

BANNER

MAY 2025

THE BANNER.ORG

A woman with glasses and a teal shirt is smiling and holding a large, square piece of traditional Navajo weaving. The weaving features a complex geometric pattern in dark brown and tan on a light background. She is standing in a desert landscape with mountains in the background. The text "A Remarkable Life" is overlaid in large white letters on the left side of the image.

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BY THE NUMBERS

The CRC maintains a relationship of **"churches in communion" with 23** denominations and of **"churches in cooperation" with 21** denominations/partners. Here are those **44 relationships** by global region.

Global Connections



From the report of the Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations Committee to Synod 2025. See a complete list of relationships at crcna.org/EIRC.

WHAT'S ONLINE

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

- » Church Worldwide: Sudanese Christians Pray for End to War and Religious Attacks
- » Television review: *Frasier*
- » Music review: *Looking Up*, by Sidewalk Prophet
- » Book review: *The Pharisee's Wife*, by Janette Oke

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In "Classis Watch: Winter 2025" (April 2025, p. 16), the name of honorably released pastor Ken Bieber was misspelled.

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BANNER

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Empathy and Justice

Empathy should motivate us to seek justice, to protect and stand by the victims.



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

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

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

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

I WAS ALERTED to online debates about the “sin of empathy” after publishing the editorial “Empathy” (March 2025). That prompted me to write the Big Question answer on page 12. My focus there is to remind us that the Bible emphasizes the danger of *lacking* empathy and compassion, not having too much of them. This editorial is about empathy’s relationship to justice.

Empathy should not prevent us from enacting justice. Empathy for victims of injustice should drive us to seek justice for them, while empathy for all God’s image bearers should restrain our justice-seeking from crossing into vengeance or even cruelty.

We naturally have more empathy for those who are suffering than for those who are not. For example, it is fitting to have more empathy for victims of bullying than for their bullies. This empathy should motivate us to seek justice, to protect and stand by the victims.

The Bible shows us a God who cares about and fights for the poor and the oppressed. God freed the enslaved and oppressed Israelites from the mighty empire of Egypt. God later gave the Israelites many laws to protect the vulnerable among them, especially the poor, the widows, and even the foreigners. The nation of Israel was to protect foreigners who lived among them: “When a foreigner resides among you in your land, do not mistreat them. The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt. I am the LORD your God” (Lev. 19:33-34).

Israel’s kings were expected to defend the oppressed: “May (the king) defend the afflicted among the people and save the children of the needy; may he crush the oppressor” (Ps. 72:4). God’s prophets often rebuked Israel

for failing to care for the vulnerable. For example, Zechariah 7:9-10: “This is what the LORD Almighty said: ‘Administer true justice; show mercy and compassion to one another. Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the foreigner or the poor. Do not plot evil against each other.’”

However, bullies too are made in God’s image, so we also should have some empathy and compassion for them. However, that empathy should not prevent us from resisting bullies and bringing them to justice. Empathy should restrain our pursuit of justice from crossing into vengeance. We do all we can to stand up to bullies and protect the vulnerable, but we should not kick the bullies when they are already down, so to speak. Otherwise, we end up becoming bullies ourselves. Scripture warns us not to seek vengeance: “Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD” (Lev. 19:18).

Empathy also helps us to be more curious and less judgmental. It should motivate us, for example, to be curious about the victims. What is the history of the relationship between the bullies and them? What makes the victims a target? Are there ways we can help them to mitigate the bullying or even change the nature of the relationship? Similarly, we can be curious about the bullies too. Many studies have shown that hurt people hurt others. Bullies often were themselves bullied. Scripture calls us to love our enemies and not repay evil with evil, but with blessing (Luke 6:27-28; 1 Pet. 3:9).

This is a hard calling, and we often have failed. But with the Holy Spirit’s help, we can be the empathic, justice-seeking people God calls us to be. **B**



REPLY ALL

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

Charlie Brown

It was nice to read something about *A Charlie Brown Christmas*, which I have watched many times. It has a very overt message about the Christ Child with the scriptural quote by Linus. Sadly, Charles Schulz himself lost that faith over the years, and in later years he considered himself to be a secular humanist. But it was a great piece of animation.

» Bob Wierdsma // Peterborough, Ont.

Media Reviews

In the recent article “Keep Writing!” (January/February 2025), it was encouraging to see students take interest in reviewing the popular media they consume. *The Banner* indicated (three times) that it did not run certain reviews because “content might be problematic for our more sensitive readers.” This begs the question: What’s the problem? The sensitive reader or the content? Part of *The Banner’s* mandate is to stimulate critical thinking. Popular movies, TV shows, and books deserve critical review with a clear indication of why Christians would or would not want to engage. Culture speaks its worldview loudly. *The Banner* has the opportunity to speak loudly as well. What does the Bible have to say about the content—hardships, violence, hero worship, depression, isolation, sexuality, substance abuse—in the movies the students chose?

» Rachel Bouwkamp // Wyoming, Mich.

Like God

Thank you for your deeply thoughtful editorials. I found your editorial “To Be Like God” (January/February 2025) to be a very helpful, biblical, and thoughtful piece. It gave me new insight, which you do so often with your editorials. Thank you for that.

» John Meiboom // Toronto, Ont.

White Supremacy

I applaud your profound, subtle editorials. I believe you (editor Shiao Chong) were called by God to promote unity as the Christian Reformed Church struggles with difficult issues within the church. I also applaud the denomination’s stated commitment to “hear the cries of the oppressed, forsaken, and disadvantaged, to seek justice and love mercy as we walk humbly with our God.” ... As you stated in your recent editorial, the Bible doesn’t call us to seek power. The Bible calls us to exemplify the fruit of the Spirit. Zachary King says in his article “Why a Denomination” that “collective seeking, discerning, and submitting to God’s will remain essential for our churches.” As a denomination, are we complicit in what is happening in the current U.S. federal administration, which is demonstrating what unbiblical white supremacy looks like? Are we complicit when we aren’t working at finding a way forward to boldly and openly communicate that white supremacy has been declared by the denomination to be unbiblical and therefore not an acceptable belief system for CRC members?

» Barbara Van Enk // Los Angeles, Calif.

A Metaphor in CRC Building’s Destruction

The Christian Reformed Church is losing affirming churches, pastors, longtime faithful members, and finances. I saw an apt metaphor for that in today’s drive-by of 1700 28th St. SE in Grand Rapids, Mich. Storm clouds hovered above the destruction of the former CRC building, surrounded by fence barriers and two signs: one limiting access to a certain class of people, and one that said “Caution: You are under surveillance.”

» Bob Bosch // Grand Rapids, Mich.

Finding Our Center in a Divided World

LAST SUNDAY our pastor preached about unity in Christ. As I sat in my familiar pew, his words struck deeper than usual. Just days earlier, I'd ended a 15-year friendship over political differences that had grown too painful to navigate.

How did we as Christians arrive at this place? When did our political or cultural identities begin to overshadow our identity in Christ? I've noticed—not only in my personal relationships, but across our denomination—a growing tendency to define ourselves first by our positions on social issues and only secondarily as followers of Jesus.

Scripture repeatedly calls us to unity. In Ephesians 4:3-6, Paul urges us to “make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all.”

This doesn't mean we shouldn't have convictions. Rather, it reminds us that these convictions exist within a larger, more important framework: our shared faith in Christ.

In Canada and the United States, Christians face intense pressure to align with political tribes. Media ecosystems encourage us to view those who disagree as not just wrong, but morally deficient or even dangerous. This tribalism has seeped into our churches, threatening the unity Christ prayed for in John 17.

When I reflected honestly about my ended friendship, I recognized how I'd begun to see my friend primarily through a political lens rather than as a fellow image-bearer. I'd forgotten our shared history—how she brought meals when my father was in hospice,

Scripture repeatedly calls us to unity.

how we prayed together through job losses and family struggles.

What might change if we intentionally practiced seeing each other first as brothers and sisters in Christ, even amid deep disagreements? What if we approached difficult conversations with curiosity instead of defensiveness?

Last week, I reached out to my friend. Our conversation wasn't easy, and our differences remain. But we committed to prioritizing our shared faith above our political identities. We're learning to disagree while still honoring Christ in each other.

In our polarized culture, perhaps one of the most powerful witnesses the church can offer is the counter-cultural ability to remain in communion despite deep differences—not by minimizing important issues, but by remembering that our primary citizenship isn't in any earthly kingdom, but in God's kingdom.

When the world's divisions threaten to overwhelm us, may we find our center not in our positions, but in the person of Jesus Christ. 

