekers of Wisdom (the Wise Men) would travel far to find the Chosen One and then return secretly so the baby's life would be spared.

In a beautiful moment of kinship, Rosaleigh pointed out that the stars that shine over our land today are



the same that lit the sky as the shepherds shook with fear when the angel messengers proclaimed the birth of the Chosen One. What a powerful linkage to the love that the Creator of this world has for all children—past, present, and future!

Wildman brings this narrative home for children and adults through vibrant words accompanied by art from illustrators Hannah Noel Buchanan and Holly Buchanan. He connects each of us to the Good News of redemption and reconciliation, a promise that extends to all generations—including my granddaughter's. **B**



Carol Bremer-Bennett is World Renew's director of U.S. operations. She lives in Grand Rapids, Mich., with her family and attends Madison Square Church.



### White Bird

Reviewed by Lorilee Craker

*White Bird*, based on the graphic novel by *Wonder* author R.J. Palacio, picks up the story of Julien, Augie's bully in *Wonder*. Now in high school, Julien encounters his glamorous grand-mère, Sara, who tells her troubled grandson how she and her friends used to exclude another Julien, a boy with polio, in Nazi-occupied France. But soon the Nazis were marching into town, and Sara was in danger.

When Julien hides Sara in his family's barn, the bullied one becomes the protector, and Sara begins to look at him with new eyes.

The story is mostly about the Julien and Sara of 1942, but when Grand-mère's narrative ends, her grandson must reckon with his own life and choices. *White Bird* shows that acts of kindness and courage make their own kind of history. (Rated PG-13 for some strong violence, thematic material, and language. In theaters now.)



## The Science Behind Your Salad

Reviewed by Kristen Parker

If you're curious about how the food on your plate is made, this podcast offers an insightful look into agriculture, food innovation, and sustainability.

The host, Jane Craigie, has a natural way of guiding conversations and making complex topics approachable and engaging. She has a strong interview style and connects well with a diverse group of guests from all parts of the globe. Her global approach helps ensure that each episode offers a fresh perspective. The variety of voices—from scientists to farmers to innovators—keeps the content interesting.

Some episodes focus on specific foods, such as coffee or tomatoes, but others branch out to address topics such as water security and sustainability.

This is a great listen if you're interested in food innovation, sustainability, science, or food.



## Receiver

Reviewed by Sam Gutierrez

Gisele Bündchen (Tom Brady's former wife) said it after the New England Patriots lost to the New York Giants in Super Bowl XLVI: "My husband cannot ... throw the ball and catch the ball at the same time." Quarterbacks need someone who can catch the ball.

This streaming series goes behind the scenes of five top NFL receivers: George Kittle (San Francisco 49ers), Deebo Samuel (49ers), Davante Adams (Las Vegas Raiders), Justin Jefferson (Minnesota Vikings), and Amon-Ra St. Brown (Detroit Lions). Executive-produced by Peyton Manning, the cameras follow these five professional players during the highs and lows of the 2023-24 season.

Christians will appreciate the theme of dedication, the interesting look into various expressions of faith (Christian and non-Christian), and the reflection on the motivations that drive these five top receivers. (Netflix; rated TV-MA for language)



## Cottontail

Reviewed by Mary Li Ma

Bereavement is a strange thing. Even when family members grieve together, the journey doesn't always bring everyone closer.

This movie tells the story of a Japanese widower, Kenzaburo, journeying to England to scatter the ashes of his late wife, Akiko, in Lake Windermere, mentioned in her favorite childhood book, *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*. When the old man doggedly determines to set out for a foreign land, his son must follow. But even with his son traveling alongside him, Kenzaburo would rather ask strangers for help than face his son. Yet old memories are relived, and they are reminded how this family came to be—and how the love of Kenzaburo and Akiko came to be. The bond of love is strained, but "love covers over a multitude of sins" (1 Peter 4:8).

(Streaming on Amazon Prime, Apple TV +, and other platforms. Rated 13+ for mature themes, including death and assisted suicide, occasional language, drinking, and smoking scenes.)