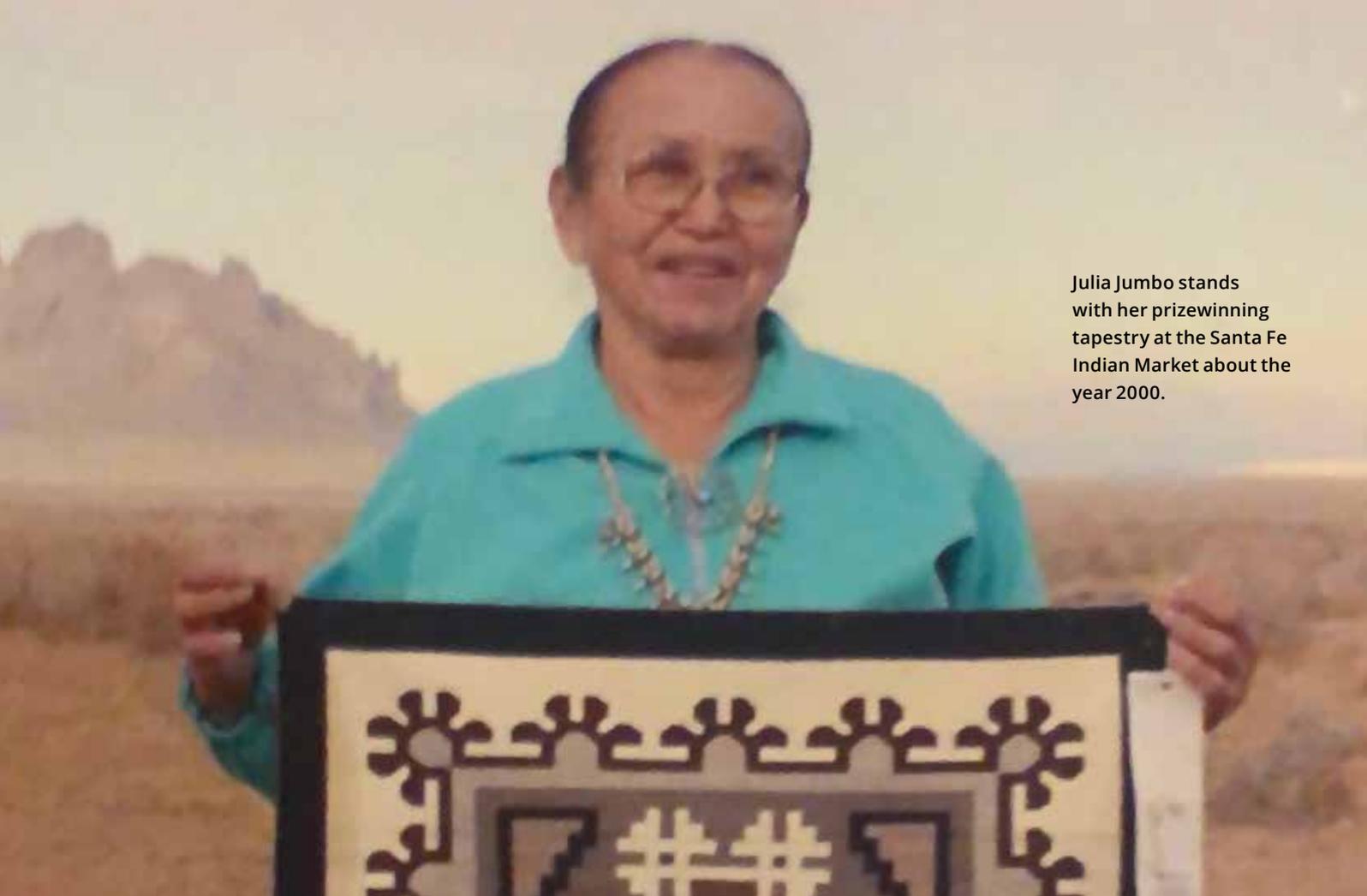


Charlene Trino is a writer and speaker based in Toronto, Ont. She is an active member of Grace Community Church, where she leads small group studies and mentors young professionals.

As I Was Saying

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

- » A Messy Hallelujah: "Naturally, we want to showcase our strength. But Paul reminds the whole church that the good news resonates best when we are weak, needy, vulnerable, and unpolished."
- » The Church at War: "Eighty years ago, as a little boy, I experienced the sadness and the sin of a church split."
- » In Quietness and Rest : "Overwhelm is so pervasive in our world as a whole, including within the church."
- » The Most Underrated Book of the Bible : "While it contains deep wisdom on life, the book is easily passed over because of the unsavory negativity."



Julia Jumbo stands with her prizewinning tapestry at the Santa Fe Indian Market about the year 2000.

The Remarkable Life and Art of Julia Jumbo

By Ron Polinder



If one spends 23 years living and working with Navajo people in western New Mexico, as I did, one will come across stories that need to be told.

A cross-cultural setting highlights the uncommon, even remarkable events of people and places that those of us reared in the prevailing culture find it difficult to apprehend. Such is the story of Julia Jumbo from Toadlena, N.M.

Julia Jumbo was a weaver—indeed, a master weaver. Her weavings are not merely Navajo rugs, as beautiful as they are; rather, they are spectacular tapestries—works of art worthy of awe and wonder. The tightness of the weave (120 threads per inch) and their precise symmetry enabled Jumbo to often place highly in art shows, and she earned the Southwest Association for Indian Art’s Lifetime Achievement Award. She is simply the finest of the master weavers.

Jumbo was born in 1928 “in the bush,” meaning she was born as her mother was herding sheep—not all that unusual on the reservation. Jumbo’s mother died when she was 7, and she

was thereafter raised by her grandparents. She openly acknowledged that she had a difficult childhood, was “treated mean,” and “denied school and made to work.”

Of further note, Jumbo was Christian Reformed and attended the Toadlena mission church established in 1910. Her pastor was Rev. Jacob Kobes, who with his wife, Trina, served the Toadlena community for 37 years. Jumbo lived four miles from the church. Until she finally got a pickup truck in 1965, she most often walked to church on the rutty roads. Otherwise she depended on horses and wagon or on Rev. Kobes coming with his truck.

How is it that one raised in these circumstances rises to such artistic distinction?

At age 9 or 10, Jumbo made herself a smallish loom and taught herself how to weave. She took her first rug to the trading post and, not knowing how much to ask, accepted a bag of candy as payment. Such was the inauspicious start of the CRC's greatest master weaver.

Jumbo's aunt was a notable weaver who became someone to imitate. In particular, Jumbo picked up her aunt's idea of surrounding her weavings with rosettes. Jumbo and her daughter Serena were and are the only weavers to perfect and carry that pattern forward. It became a trademark. By the time Jumbo was in her early 30s, she had entered a prizewinning rug at the Gallup Indian Ceremonial.

Serena described to me her mother's work and habits as such: "They are all tapestries. I remember all the rugs she's woven. She always had wool in her hands, spinning and carding the wool and sitting on the floor, busy weaving." She remembered when a fire at their home destroyed two tapestries ready for competition at the renowned Santa Fe Indian Market.

Jumbo also experienced much deeper pain when she lost two sons in a car crash in 1971. The girls remember the deep grief of their mother surrounding the accident. The oldest son, a Vietnam veteran, used alcohol to address his post-traumatic stress. Serena said Jumbo cried so much "her eyes were swollen shut," and she was disappointed that more church members did not come by to share in her grief. These days Serena makes it her ministry to visit the families dealing with sorrow, Bible in hand.

One cannot help but wonder how these tragedies, along with Jumbo's difficult

"She always had wool in her hands, spinning and carding the wool and sitting on the floor, busy weaving."

childhood, affected her spiritual life. Jumbo died in 2007, but her three surviving children have shared some of their memories with me.

Navajo families in the 20th century were often disrupted by poverty, transportation difficulties, language challenges, boarding schools, and the cultural persistence of traditional religion. Yet Jumbo's children Kee, Serena, and Julie Marie all are faithful believers thanks to seeds planted in their lives by their Christian mother, earnest missionaries, and religious instruction at school.

Jumbo's husband was not a Christian, nor did the family participate in traditional Navajo religion. Yet Kee remembers his father often said, "God never dies." He seemed not to be opposed to the family's Christian instincts, Julie remembers, and even was the one who took the lead in enrolling her and a brother in the CRC-sponsored Rehoboth Mission School.

Through it all, Jumbo kept on weaving. Historian Mark Winter wrote, "Julia Jumbo said the hardships of her youth made her 'try harder.'" Her work was typical of weavings from the Two Grey Hills region—that is, it featured shades of black, white, gray, and brown. But because Jumbo had to sell her work to survive, her children possess none of her tapestries.

Is it fair for the CRC to claim this renowned artist as one of its own?

In those early decades of the CRC mission effort in the American Southwest, there was all too great a gulf between the culture of the white missionaries and the Indigenous cultures they came to serve. The white folks were dominant, and Native people, at least early on, were generally compliant. Worse, there was too often a lack of respect for the Navajo language and culture and for Native leadership.

Given their geographic and cultural distance from denominational leadership, the Navajo CRC people and congregations were easily overlooked and marginalized. In that context, in the obscurity of Toadlena, N.M., lived one of the finest Navajo artists—one affiliated with a Christian Reformed church. It is altogether fitting that at long last Julia Jumbo is recognized and honored by her church for the God-given, Spirit-led creativity and discipline reflected in her impressive body of work. Could it even be that Julia Jumbo's artistry is unsurpassed within our CRC tradition? Visitors to the art gallery at Calvin University in Michigan or Rehoboth Christian School in New Mexico will surely see the quality of her work, celebrate its beauty, and wonder how it was essentially out of sight for several decades.

But now it is being noticed, and in it we shall see the Light that flowed from the hands of Julia Jumbo. **B**



Ron Polinder grew up in Lynden, Wash., and attended Lynden Christian School and Calvin College (now University). With an education degree, he spent his career mainly in administration at Rehoboth (N.M.) Christian School and Lynden Christian School.

BIG QUESTIONS

Vocation

I have to make a big decision regarding a job opportunity. I've been reading my Bible and praying, but I still don't know what to do. How do I know if I'm making the right choice?

It's often only looking back that we know whether we've made the right decision. Looking forward, the best we can do is to act wisely and in a way that honors God. Reading our Bibles and praying are good first steps, but not the only steps.

The Bible provides guidelines for following God faithfully, but it can be hard to know how to apply these to a particular situation. Prayer and talking to others can help with that, but it is still often easier to determine whether a decision is wrong. For example, we can know that a job that actively harms our neighbors, such as working in a casino or building faulty

roadways, is not likely to be a good and holy choice. Likewise, pursuing a job opportunity without taking into account the needs of one's family, such as a child struggling with school or family members who are ill, is a decision more likely to be made out of "selfish ambition or vain conceit" (Phil 2:3) than one made out of an honest desire to follow God's will.

As you pray through the decision, God can speak to you through your feelings and thoughts. It can be helpful to list the possible consequences of taking the job, which is one way to use our God-given ability to think. It can also be helpful to make a decision but wait to act on it so you can experience how you feel in response to that decision. Yet both our feelings and our thoughts can be selfish and lead us astray, so it is helpful to talk through decisions with those who know us well.

Finally, we can trust that God will guide us to make a good decision. God will be with us as we move forward, even when that means God helping us determine what to do if it becomes obvious that a different decision might have been wiser.

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



Bible

I see Christians debating about the "sin of empathy." Is that a biblical teaching?

I think the phrasing might be deliberately provocative, verging on click-bait. But the point, I believe, is that any virtue, even empathy, can be twisted and weaponized. Although that is true, I worry that some people use that to disparage calls for genuine empathy and compassion or to justify behaviors lacking in empathy and compassion in the name of zeal for God's truth. People have often distorted and weaponized the virtue of zealous truth telling too.

In fact, the Bible emphasizes tempering truth telling with empathy, compassion, and gentleness. The apostle Paul told us to speak "the truth in love" (Eph. 4:15). He described the "Lord's servant" as someone who "must not be quarrelsome but must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful" (2 Tim. 2:24). Even doctrinal opponents "must be gently instructed" (2 Tim. 2:25). Paul enjoined Christians to "mourn with those who mourn" (Rom. 12:15). He wrote that the church is one body with many parts, and "if one part suffers, every part suffers with it" (1 Cor. 12:26). God's people are to clothe themselves with "compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience" (Col.

3:12). Hebrews 13:3 says, “Continue to remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering.”

Jesus commanded us to love our neighbors as ourselves (Matt. 22:39). Can we do that genuinely without some level of empathy? Jesus himself was “full of grace and truth” (John 1:14), and he publicly wept out of empathy (John 11:35). Jesus harshly rebuked religious teachers who lacked empathy (Matt. 23:4).

The Bible is more concerned with the lack of empathy and compassion than with having too much empathy.

There is a good reason for this emphasis. Gustave Gilbert, the American psychologist who studied the Nazi war criminals of World War II, famously concluded, “Evil, I think, is the absence of empathy.” Of course, we have to be careful not to demonize everyone who lacks empathy, as some people who are neurodivergent naturally have difficulty showing empathy. Nevertheless, it is a cautionary note.

Let us emphasize what the Bible emphasizes and worry more about lacking empathy than about having too much empathy.

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

Digital Life

Despite technology providers’ claims to the contrary, is it possible that our digital devices have made modern life less interesting?

Our ever-present cellphones and their connection to GPS (the Global Positioning System) means we’ll never not know where we are—and most of our friends and family will know too. And our constant sharing on social media means we probably know what each of us are doing at any given time as well.

We track our shipped packages mile by mile, and we can see a scan of our paper mail online before we go to the box to fetch it. Recently we learned that artificial intelligence can forecast the weather 15 days in advance with great accuracy. All areas of finance and medicine are also seeing the impact of large learning systems that quickly analyze mountains of data and reliably predict outcomes.

Amazing accomplishments, true—but I wonder if something has been lost in the process. Where in our world is the element of surprise and delight?

There’s nature, of course. Getting outside with even a little bit of curiosity is guaranteed to surprise you. Creating original art can provide endless amounts of wonder if you let it. Oh, and children are full of surprises. Attending live worship at church can also be delightful. But this is a column about *digital life*.

For a while now I’ve been playing Wordle, *The New York Times*’ five-letter word guessing game, and it has me wondering how anything online and so-not-sexy like this game keeps my attention.

Part of its appeal is that there’s only one puzzle per day. Unlike the endless scroll of social media content, it takes only a few minutes, and once you solve it (or use up your six guesses) you’re done. It’s not asking any more of you, and you don’t need to give it more.

What if the people designing websites and applications would similarly limit the delivery of news or shares or videos? We’d be a little more surprised when we came back online. They’d never do it, of course, as the endless scroll of content includes ads, which make them huge amounts of money. So we have to take this into our own hands by limiting what we post and limiting the time we give to the endless stream of content coming our way.

I know that for many of us, giving up our devices would be almost impossible—probably even harder than giving up ice cream. But maybe we just need to stop eating bowl after bowl of content and find delight in it only every few days.

Dean Heetderks is co-director of Ministry Support Services of the Christian Reformed Church and art director of *The Banner*. Have you found surprise and delight somewhere online? Tell him at dean.heetderks@gmail.com.



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

Former Home Missions Director Returns to Resonate to Lead Asia Ministry

NEWS

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Moses Chung, the new regional leader for Resonate Global Mission's ministry in Asia.

Resonate Global Mission, the Christian Reformed Church's mission agency at home and abroad, is consolidating its South & Southeast Asia and East Asia ministries under one regional leader, Moses Chung. Chung started in the role April 1. The job marks Chung's return to Resonate after his role as program and strategy director ended in October 2024.

Joyce Suh, global mission leader for Resonate, had been serving as interim leader for the Asia teams. "After a longer-than-planned season of serving an interim role with the Asia teams, I am looking forward to having Moses in this role and feel very confident in the discernment leading up to this appointment," Suh said in a communication to Resonate staff March 21. "I do want to thank the Asia teams for their grace and cooperation in the interim. I have loved my season working more closely with all of you."

Before Chung's departure in October, he had worked for the agency for 13 years, first as director of Christian Reformed Home Missions, which merged with World Missions to form Resonate in 2017.

Chung and his wife, Eunae, who currently live in California, will relocate to Korea for this role—something they already felt God unexpectedly calling them to over the past six months. "Since my last day with Resonate in October 2024, I have been prayerfully seeking God's guidance for my next steps," Chung said. "To my surprise, God has placed a deep burden on my heart and given me a clear sense of calling to move to Korea and take part in the work God is doing in that region of Asia."

Chung said he has a deep desire "to see new communities of faith with new imagination" and to see these "communities of new imagination in droves." The opportunities for that kind of gospel work exist in Asia, where his new role with Resonate includes both the supervision and leading of the Asia team and also "personal engagement in local ministry in alignment with Resonate's goals." Chung said that

piece is what drew him in particular. After 40 years of living in the United States he said now, at 55, he feels a strong call from God to return to Korea. While ordinarily a missionary sending process might take two years, Chung expects his relocation period will be less because he already knows the language and the culture.

Combining the SSE Asia and East Asia mission teams into one region is "part of the global mission team's sustainability work," Suh noted in the March 21 email. Brian Geers, Resonate's director of marketing and communications, said that "joining the regions together will have an immediate cost savings benefit, and the important work ahead includes balancing operational efficiencies with ongoing ministry effectiveness."

Other Resonate Changes

Resonate has seen cuts to its domestic ministries as the agency tries to reduce its expenses by \$4 million to match revenue projections. Beth Fellingner, regional mission leader for Eastern Canada, said, "Because of budget constraints this year, every regional mission leader was asked to cut some hours from our local mission leaders," with each regional leader determining how to manage the allocated budget.

In Classis Eastern Canada, the cuts resulted in the loss of an outreach mission developer, a position that was funded jointly by the classis and Resonate. At its March 1 meeting, Classis Eastern Canada voted "to maintain the funds designated for the OMD position" while it reconsiders its future commitment to the classis's missional work. That discussion is expected to happen at the classis's October meeting.

"I will be part of reimagining with Canada East what the position could look like in the future," Fellingner said. "Resonate is still committed to work with Classis (Canada East), and I believe that to be a good relationship."

—Alissa Vernon, News Editor

Noteworthy



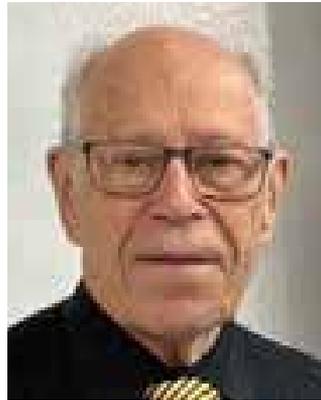
Kathy Vandergrift



Philip Visser

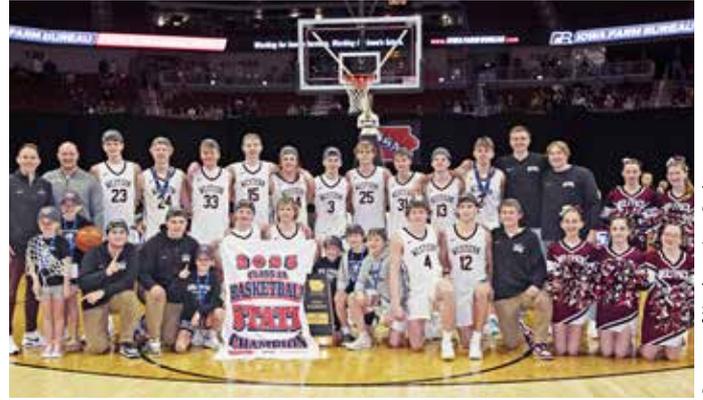


Peter VanderZaag



Jim Romahn

Kathy Vandergrift, Philip Visser, Peter VanderZaag, and Jim Romahn—all Christian Reformed Church members in Ontario—each received a King Charles III Coronation Medal in recognition of their community contributions. Vandergrift, a member of Kanata Community Church near Ottawa, Ont., was honored for her years of advocacy work on children's rights and leadership in her community. Visser, a member of First CRC in Owen Sound, Ont., served with the Merchant Navy and is a volunteer with the Silver C's Caring Canadians organization. His medal recognizes him as a "longtime community volunteer, educator and leader." VanderZaag, a member of Alliston (Ont.) CRC and a potato farmer and researcher, was honored for his lifelong work improving food production through potatoes in Ontario and around the world, including 60 countries of Africa and Asia. Romahn, of Community CRC in Kitchener, Ont., was recognized for more than 20 years of volunteer service to Habitat for Humanity Waterloo Region.



Courtesy of Northwest Iowa Review

Western Christian High School in Hull, Iowa, won its second consecutive Division 2A boys basketball state championship March 14. Karsten Moret and Kaden Van Regenmorter, both seniors, were named to the all-tournament team, with Van Regenmorter named captain. Coach Derek Keizer said the team had a season characterized by "loyalty, resilience, (and) accountability." They traveled more than 3,200 miles (5,150 km) during the season "competing all over Nebraska, South Dakota, and Iowa."



The mixed doubles badminton team of The King's University took the gold medal at the Canadian Collegiate Athletic Association national tournament hosted at the Edmonton, Alta., school Feb. 26 to March 1. Teammates Melissa Roque and Mahdi Ahmadi were named female and male badminton athletes of the year by the Alberta Colleges Athletic Conference. The ACAC also named coach Naeem Haque its Coach of the Year "for his exceptional leadership on and off the court."

ACAC also named coach Naeem Haque its Coach of the Year "for his exceptional leadership on and off the court."

Serving From Experience, Outreach Director Becomes City's Support Specialist

Seven years ago, Roger Evans was living on the streets, struggling with addiction, and searching for a way out. Today, he serves not only as outreach director at New Hope Fellowship, a Christian Reformed congregation in Monroe, Wash., but also as peer outreach support specialist for the city, working to help those experiencing homelessness find stability, resources, and hope.

Evans' journey took a turn when he entered rehabilitation. Upon completing treatment, he found his way to New Hope Fellowship. A church member offered Evans a small camper to live in and occasional work opportunities. With a place to call home and a renewed sense of purpose, Evans began rebuilding his life. He found steady employment as a school bus driver, but his true calling lay in serving Monroe's unhoused community.

"I know 80% of the homeless in Monroe by name," Evans said. "They're people, and they need help. I've been there, and I know how much of a difference a simple act of kindness can make."

With backing from New Hope Fellowship, Evans started visiting homeless camps, checking in on individuals, and providing essentials such as food, blankets, and warm clothing. The church supported his outreach efforts with a monthly stipend to help meet immediate needs. Over time, his efforts expanded, and he played a key role in organizing a cold-weather shelter in the church's fellowship hall.

Beyond the shelter, Evans became a regular volunteer with Feed My Sheep, a group providing weekly community breakfasts



Roger Evans, left, at a food drive event with Mikeal Hager, Karen Hager, and Robert Bach. The three came to New Hope Fellowship for shelter, and Evans was able to help them.

and laundry services. He not only helped prepare and serve meals, but also sat with guests, fostering relationships and offering encouragement. His work contributed to a shift within the congregation, and several formerly homeless individuals found stability through connections built at these gatherings.

In January 2023, Monroe city leaders officially recognized Evans' dedication and hired him as outreach support to continue his work on a broader scale. He now bridges the gap between the city and its unhoused residents, offering resources, crisis intervention, and long-term solutions for those in need.