## The Lowdown

***The Independence of the Prosecutor***: This book, written by a member of the Christian Reformed Church, dives deeply into the origins of the International Criminal Court. Laszlo Sarkany draws from interviews with key participants to analyze the negotiations that produced the novel institutional design of the court. (UBC Press)

***For Fans of the Inside Out Franchise***: Taking place between the events of *Inside Out* and *Inside Out 2*, *Dream Productions* is an all-new series about the studio inside Riley's mind where dreams really do come true every night, on time and on budget. (Disney+, Dec. 11)

***The Lord of the Rings: The War of the Rohirrim***: The story behind Helm's Deep, the fortress at the center of *The Two Towers* film, is told in this anime fantasy. Starring Miranda Otto as Eowyn. (Warner Bros. In theaters Dec. 13)

***Young Adult Edition of The Choice***: In this young adult edition of the best-selling, award-winning memoir *The Choice*, Holocaust survivor and renowned psychologist Edith Eger shares her harrowing experiences and gives readers the gift of hope and strength. (Simon & Schuster, Oct. 1)

## How Can These Horrible Stories Be in the Bible?

Contrary to our natural tendency to view sin favorably, sin is ugly and disturbing.



Rev. Aaron Vriesman has been the pastor of North Blendon Christian Reformed Church in Hudsonville, Mich. since 2006. Follow him on YouTube and Substack.

**THE BIBLE** contains many stories that are downright disturbing. Perhaps you have read the stories of Lot and his daughters (Gen. 19:30-38), the Levite and his concubine (Judges 19), Amnon and Tamar (2 Sam. 13), or Jephthah and his daughter (Judges 11), to name a few. The first time you encountered these stories, you probably closed your Bible and shook your head, wondering why in the world God would put these stories in inspired Scripture.

I believe these stories are meant to show us the ugliness of sin. We are supposed to be revolted when we read about human sacrifice, incest, and sexual assault. As sinners by nature, we are inclined to be indulgent with our pet sins. These stories are meant to hit our spiritual gag reflex. Contrary to our natural tendency to view sin favorably, sin is ugly and disturbing.

But these stories are much more than episodes in a crisis-driven soap opera. They're even more than a sin deterrent or a moral lesson.

As Christians, we don't preach a gospel of works, of being "good" as a means of salvation. We preach Jesus Christ and him crucified (1 Cor. 1:23; 2:2).

Because Jesus Christ is God's Word in the flesh (John 1:14), and the Bible is the written Word of God, all the stories of the written Word of Scripture point us to Jesus Christ and his salvation. All the stories of the written Word are ultimately about the enfleshed Word. When we consider the ugly stories of the Bible, these also point us to Christ and salvation. Every ugly story in the Bible points to the ugliest story: the Son of God was crucified for us. By our sins and transgressions, we killed Jesus Christ. Nobody who has ever walked the earth deserved more honor and respect than Immanuel, God with us. Nobody else deserved to be believed and obeyed more than

the one who came down from heaven itself. Nobody was more innocent than the one without sin. But instead of honor, he received disgrace. Instead of obeying him, people despised him. The world will never see a more grievous evil than the crucifixion of God's only Son. Never was a more innocent person treated so unjustly. Never was the holy ever more profaned. It is the ugliest story of all time.

When we encounter other ugly stories in the Bible, they are a window on the story of Christ crucified. When we read about the Levite dismembering his concubine, we realize the horror story of the cross. When we read the scandalous story of Lot's daughters, how much more scandalous is a crucified Lord and Savior. The defilement of Tamar is a reflection of the greatest defilement. Jephthah's daughter's sacrifice is a picture of the ultimate sacrifice of Christ.

When we are shocked and appalled by ugliness in the Bible, we ought to be all the more shocked and appalled at Christ's crucifixion. Each ugly story is a window on another aspect of the cross. Thankfully, the ugliest story ended in a victorious resurrection and eternal salvation for all those who believe in Christ. If the almighty God can bring such a glorious victory out of the ugliest story and turn it into our salvation, then God can surely do the same with all ugly stories. **B**





**DEADLINES:** Ads for the January/February issue are due December 13, 2024; March: issue, January 31, 2025. 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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cipleship. The city of Barrie offers a variety of recreational and educational opportunities. Please contact us at [firstcrcpastorsearch@gmail.com](mailto:firstcrcpastorsearch@gmail.com).