One of the people Evans had been assisting was Brett Pierce, a Monroe resident who had been living in an RV with his three dogs. Evans had been in contact with Pierce for about a year, providing occasional support. On a cold Wednesday in January 2025, Pierce's RV caught fire, destroying his home and taking the lives of his beloved pets. That same day, Evans

reached out to New Hope Fellowship's pastor, Jon Westra, seeking a way to help. At a church council meeting, one deacon made a providential phone call. Within 24 hours, a donated trailer was secured for Pierce, needing just a few repairs before it could serve as a new place to live. Soon the church community, including several individuals who had once been homeless themselves, came together to repair the trailer's roof.

"The remarkable thing isn't just that Brett got a new home," Westra said. "It's how God worked through the people in our community. This wasn't a government program or a structured initiative—this was people following their hearts and stepping up to help."

"It's not about changing the world in one day," Evans said. "It's about showing up, being consistent, and reminding people that they're not forgotten. That's what saved me, and that's what I hope to do for others."

—Dan Veeneman

Indiana Pastor Posts 1,000 Days of Devotions



Photo by Art DeBruyn

For the first of 1,000 planned daily devotions, Pastor Art DeBruyn used a photo from the Camino de Santiago and Scripture from 1 Corinthians 1:27: “God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise.”

The Facebook page of Center Grove Church in Greenwood, Ind., is filling up with beautiful images and daily scriptural reflections as pastor Art DeBruyn works his way through 1,000 days of devotions. This spring he’s about a quarter of the way through, having started Aug. 5, 2024.

The project, which DeBruyn is crafting from 18 years’ worth of sermons and treasured photos from his personal collection, grew out of two earlier books and DeBruyn’s daily habit of practicing Spanish with the language-learning app Duolingo.

DeBruyn made use of the app after a few trips to Spanish-speaking countries, including Spain, where he walked portions of the Camino de Santiago in 2017 and 2022. When he reached 1,248 days of consecutive Spanish practice, he wondered about putting daily effort into sharing devotions. He’d done shorter stints of devotion sharing during two summer preaching series at Center Grove, covering Romans in 2021 and 1 Corinthians in 2022. He turned those devotions into books: *The Redeeming Road* and *Always Better Together*.

For the 1,000 days of devotions, DeBruyn is mining his sermon archive and tracking his posts in a spreadsheet so he doesn’t

reference the same sermon twice over the course of nearly three years of posts.

“Even when (I) use the same Scriptures, (there’s) always something new,” DeBruyn said. “Every time I go back to an old sermon, it’s a trip back to see development and transformation.”

DeBruyn became a minister when he finally left his job as an attorney after many rejections of God’s calling. He says he was “raised as an evangelical atheist,” with parents who were Dutch immigrants to Grand Rapids, Mich., affected by experiences of growing up in occupied territory during World War II. But at age 37, “Christ tracked me down,” he said.

The photos DeBruyn uses to accompany his reflections often include shots of nature and landscapes from travel to visually express what he’s conveying in words.

According to his spreadsheet, DeBruyn expects to post the final devotion May 3, 2027. He doesn’t yet know what he might do after that. “If there is a plan, it hasn’t been revealed to me,” he said.

“God doesn’t reveal the big picture; I don’t think we can handle the big picture.”

—Kimberly Simpson

IN MEMORIAM



Rev. Walter Swets

1935-2025

Wally Swets was a source of joy to those around him. He trusted fully in his heavenly Father and believed every minute of his life was a gift from God. He died March 27 at age 90.

Wally was born in South Holland, Ill., and lived there until leaving to study at Calvin College (now University) and Seminary in Grand Rapids, Mich.

He was ordained to the Christian Reformed Church in 1959 and pastored: Hartley (Iowa) CRC; Faith Community CRC, Colton, S.D.; Bethel CRC, Oskaloosa, Iowa; and First Cutlerville CRC, Byron Center, Mich., where he remained for 24 years. During these years of ministry, Wally was a delegate to synod several times and served on many classical and denominational boards.

After he retired in 1997, Wally preached locally for several years and was honored to be on staff at the Stroo Funeral Home for 25 years. He enjoyed daily walks, morning coffee with friends, reading, playing games, working outdoors, and volunteering for Crossroads Prison Ministries and Samaritan’s Carriage, a nonprofit organization providing transportation and excursions to those with limited mobility.

Wally will be lovingly remembered by Albertha, his wife of 68 years; a daughter; a son and daughter-in-law; and four grandchildren.

—Janet A. Greidanus

Disability Advocates Support Belonging, Participation

The number of church and regional disability advocates is growing in the Christian Reformed Church, with 10 new regional advocates and 22 new church disability advocates stepping into these roles since 2023. As of the end of 2024, 384 church disability advocates are serving, representing about 40% of the churches, and 21 out of 49 classes have a regional disability advocate.

Church advocates think about universal and responsive design in their church context, said Lindsay Wieland Capel, disability consultant with Thrive. "Universal design is proactively designing and adapting worship services, buildings, and attitudes so that they are accessible for as many people as possible," Wieland



Amie Spriensma is a regional disability advocate in Classis Zeeland.

Capel explained. "Responsive design is more person-centered"—focusing on a particular person with a disability and adapting and accommodating based on what works well for them.

Regional advocates support church disability advocates in their classes and connect with churches who don't yet have a disability advocate. "Our hope is that each church and classis would have a disability advocate," Wieland Capel said.

Amie Spriensma, regional disability advocate for Classis Zeeland,

has been a disability advocate "on and off for at least a dozen years." She said some years she's been more active than others, depending on her life circumstances.

"As a person with cerebral palsy, I feel as though I am always advocating for something. Either I want to be included, or I am looking for ways to help others be included," Spriensma said. "One of the best things about being an advocate is having your message of inclusion connect with other people. It doesn't always happen, but when the message is conveyed with compassion, comprehension, and clarity, it's a blessing to see the response.

"Disability advocates help people in the church and wider community recognize that God sometimes uses broken crayons and cracked pots to create his masterpieces," Spriensma said. "The power to do what we do and shine his light in any capacity is from God and not from us. If the calling truly comes from Christ, he will expand it, not revoke it or hide it away."

To learn more about becoming a church or regional disability advocate, email Thrive@crcna.org.

—Kristen Parker

Shaped by a Food Sharing Ministry

The pastor of Akron (Ohio) Christian Reformed Church says the congregation's food distribution service, The Landing, has transformed the congregation since the ministry started 13 years ago.

"We are much more aware of the poor among us. They are now our friends. They are now us," Pastor Harry Winters said.

Winters has served the 58-year-old congregation since 1992. When the church moved into Akron's Highland Square neighborhood in 2008, they "spent time asking, 'Why has God moved us here?'" Winters said. "Slowly we discovered the large very poor population that remained primarily hidden."

Wanting to serve that population, the church approached the Akron Canton Foodbank about opening and funding a food pantry in its building. "They jumped at the suggestion because they didn't have any agencies working in this neighborhood," Winters said. "We've been open nearly every single Friday since (we launched)—even during COVID," he added. "Many things have changed. We started by serving about 30 people a week; we now average over 150. We purchased an old box truck five years ago, and this has allowed us to increase our volume."

The church designed The Landing to be a meeting place as much as a place to share food, and the once-a-week outreach shaped other parts of the church's ministry.

Winters said unexpected results from this work include becoming "known among our poorer neighbors. Many of them count our church as their church." The majority of volunteers come from the community—"They're people we've come to know," Winters said.

The congregation was even able to raise around \$200,000 for an elevator to help elderly and disabled clients who for many years have been "struggling to get their groceries out of the (church) basement." Winters said the project was completed in 18 months even though the "fairly young" congregation didn't need to use the lift themselves. "On most Sundays it isn't used," Winters said, "but it has really helped people from the neighborhood."

—Alissa Vernon



In December 2024, adult and children's Sunday school classes assembled holiday gift bags for patrons of The Landing food pantry.

facebook.com/AkronCRC

World Renew Extends Local Empowerment Approach to New Bangladesh Project for Vulnerable Youth

World Renew's 40-year track record of working with community partners on anti-poverty initiatives in Bangladesh contributed to its being awarded a five-year grant of \$7,886,330 Canadian dollars (US\$5,547,424) from Global Affairs Canada. Matched by World Renew's church and household donors with a CA\$417,708 contribution, a total fund of CA\$8.3 million (US\$5.8 million) will be used for programs supporting vulnerable youth in Bangladesh's Dinajpur and Netrokona districts, the agency said in a March 12 announcement.

World Renew is the Christian Reformed Church's global relief and development agency. Like its previous projects in the region, this new effort, Supportive Adolescent and Youth Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights, will be implemented in conjunction with established People's Institutions. Described in a March 2024 case study from World Renew as "government-registered, sustainable entities that design, implement, and manage development programs," these groups include women working from their local contexts.

"The People's Institution model is the magic sauce in this whole thing," said Gertrude Omoro, project manager for the new Bangladesh-based program. "In the communities where World Renew operates, the People's Institutions have brought about remarkable changes. Women are engaging more actively outside their homes, which is often not the norm. They are forming groups to explore economic opportunities, such as Village Savings and Loan Associations, and are encouraged to start small businesses. This long-standing work of World Renew significantly contributed to the success of our grant application."

Maggie Zeng, World Renew's grants program manager, said Global Affairs Canada selected the submitted proposal in September after World Renew had responded to a call for concepts in June



Photo by World Renew

In a project of World Renew partner Sustainable Association for Taking Human Development Initiatives, community health volunteers monitor child growth in a community in Bangladesh.

2023. The objectives, which include a "focus on prevention and empowerment of adolescents and youth" and protecting girls from early and forced marriage, were aligned with the proposal call, Zeng said.

"Our project is really about prevention and supporting adolescent girls with access to knowledge," she said. "Girls are at high risk because they're the most vulnerable group. They don't belong with children's groups. They don't belong with adults' groups. So where can they talk openly about reproductive health? It's a critical stage to have the education, to know about the body, and to understand why they are at risk."

Omoro said the project aims "to offer information and training about all of the implications that come with young marriage for the health of the children, the health of the babies, and

the economic health of the family. We emphasize that, out of love for their children, parents should ensure that young mothers are physically and emotionally ready for the responsibilities of parenthood. This preparation enables them to finish their education and make positive contributions as adults. It also ensures safe childbirth experiences, fosters a healthy home environment, and ultimately promotes better health outcomes for families."

The project is expected to benefit an estimated 210,937 participants and stretch to about 450,000 additional community members "through the sharing of knowledge by participants," World Renew's announcement said.

—Alissa Vernon

New U.S. Refugee Policies Impact CRC Congregations

The recent suspension of the U.S. refugee admission program and of federal support for those already admitted have put Christian Reformed churches' refugee resettlement ministries on hold.

Bev Stephenson of Intersection Ministries, a Spanish- and English-speaking congregation in Holland, Mich., that has been cosponsoring refugee families for about 18 years, is concerned for families Intersection has been working with who haven't yet made it to the U.S. Stephenson said one family is in hiding in Afghanistan following the U.S. military withdrawal from that country in 2021. Another family in the congregation is waiting to be reunited with relatives from Venezuela.

"There are refugee families throughout the nation who have found themselves in difficult circumstances when their refugee resettlement assistance was suddenly cut off," Stephenson said.

In Pella, Iowa, a resettlement group of six church members from various denominations matched with a family of six from Afghanistan lost the opportunity to help. The U.S. Welcome Corps program had matched them with the Afghan family in early January.

"We were awaiting a travel date for them when the Jan. 20 executive order halted all refugee travel," said group member Noreen Vander Wal, a member of Grace Fellowship CRC. "We were very sad that their opportunity to resettle in the U.S. was lost, as was our opportunity to welcome them."

The Pella group is still committed to helping refugees. After learning that all funding for recently resettled refugees was also frozen, Vander Wal said, the group offered its funds "to other area resettlement agencies to provide any needed rent assistance, transportation, case-workers, job training, and more. The Iowa Bureau of Refugee Services in Des Moines introduced us to a family from Venezuela



First CRC video-streamed worship service, March 2.

Some members of a recently immigrated family who arrived in the U.S. Nov. 1, 2023, thanked First CRC in Grand Rapids, Mich., for its support over the last year and a half.

who was facing some very challenging circumstances. Their 9-year-old son, who has since died, had a serious medical event after arriving in the U.S., and they were in need of ongoing support." Vander Wal said the Pella group is continuing to provide that.

In Grand Rapids, Mich., First CRC blessed the Congolese/Rwandan family they have sponsored for the past year and a half into a new chapter in their lives March 2 as the family moved out of the church's former parsonage to a home of their own. Steve Timmermans, chair of First's immigration/refugee committee, described how the church had helped the large family acclimate to the local culture and language, obtain driver's licenses and find jobs, and get the children enrolled in school. One young man was welcomed as a member of the congregation. The congregation is prepared to open the former parsonage to another refugee family. However, according to the Jan. 20 executive order, the United States Refugee Admission Program won't resume unless the president, in consultation with the secretary of homeland security and the secretary of state, determines "that resumption of the USRAP is in the interests of the United States."

In a Feb. 5 Prayer and Call to Action on Immigration, the CRCNA, citing the denomination's positions on immigration and migration and the conclusions of a 2010 synodical study (*Acts of Synod 2010*, pp. 875-79), reminded and encouraged Christian Reformed congregations "to welcome, love, and enfold immigrants, refugees, and migrants in our churches, and to advocate for comprehensive immigration reform, increased opportunities for immigrants to gain legal status, and dignified treatment of those detained because of their lack of status."

Vander Wal said her congregation "has become more active in tutoring English language learners." And Stephenson suggested an effort could be made for refugees already in the U.S. who might have lost their federal assistance: "If groups of Christians across our nation can be the hands and feet of Christ to refugee families that now feel afraid and isolated, what a difference that could make!"

—Anita Beem

Christian Groups Hold Prayer Vigil Over U.S. Foreign Aid

World Renew co-executive director Carol Bremer-Bennett was one of about three dozen Christians assembled at Capitol Hill Presbyterian Church in Washington, D.C., for a Prayer Vigil for Foreign Aid on March 11. Arguing the actions by President Donald Trump to suspend disbursement of U.S. foreign aid will hurt millions of people around the world, the group was calling on Congress to reinstate foreign aid programs.

Rev. Eugene Cho, president of Bread for the World, a nonpartisan Christian advocacy group promoting hunger-fighting policies, denounced the “broad, untargeted cuts” implemented in the U.S. Agency for International Development as an assault on vulnerable populations all over the globe.

“These indiscriminate cuts are not just a policy failure,” said Cho, standing in a sanctuary dotted with candles. “For us, especially, as followers of Christ, as uncomfortable as it may be, we must clearly ... but prophetically say it is also a moral failure.”

The vigil included World Renew, World Relief, and the Accord Network and came a day after Secretary of State Marco Rubio declared on social media that the government would cancel 83% of programs at USAID. In a Jan. 20 executive order from Trump, United States foreign development assistance was paused “for assessment of programmatic efficiencies and consistency with United States foreign policy.”

World Relief, the humanitarian arm of the National Association of Evangelicals, had some contracts canceled, said Matthew Soerens, vice president of advocacy and policy, in a March 10 email to Religion News Service. Soerens said that four of World Relief’s grants in Sudan, South Sudan, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo were unexpectedly reinstated but were “scheduled to be completed” in March.



Carol Bremer-Bennett, co-executive director of World Renew

During the March 11 vigil, several speakers highlighted the human toll of the cuts. Kombo Choga, senior director for program design at Compassion International, pointed out that his organization currently does not receive government funds but “are witnessing how the withdrawal of aid is devastating” populations they work with—including children.

“It’s causing harm now and into the future,” he told the crowd, which included evangelical Christian USAID staffers laid off during recent cuts. Several held signs with slogans such as “Hunger won’t wait” and “Aid strengthens American national security.”

Choga argued that while the government has a responsibility to assess the proper use of taxpayer funds, the Bible offers “very clear guidance.”

“Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the LORD,” he said, citing Proverbs 19:17.

World Renew, the development and relief agency of the Christian Reformed Church in North America, which had issued a call to action on foreign aid a month earlier, was a joint recipient of a USAID grant for a three-year crop yield increase project in Nakuru County, Kenya, which ended in 2024. That was part of more than \$13 million in U.S. government grants that

the organization has programmed over the last 25 years, the call to action said.

At the vigil, Bremer-Bennett prayed, “We lament the choices of those in power who have turned away from the suffering of your children,” adding that funding “has been withdrawn from clinics where babies take their first breaths, from hospitals where mothers fight to survive childbirth, from communities where clean water and medicine once flowed.”

The cuts, Bremer-Bennett said, are “not just numbers on a page,” but “real lives lost.”

Cho and others expressed frustration at the administration’s actions but also highlighted the potential role of Congress in reinstating the programs.

“We are here today to urge the administration and Congress, Democrats and Republicans alike, to do all that they can,” Cho said. “It’s not too late to protect critical international aid that supports tens of millions of people suffering alone right now.”

—Religion News Service

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Prayer in the Workplace

By Jenninah Kabiswa, World Renew

When I started my role as country director at World Renew Kenya in 2015, I knew prayer was important. We had devotions every Monday before our work week began, but because it was time bound and rushed, it became routine.

That changed recently. The Kenya team wanted to connect more as a family that works together. We started meeting for an hour one Friday each month to laugh and share a meal. During that time, we felt that we also wanted to connect more at the spiritual level. We agreed to set aside time once a year to prayerfully dedicate all our work to God. We draft our work plan, prayerfully discern, review it, and once we're happy with it, we step away.

For two days every year, all we do is pray over our work for the coming year. We pray for resources. We thank God for our supporting churches and all our development partners. We thank God for our leadership from this office to our region and to the global level because we started to realize how connected we are—and the more we pray, the more connected we become. When we began praying in this way, brilliant ideas started to flow.

So we started to pray more. We dedicated more time during our staff meetings for prayer. We spend time each month studying the Bible together and praying before we get into our usual updates. I have seen my colleagues bonding more because of those conversations. Different people will lead. You don't have to be very good at leading devotions, just willing to share what the Lord has put in your heart.

From there we discovered a need for prayer partners. For the past three years, we have had a box holding the names of everybody in the office. Once a year, each person draws a name and then prays for and with that person for the whole year. At the end of the year, prayer partners exchange Christmas gifts—whatever they can afford. This has translated into a love for one another, because in those sessions people truly share their lives. It's not about work; it's about family. It's about how they are doing. It's their whole selves.

We've seen a change in the past few years as a result. There's more engagement, more friendship, more cohesion. Prayer has done that for us.

In my heart, I've always wanted us to be workplace ministers. Our office is no longer just a workplace, I hear staff say. World Renew has always been a good place to work. You are cared for and loved. But now it's become a place to flourish.

Members of the community in Magirini were able to receive emergency food supplies—an answer to prayer.



Jenninah Kabiswa is the country director for World Renew Kenya.

Worldwide Prayer Each Month

Something I've particularly benefited from is joining with colleagues from around the world for monthly prayer. It doesn't matter if one is a country director, an executive team member, or staff in North America, Asia, or Africa. We come together, and we pray. At that table we are all children of God. We are connected in prayer for things the Lord has put in our hearts.

I love that these monthly prayer sessions have also become a forum to communicate the values we hold: We love and care for one another. We are people who are concerned about justice. I see the vision of World Renew being fulfilled through these actions. It's not just work; it's ministry to self and others. We receive Christ's compassion, and we extend it.

Our monthly worldwide prayer session is a recognition that we are one body. We have different branches and different parts, but we all want to be together, to grow and flourish together. We must listen to the voice of God together. That's where we are transformed to live out our calling and our vision as an organization.

Church Partnership

World Renew Kenya has an amazing partnership with First Christian Reformed Church in Red Deer, Alta. We have not been able to physically visit one another as much in recent years, but we have not stopped meeting virtually to talk and pray. It reminds me of the early church, with believers



Members of communities in Turkana with longstanding tensions meet to learn skills, build peace, and work together.

gathering to eat and pray together. I once thought First CRC would grow tired of these meetings, but there's so much value in the times we have together. We talk as friends. We pray together. We are truly brothers and sisters in Christ.

We listen to what our Albertan friends are saying. They listen to what we in Kenya are saying—challenges and updates. And we pray for one another. This has created a bond. It's a different kind of relationship that has been blessed by God.

Holding Hands in Prayer

Because of the regional conflicts we continue to see in places like Turkana, we joined with Resonate Global Mission, who provides Timothy Leadership Training, and another organization called Way of Peace, which facilitates peacebuilding through repentance, forgiveness, healing, reconciliation, and reconstitution. These three organizations, each focused on its own area of responding to the conflict, also lift up the work in prayer.

We all have been working with people in this region for almost two years now, helping the churches to understand and heal from the conflicts, then provide food security measures, clean water, and skills training.

Gratitude is coming not just from the communities we are working with, but from county government officials. Imagine I'm in World Renew's Nairobi offices and I get a call from the county governor. County governors here are a big deal. They don't usually have time for someone like me

unless I'm giving them money—and I'm not. But the county governor saw the change happening in the Turkana region—the peace that was being introduced, the repentance from the churches—and he sent for me. I went, wondering, *What have we done?* But when I met with the governor, he expressed gratitude and wanted to know how to incorporate our methods into county leadership. That's an incredible answer to prayer!

The Power of Prayer in Communities

We work in a place called Magarini. In that region, people have been experiencing challenging weather conditions. It gets extremely dry, and people struggle to grow enough to eat. These dry spells are somewhat predictable but not easy to deal with, even for the government.