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### Obituaries

**BAKKER, THOMAS G.** of Scottsdale, AZ, passed from this earthly life to his heavenly home in July after a lengthy struggle with ALS. He is survived by his wife of 55 years, Charlotte (Kamstra), daughter Sarah (Jonathon) Madderom, son Jonathon (Katie) Bakker, and 5 grandchildren - Samantha, Joshua & Chloe Madderom, and Tommy & Charlie Bakker.



**VANDERHILL LENGHER, FAITH**, age 88, died on September 22, 2024. Faith was preceded in death by her parents, her husband, Ronald VanderHill, her 2nd husband, Dewey Lenger, her sisters, Alberta Jeane Hageman and Arlene Verseput, her brothers, Lawrence and James Schemper, plus several other beloved family and friends. She is survived by her son, Steven (Thea) Vanderhill, daughter Susan (Alan) Poupore, grandchildren: Phillip (Winsor) Vanderhill, Stephanie (Marc) Orgass, Jessica (Chris) Sutton, Annalise Poupore and Zachary Poupore, plus her 7 great-grandchildren: Weston, Reed, Lane, Scarlett, Holland, Leighton and Wright.

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## An Invitation to Trust

While I'm sure  
many young  
people feel  
overwhelmed ...  
my uncertainties  
carry an  
extra layer of  
complication.



Ethan Meyers, 21, is a senior at Calvin University and is editor of *Chimes*, Calvin's student newspaper. He attends Madison Square Christian Reformed Church in Grand Rapids, Mich.

**"WHERE ARE YOU** going to college?"

As high school was ending, I remember the same question being on everybody's lips. I heard it so often I rehearsed a bundle of canned answers. Sometimes I'd change these slightly depending on who was asking or how fast a given deadline was approaching. Throughout my time in college, I've learned that life sometimes goes in cycles, and that some seasons are full of more questions than others.

As I look toward my senior year, the universal question has become "What's next?" People wonder if I'll go to grad school, get a job, move across the world, or get married. I'll probably end up choosing a few of those options, but I'm still not sure which. The uncertainty and life-altering potential in each choice is dizzying.

While I'm sure many young people feel overwhelmed when they arrive at this stage in life, my uncertainties carry an extra layer of complication. Since birth, I've lived with cerebral palsy, a disability that mainly affects my balance and coordination. Some of the biggest CP-related challenges for me include an impaired ability to drive, carry things, or walk long distances. Just before the beginning of "real" adult life, these obstacles loom larger than ever, but living with a disability has always colored my outlook.

For many years, conformity was an ever-present idol in my life. I focused on academics in part because it was an area of life where I could excel according to everybody else's standards. With my academic life nearing its probable conclusion, I've increasingly had to reevaluate my idea of what makes up a worthwhile life. Thanks to the wisdom of several friends and scholars, I'm realizing the lies I often believe about independence and self-worth are beguiling for anyone.

While there are perhaps more question marks in my future than for other people my age, my Christian faith assures me of two foundational truths for the years ahead. First, my disabled body is more than a long list of "I can'ts," and it is not simply an extra challenge to overcome. God created me (body included) to bear the *imago Dei*. That truth affirms me as beautiful, valuable, and worthy of celebration.

Second, there are ways in which my disabled body is limited. As I go into the next stage of life, many things able-bodied people do effortlessly will for me remain tantalizingly out of reach. No matter how much progress I make toward self-acceptance, these limits still will be painful. But what if I saw my embodied experience as a radical chance to trust a God whose "power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor. 12:9)? The Bible is full of people with disabilities whom God uses for God's plans. Moses was scared to lead because of his speech impediment. Jacob walked with a limp after wrestling with God. Famously, Paul writes about a "thorn in (his) flesh" (2 Cor. 12:7), which some scholars believe refers to a disability. The stories of these heroes of the faith reassure me that God has a plan for my own life, too.