Four or five years ago, this community was in crisis. At the time, we didn't have any funds for a proper response, but we knew we needed to do something. We told them the truth: "We're assessing the situation, but we really don't have the money. So let's pray."

We then discussed the situation with our International Disaster Response Team, and they were able to give us a grant. We quickly returned to Magarini and shared with this community that their prayers had been answered. They expressed joy and gratitude, but those prayers also birthed a willingness among community members to contribute.

Community members worked on a road in exchange for food—a shining example of God providing an innovative solution to support and rebuild a community. When the rains came and things were settling, the government decided that it wanted to use the section of the road the community helped rebuild as a starting point for upgrading the entire road. And it all started with prayer.

Today the community knows us as a faith-based agency. We have never said, "Become Christian to get things from us," but we do say, "This is who we are. This is why we have come. If it weren't for the fact that we believe Christ has called us to do this, we wouldn't be here." That's how we see ourselves. We are not bishops. We are not pastors. But we are ministers in the workplace—professionals who are also ministers. **B**

Intercessory Prayer: A Legacy of Mercy and Grace

IN DANIEL 9:17-19, we see one of the many examples of intercessory prayer in Scripture:

“Now, our God, hear the prayers and petitions of your servant. For your sake, Lord, look with favor on your desolate sanctuary. Give ear, our God, and hear; open your eyes and see the desolation of the city that bears your Name. We do not make requests of you because we are righteous, but because of your great mercy.”

What a heartfelt prayer for God’s mercy and intervention on behalf of his people! As it was in Daniel’s time, intercessory prayer continues to be an essential part of Christian life.

As ReFrame Ministries’ Prayer Ministry leader, I have the honor of facilitating thousands of intercessory prayers every week. The way God works through these prayers never ceases to amaze me.

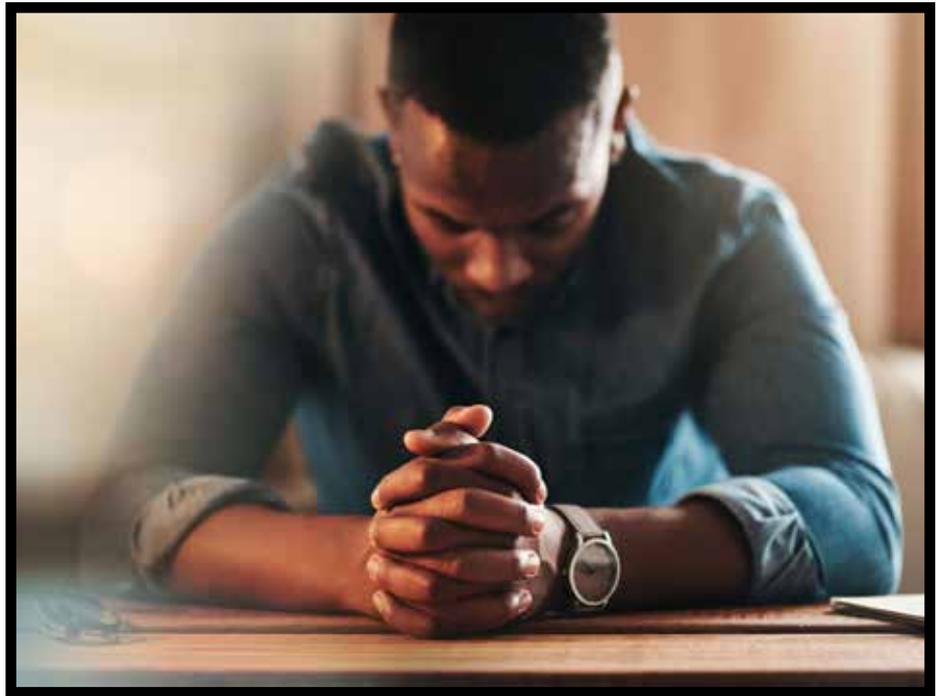
Jeff and Megan’s Story

One example of this work comes from Jeff, one of ReFrame’s 7,000 Prayer Team volunteers. He reached out to ask for prayers for his daughter, Megan.

A few years ago, Megan was involved in a serious car crash, leaving her with a traumatic brain injury and ongoing pain in her back and neck. More recently, Megan began experiencing heart issues that required multiple emergency room visits.

In response to Jeff’s request, I sent an email with Scripture, encouragement, and the assurance that prayer warriors across the globe were lifting Megan and her family in prayer.

Jeff shared this update: “My heart is beyond grateful for the prayers of the ReFrame Prayer Ministry. I forwarded



this prayer over to Megan. Megan was in the hospital over the weekend, and they did several tests for her heart and brain. Everything came back good! Praise God.”

They are now looking at some of the medications Megan is using to see if they caused a spike in her heart rate.

“Thank you so much for leading this amazing ministry that God has orchestrated!” Jeff said. “I have been on the Prayer Team for several years now, and . . . it’s (as if) God is sending me the lists you send every week.”

This heartfelt message is a powerful reminder of God’s call to pray for one another. Just like Daniel, we can trust that God invites us to intercede for others, knowing that God responds with love and grace.

As we continue to pray for healing and strength, hold fast to the truth that no prayer goes unnoticed or unanswered. In Jeff’s words, we are reminded that God is at work in the lives of those we lift up in prayer.

—Emily Vanden Heuvel,
ReFrame Ministries

You’re Invited!

Join Jeff and 7,000 other Prayer Team members in praying for others through ReFrame Ministries’ Prayer Ministry. To learn more or to volunteer, visit prayer.reframeministries.org, where you’ll also find helpful resources like the *How to Pray* ebook and *Prayers of Comfort for a Grieving Heart*.

The View From Here

A Sustained and Healthy Connection to the Broader Church

BUILDING CONNECTIONS with other believers often happens over food. That's why I appreciate Jesus' command to "eat what is offered to you" (Luke 10:8). Sitting at a table piled high with rice and beans, yams, mangos, okra soup, beets, chicken, goat, and plantains, I join with the saints in all places and ages in raising my hearty "Amen!" But before digging in, my host shares a reflection on Psalm 133.

"How good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity! It is like precious oil poured on the head, running down on the beard, running down on Aaron's beard, down on the collar of his robe. ... For there the LORD bestows his blessing, even life forevermore," he reads.

Psalm 133 invokes the anointing of the bodies and the garments of the Aaronic priesthood for service in the tabernacle where the Lord dwelt among his people (Ex. 29). Admittedly, the image is a little weird. But the message my host shares is that the togetherness, connectedness, and unity of God's people are like the warm and eternal life-giving glow of God's presence.

In the past few issues of *The Banner*, we've been reflecting in this column on what it means to be a denomination. Article 39 of Church Order reminds us of the fourth and final reason for our congregations to exist together as a denomination: to "allow for a healthy and sustained connection to the broader church."

Our ecumenical creeds and our Reformed confessions speak of this as well. The Nicene Creed confesses "one holy, catholic, and apostolic church." The Heidelberg Catechism states that

God "gathers, protects, and preserves for himself a community chosen for eternal life and united in true faith" (Q&A 54). Deepening our connections to the broader church is a blessing, and being part of a denomination allows us to do that in an organized and systematic way.

For example, as a community of churches, the Christian Reformed Church has an Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations Committee that stewards relationships with 53 denominations around the world (crcna.org/eirc). The CRCNA has "church in communion" relationships with 24 of these denominations, which allows for the sharing of sacraments and pulpits, the exchange of members and ministers, and the sharing of projects and ministry. The CRCNA has another 19 relationships of "cooperation," which focus primarily on shared ministry and mission projects.

In addition, the CRCNA is part of ecumenical networks, whether nationally in Canada and the U.S. or globally. These "healthy and sustained connections to the broader church" provide opportunities for fruitful ministry, advocacy, shared vision, and a unified voice within and outside North America.

And through missions, the CRCNA is in relationship with ongoing ministries around the world. In 2024, synod ratified a church-in-cooperation relationship with the Christian Reformed Church in Liberia because of the relationship between several CRCNA congregations in Iowa and Oregon with brothers and sisters in Liberia. Our CRCNA missionaries with Resonate Global Mission are connected to denominational partners in Japan, Nigeria, the Philippines, the Dominican Republic, and many other

places. Sometimes pastors from these international denominational partners even come to North America to serve CRCNA churches.

Our 49 CRCNA classes (regional bodies) play an additional important role in fostering "healthy and sustained connections to the broader church." Such regional connections result in shared outreach, evangelism, and diaconal ministries that concretely impact cities, towns, and rural communities and serve as a powerful witness to nonbelievers. Many of our CRCNA pastors are blessed to participate in networks of local clergy from different denominations.

Whether it is sharing a table, a ministry project, or simply a cup of coffee, "healthy and sustained connections with the broader church" are a way that we CRC folks mysteriously participate in the life and work of the Trinity, who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, three persons in one indivisible God. I admit the anointing oil running down Aaron's beard and vestments sounds a little weird to my modern Protestant ear. But enjoying the warm, life-giving glow of the Lord's presence with brothers and sisters from every nation around the world is transformational. And the food is really good too. B



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.

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

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

A Pastor's Faith in Action

WHEN NAKESE, Nakole Ruth, and Loiki's mother died from AIDS, the three young girls were left to fend for themselves in their grief. They survived by rummaging through garbage for food and sleeping in abandoned houses in their Ugandan village. They found a home again when Sylvia, a pastor of a nearby church, attended a Timothy Leadership Training led by Resonate Global Mission.

Resonate, the Christian Reformed Church's mission agency, uses TLT to equip pastors and other Christian leaders with a Reformed worldview of mission. When Sylvia participated in TLT, she learned how her calling as a pastor and believer was not only to preach the gospel in word, but to live out the gospel by meeting tangible needs and caring for people.

Resonate's TLT training completely transformed how Sylvia saw her role as a pastor, and when another pastor told her about Nakese, Nikole Ruth, and Loiki, Sylvia felt convicted to help.

"Sylvia felt a burden in her heart," shared Stephen Omoko, a Resonate ministry leader who facilitates TLT in Uganda.

Like many pastors throughout sub-Saharan Africa, Sylvia isn't paid. She and her husband sometimes struggle to make ends meet. They make do with the crops they're able to grow as subsistence farmers. Their seven adult children also periodically send them food or money.

Even though money could be tight and food could be scarce for Sylvia and her husband, she felt convicted to care for the children who had lost their mother. She was confident God would provide.

Sylvia set out to find the three girls and brought them to her home.

When she walked in the door with the girls, her husband was upset. He



Resonate Global Mission training is equipping pastors like Sylvia not only to preach the gospel, but to live it out. Now, three orphaned girls have a home again.

wasn't sure how they could afford to feed a large family, but Sylvia told her husband what she learned through TLT: Bible verses about God's love and care for people, and how God can deliver people from trouble.

It took some time, but Sylvia's husband placed his trust in God too, and embraced Nakese, Nakole Ruth, and Loiki as part of the family. Now the girls have caring adults who provide them with food, clothing, medical care, a safe place to sleep, and an education.

Sylvia and her husband's care for these three young girls who lost their mother has had ripple effects in their family, church, and community. Their seven adult children see Nakese, Nakole Ruth, and Loiki as their sisters

and help to support them. Members of the community and the church that Sylvia pastors have shared their funds to help care for the girls, and teachers have bought them school supplies. Seeing Sylvia's compassion and care, members of the community have even joined Sylvia's church.

"The community too has become concerned about people who are suffering," Omoko said. "These children have seen the love of God."

—Cassie Marcionetti,
Resonate Global Mission

Calvin Student wPrompted to Pray

"PRAYER IS THERE all the time, but you don't see the significance or value of what it could be," says Alyssa Pokharel, a Calvin University junior from Kathmandu, Nepal. She has experienced prayer in classes, in dorms, in Bible studies, and before meals during her time at Calvin.

"It's everywhere. It's embedded into the way we live out our faith," she said. "But I think there's just so much more potential for us to learn about what prayer can be."

In January 2024, Pokharel felt a prompt from the Holy Spirit to focus on prayer. At the time, she was a discipleship leader in the dorms but thought prayer, particularly intercessory prayer, was not a spiritual discipline she was particularly good at.

But "Campus Ministries did a lot to show us the significance of spiritual disciplines—faith practices that really open up this whole new world of beautiful relationship with God," she said.

She made a New Year's resolution to focus on prayer, having no idea where God would take that desire. A few weeks later, sitting in a breakout session at the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship's Worship Symposium, "I felt this voice, this tug within me prompting me to start a prayer gathering at Calvin," Pokharel said.

As days and weeks passed after that event, conversation after conversation confirmed that prompt in Pokharel's heart to be from God. At the same time, she was personally feeling the importance of starting this gathering.

"During this time I was going through a hard season, and sometimes I'd have a day with so much peace for seemingly no reason," she said. "My friend Anna would text me and say, 'I'm praying for you today.' And I'd think, 'This peace



Alyssa Pokharel (bottom right) started a weekly prayer gathering for students at Calvin University.

can only be from God.' It was a tangible way of showing me that prayer has such real power."

In March 2024, Pokharel took a step of obedience and started a weekly prayer gathering from 7 to 8 on Wednesday mornings in the basement of the university chapel. And while there was no formal structure to begin with, certain aspects of prayer have become central, including a centering prayer in which students sit in silence and give everything they are carrying with them to God, confess sins privately, and then enter into a time of intercession.

"We ask the Lord to put on our hearts what he wants us to pay attention to, what he wants us to intercede for," Pokharel said. "Every week there is something he's speaking to multiple people at the same time. Sometimes we just need to give the Lord space to speak before we present our list."

While it's clear this small gathering of praying students is having an effect at Calvin, Pokharel is also hearing about how it's inspiring people off campus.

"Yesterday," she said, "one of my friends texted me and said, 'I wanted to let you know that our prayer gathering has inspired a prayer gathering at our church.'"

—Matt Kucinski,
Calvin University

The Our Shared Ministry section of *The Banner* is where you'll find news and inspiration from the ministries of the Christian Reformed Church.



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Equipping the Next Generation of Military Chaplains

LT. COL. SANG JOON (Tim) Won is a Christian Reformed chaplain who has spent the past three years overseeing an intensive program that prepares military chaplains to serve as community counselors at U.S. Army installations worldwide. As director of the Chaplain Family Life Training Center in Fort Cavazos, Texas, Won is part of a team that provides over 5,000 hours of pastoral counseling annually, serving soldiers, Department of Defense personnel, military retirees, and their families. The center also trains chaplains to earn the Family Life Chaplain designation, equipping them with the skills to provide vital emotional and spiritual support to military communities.

Currently, 11 chaplains at the rank of major are enrolled in the program, undergoing rigorous academic and practical training. In partnership with Texas A&M University Central Texas, these chaplains pursue a master's degree in counseling while completing over 500 hours of supervised counseling. Their education includes 100 hours of theological integration training, incorporating spiritual practices such as prayer and Scripture reading into their counseling practice, and 100 hours of training in evidence-based counseling methods to ensure a robust and qualified approach to providing chaplaincy services.

For Won, this role is more than a profession; it is a calling. "God's grace motivates me to be faithful in my role," he said. "We have two Chaplain Family Life Training Centers in the U.S. Army, and I am one of two directors entrusted with leading and training military chaplains. As a first-generation immigrant to this country, this is huge. It is such an honor and privilege to have a job that honors God, brings joy to my life, and benefits our community, the U.S. Army, and our nation."



Lt. Col. Sang Joon (Tim) Won (second from right) and Chaplain (Maj.) Neal Muasa (third from right) are both Christian Reformed military chaplains who serve at the Chaplain Family Life Training Center in Fort Cavazos, Texas. They are pictured with several other military chaplains.

Having immigrated to the United States from South Korea in 1983, Won experienced the challenges of marginalization. Today, as a senior Army chaplain, he embraces his leadership role with a sense of duty and humility. "I'm entrusted to lead my students with intelligence, experience, maturity, and poise," he said. "Such responsibilities bring me joy and excitement. While acknowledging my own shortcomings, I am also proud to provide and promote cultural richness and diversity."

One unique aspect of his time at the center has been serving alongside Chaplain (Maj.) Neal Muasa, a fellow chaplain from the CRC. "It is a rare occasion when two CRC military chaplains get assigned to the same installation," Won noted. "Neal is a pleasure to work with every day. He is intelligent, mature, and grounded. During our theological integration group sessions, we often share our Reformed perspectives with other students, promoting dialogue and diversity together."

Balancing the demands of his role requires a deep well of spiritual discipline. Won credits his ability to stay

grounded to his commitment to daily spiritual practices. "Morning prayer and devotions set the attitude for the day. Listening to sermons and audiobooks during my 30-minute commute helps me learn new things. And plugging into a spiritual community through worship and Bible study sharpens my spiritual edge."

Chaplain Won remains steadfast in his dedication to equipping the next generation of chaplains. His leadership not only affects those he trains but also reverberates throughout military communities worldwide, offering faithful support to those who serve.

"I am consistently encouraged by the ministry of our CRC chaplains," said Rev. Tim Rietkirk, Chaplaincy consultant and endorser for Thrive. "Please continue to keep military chaplains such as Lt. Col. Won and Maj. Muasa in your prayers as they provide the ministry of presence to service members."

—Kristyn DeNooyer,
Thrive



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—Martin S.,
a Crossroads mentor

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Gravity

GRAVITY IS ONE of the most amazing forces we experience every day. But how does it work?

We all know what happens when you drop something. On Earth, gravity pulls objects down at an acceleration of 9.8 m/s^2 . This means that every second something is falling, it gets faster by 9.8 meters (about 32 feet) per second.

Things can fall really fast, but the air around us slows them down. The air pushes back on falling objects, creating resistance. Eventually, this resistance balances out gravity, and the object reaches a speed called *terminal velocity*—the fastest it can fall. From that point, it keeps falling at the same steady speed.

When people jump out of an airplane, for example, they speed up until the air pushing against them equals the pull of gravity. Once they reach terminal velocity, they fall at a constant speed. When they open a parachute, the parachute catches more air, increasing resistance and slowing them down.

What's really amazing about gravity is that it's easy to observe and to measure, but we still don't fully understand why it works the way it does.



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.

Newton's Theory

In 1687, the scientist Isaac Newton figured out that gravity is simply a force that pulls two objects toward each other, and he created equations that let us calculate this force for situations we deal with every day.

Einstein's Theory

Albert Einstein came up with a new idea about gravity in 1915. He said gravity isn't really a force. Instead, objects with mass bend space and time around them. The more mass an object has, the bigger the "bend" it makes.

Think of four people holding a sheet tightly by its corners. If you put a bowling ball on the sheet, it will make a big dip. A smaller object, like a marble, will roll toward the bowling ball when placed on the sheet. Einstein said this is how gravity works. Massive objects such as planets bend space, and smaller objects move toward them.

Even though these theories explain a lot about gravity, scientists know they aren't the whole story. They're working on quantum theories of gravity to figure out how gravity works at the tiniest levels, where Newton's and Einstein's ideas don't fit.

Does all this sound a little confusing? You're not alone!

Even though we don't fully understand *why* gravity works, we can always count on it to be there. Gravity is predictable, measurable, and reliable.

This reminds me of faith. I don't always understand why things happen in my life, and I often wonder what the bigger plan is. But I trust that God has a plan and that, like gravity, God is always present, even when I don't have all the answers.

So trust gravity—it never lets you down. And more importantly, trust God, who keeps everything in balance. **B**



Singles and the Church

By Laura and Robert Keeley

In 1977 James Dobson founded Focus on the Family to, as their mission statement says, “nurture and affirm the God-ordained institution of the family.” Dobson’s organization was incredibly successful, having a massive effect on churches throughout North America and around the world. Even though ministry to families was always part of the church’s DNA, many churches became laser focused on supporting marriages and equipping people to be good spouses and parents.

However, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, 46.4% of U.S. adults are single. This includes those who are divorced or widowed and those who have never married. In 2022 the Census Bureau reported that the median age for marriage has been steadily rising over the past 25 years and is now around 29 years old for men and women. A hundred years ago the median age for marriage was about 22. This means that there are more single people in the population than there used to be. We could spend a lot of time looking at the reasons for this demographic change, but regardless of the reason, the church often continues to act as

if young parents and their children are the primary audiences for their ministry.

There are, of course, a number of ways to be single. According to a 2018 study by Pew Research Center, close to 40% of Christians aged 30 to 49 are single. Of that 40%:

- » 17% have never been married
- » 8% are living with a partner
- » 14% are divorced
- » 6% are widowed

To help us understand what it is like to be a single adult in the church, we spoke with a number of singles ranging in age from late 20s to 60s. We heard insights into a theology of singleness, laments that single people sometimes feel misunderstood, and observations about how the church sometimes gets ministry to single people right and sometimes doesn’t.

While ministry to divorced and widowed people is important, their unique needs and perspective on being in church differ from those of never-married adults, so this article will focus on those who have never married, a group that makes up about 10% of Christian adults and an even larger percentage of the overall

U.S. population—almost a third of American adults. Recent synodical decisions around same-sex relationships indicate gay CRC members are to remain single, so thinking again about how singles are received in congregations seems timely. We want everyone, not just those who are part of a traditional nuclear family, to be able to live full lives as part of a community of believers.