No person can be fully independent, and we all have weaknesses. Some of the weaknesses that come from my disability are obvious, and they deepen the uncertainties of my current stage in life. However, I'm learning to appreciate the opportunity those obvious weaknesses provide. As the answer to my "What's next?" comes into sharper focus, I'm hopeful my disabled body shows me what it means to live a life dependent on the God who made it. **B**



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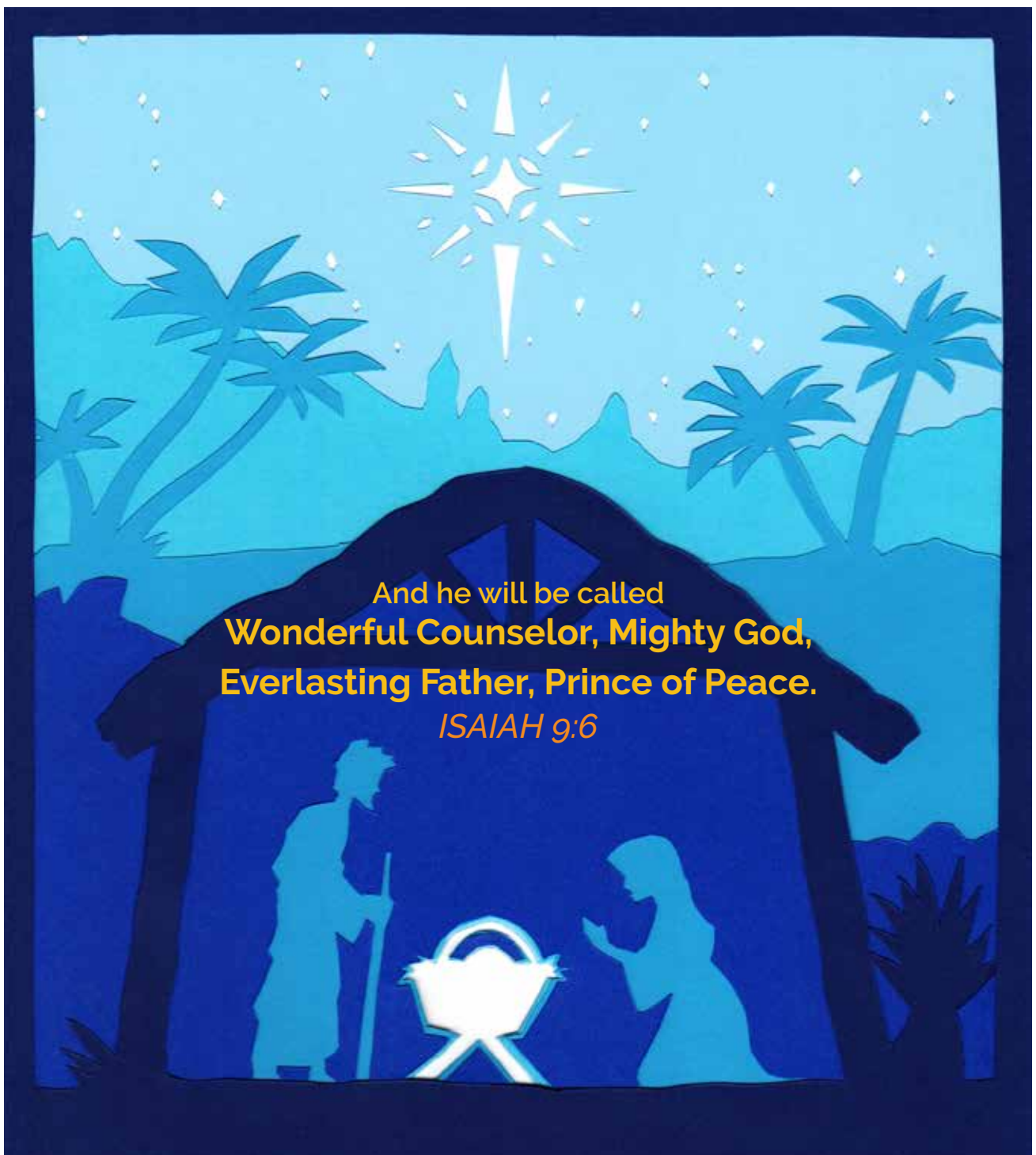


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