‘Not a Problem to Be Solved’

In Genesis 1, God tells Adam and Eve to “be fruitful and multiply.” A number of writers have suggested that the phrase “be fruitful and multiply” doesn’t just encourage the bearing of children (something necessary when the population is as low as it was in Genesis 1), but was expanded by Jesus in Matthew 28 when he said, “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.” And being fruitful does not need to refer only to children. In Galatians 5, Paul mentions the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Being fruitful can have a much

broader meaning than it might have had in the first chapter of the Bible.

While Scripture uses marriage as a metaphor for Christ and his church, singleness can remind us that we wait for the second coming of Christ. Singleness is not merely the absence of a partner, but a particular state to which some are called. Some single adults spoke to us about the blessing of singleness. While society tells us we need another person to be whole, Jesus promises a relationship with him. It is possible to celebrate marriage and singleness without lifting one up over the other.

“We are not a problem to be solved,” said one of the women we spoke with. Others agreed: “People assume that we’re either looking to get married, gay, or a nun.” Some said they sometimes feel pitied by others in the church. In contrast, we also heard that many of them find themselves living in a third space, one where they accept their singleness as a gift. Church history has many examples of those who dedicated their lives to ministry without being married, including the apostle Paul.

Thrive (the congregational support ministry of the Christian Reformed Church) has often used the Building Blocks of Faith model as a way to think about what people of all ages need to grow in their faith. The first of these building blocks and one that seems especially applicable to single adults is belonging. We need to know that we belong to God and to God’s people, the church. (For more on this, see the Building Blocks of Faith Toolkit at crcna.org/faithformation/toolkits/building-blocks-faith-toolkit. We mention only three of the building blocks in this article.)

A Welcoming Space

In our baptism we are joined to Christ, and we are joined to the church, God’s

It is possible to
celebrate marriage
and singleness
without lifting one
up over the other.

people. Just like everyone in the church, singles want to know they belong—not just in a grand, everyone-is-welcome-here kind of way, but in a practical and personal way. This starts simply with walking into church on a Sunday morning. Choosing where to sit in the sanctuary can be a weekly reminder of either their sense of welcome or of having no obvious home. One person we talked to notes that almost all families sit at the end of a row of chairs or a church pew, meaning that a person must either awkwardly climb over the group or ask them to slide over. Think about how much more welcoming it is for others if the empty places in a congregation are at the ends of rows rather than in the middle. This simple change in our Sunday morning habits can make a significant difference in the comfort level not only for singles, but also for visitors. (One thing we noted when talking to singles about many issues is how adjustments we might make for singles would also help many other people in the church too.)

One young adult single who had moved to a new community for a teaching job was standing in the back of a church one Sunday morning when a young family with children invited her to sit with them. That invitation soon became an ongoing relationship,

and sitting with that family became the expectation. That simple step made a huge difference in this young teacher’s comfort in going to worship. She belonged. People were looking for her. She was expected.

One person said that going to church potlucks was like being in her middle school cafeteria all over again. Memories of all the typical middle school social interactions and anxieties made her reluctant to attend. If church members proactively make room for singles and invite them to join a family group, this anxiety could be significantly reduced.

The singles we spoke with know that when they are ignored or when thoughtless things are said, church members are not ill-intentioned. No one is trying to make them feel awkward. But things happen that, from the perspective of a single adult, remind them that they are considered to be “different.” For example, when a single person visits a church for the first time and someone meeting them says something like, “Oh, I have to introduce you to ...,” mentioning one of the only other singles in the church, it reinforces the assumption that the person’s singleness is their most important characteristic. Again, the greeter is only trying to be helpful to both single people, but it is all part of a tacit view that being married is the norm and that remaining single makes someone “other.”

Having events in the church that send a clear message that the inclusion of singles is expected can help. One example is a program some churches have used called “Dine with Nine.” People can sign up either to go to dinner at someone’s home or to host people. The couples and singles are then randomly distributed among those who have agreed to host. The name “Dine with Nine” suggests

to everyone that an odd number of people are expected to attend and that unaccompanied people are a natural part of the church.

In a study conducted for Missio Alliance, Jen Ashby found that having positive relationships with other people in the church had the greatest impact on single adults' sense of inclusion. It made little difference whether these relationships were encouraged by formal church programs or if they happened organically. This is one of the most obvious things a church can do to make singles feel as if they truly belong. One of the people we interviewed said, "Invite us into families and events. We'd love to have dinner with you!"

In Ashby's study, relationship building was enhanced for many singles through involvement in a small group. Almost the same number of single adults said that involvement in volunteer opportunities added to their sense of belonging.

Called and Equipped

Another of the Building Blocks of Faith is to *recognize that we are called and equipped*. God gives each of us callings, and we have been uniquely equipped to answer those calls. Many see their singleness as a call, at least for this season of their lives. Single people are not more called to ministry than married people, but one of the men we talked to wondered aloud if perhaps he was being called to ministry in a place that would not be conducive to living with a family—perhaps as a missionary in some other part of the world. He even noted that he would be more able to do ministry that could be considered dangerous. While he was unique among those interviewed in his understanding of what God might have in store for him, others noted that they feel particularly able to do some

kinds of lay ministry. If, for example, someone needs emergency help, singles are often more able to jump in at a moment's notice because they don't have to coordinate their schedules with others or arrange care for children.

At the same time, single people don't necessarily have more free time than married people. One person said that she is responsible for all the household tasks because she lives alone. Those things that in many households are shared by a couple fall to just one person. She warned that singles should not be seen as people with endless amounts of available time.

Doing Better

The bottom line is that all of us want single people to be in our churches and to feel fully comfortable in our fellowship. Single people need the church, as all of us do, and their unique perspective makes us a better representation of the family of God. But the church can do better and should rethink the way it does some things. We should ask singles to help us imagine how what we do affects people who come to church alone or don't have a spouse to share things with. One person summarized it well: "Don't assume we're lonely. Singleness is a cycle. Sometimes it's great, and sometimes it is hard." One of our group semi-jokingly said, "The church needs to step up. Who's going to take me for my colonoscopy?" She's right. The church needs to step up.

Another Building Block of Faith is a knowledge of the hope we have in Christ for the future building of the kingdom of God. Singles share that perspective, which often flows out of our particular understanding of how we have been called and equipped to live our lives in service to God's kingdom. This mission of the

church to bring hope to the world is not restricted by marital status. But it can be restricted by the way we in the church pigeonhole those who are unmarried.

Recognizing singles as full adult members of the church even though they don't come with a spouse or children is an obvious first step. The problem comes when we see the traditional nuclear family as God's intention for everyone and the vehicle through and for which the bulk of our ministry should be delivered. Becoming more inclusive of singles isn't just another program for the church to start. It is about a mindset change for all of us. 



Laura Keeley is a former regional catalyzer in faith formation with Thrive, the ministry agency of the Christian Reformed Church. Robert Keeley is a professor emeritus of education at Calvin University. The Keeleys recently retired after 31 years as directors of children's ministries at 14th St. CRC in Holland, Mich.



1. Do you agree the church has largely focused too much on families to the detriment of single people? Why or why not?

2. What steps can we take to shed the prevailing approach to single people as "problems to be solved"?

READ MORE ONLINE

From Africa with Love

African church leaders were among those who commissioned Paul and Barnabas for their first missionary journey.

ONE OF MY GOALS in teaching African church history is to dispel the myth all too present in Africa that Christianity is a white person's religion. A quick survey of early church history helps. Many of the most important early theologians—Tertullian, Athanasius, and Augustine—were African. But particularly revealing for my students is a study of Africans in the New Testament.

The church at Antioch was an important congregation in the early church. Followers of Jesus were first called Christians at Antioch (Acts 11:26). Antioch sent Paul on his first missionary journey (Acts 13:1-3). But there are some lesser-known but no less important facts about the church at Antioch.

First, the church in Antioch was planted at least in part by African evangelists. After the persecution that broke out when Stephen was martyred, the church was scattered (Acts 8:1). Some of those who were scattered from Jerusalem went to Antioch. They spread the word “only among Jews.” But others, “men from Cyprus and Cyrene”—a city in Libya—“went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks (Gentiles) also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus” (Acts 11:19-20). Gentiles in Antioch were evangelized by Africans—“men from Cyrene.”

Second, the church in Antioch had African leaders: “Now in the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manean ... and Saul” (Acts 13:1). Lucius of Cyrene, the Libyan city, was likely African. Simeon was almost certainly African. Commentators agree that “Niger” was derived from the Latin for “black.” The New Living Translation refers to him as “the black man.”

“While they”—the prophets and teachers of the church in Antioch, which included Africans—“were worshipping

the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, ‘Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.’ So ... they (the leaders of the church at Antioch) laid their hands on them and sent them off” (Acts 13:2). Africans participated in the discernment that led to Paul's missionary enterprise. African church leaders were among those who commissioned Paul and Barnabas for their first missionary journey.

Paul was instrumental in the gospel's advance into Europe. But it was Africans who helped discern that call, Africans who confirmed that call, and Africans who sent Paul with the gospel into Europe. Christianity is not a white person's religion. It was a religion of Africans before it became a religion of Western Europeans.

This pattern is beginning to repeat itself today. The church in Africa is flourishing. Some estimate that within a generation, Africa will have the largest Christian population of any continent. The center of Christianity is moving south. Many missiologists think that the hope for the church in the West lies in Africa. Renewal of the church in Europe, and perhaps also in North America, is happening because of the migration and mission of Christians from the global south, especially Africa. The gospel is again moving out from Africa with love. **B**



Ryan Faber is a theological education developer with Resonate Global Mission serving in Lusaka, Zambia.

1. Prior to reading this article, how many African theologians did you know and how many biblical characters were you aware were likely African?

2. What are some reasons Christianity can be mistakenly perceived as a white person's religion?

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You Are Not Invincible

It means a whole lot to us who are left behind if you take care of things beforehand.

“THEREFORE KEEP WATCH, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come. ... So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him” (Matt. 24:42, 44). We do not know when the Lord will return, but we also don’t know if he will take us to himself before he comes. Do you have your affairs in order if God decides to take you sooner rather than later?

I became a widow at age 52, and I must say that it means a whole lot to us who are left behind if you take care of things beforehand. My husband, Jim, did that. I can’t imagine making decisions in the fog of grief, sitting in front of the funeral director on the day of a spouse’s passing, trying to make decisions on which casket to pick, what flowers to order, or whether I want more than one visitation time, only to wonder later if I made the right decisions. Knowing that Jim and I made the decisions beforehand enabled me to be present for our children during this hard time. What a huge blessing.

I encourage you all, no matter your age, to start a file. You too, young people. You are not invincible. Your families will thank you. For this file:



Joanne Schreuders is a member of Stratford (Ont.) Christian Reformed Church. She is an author, speaker, widow, and retired homeschool mom of 10. Find out more at joanne.biz.

- » Include the names of your lawyers and accountants, including contact information.
- » Include a copy of an updated will (in Canada, Christian Stewardship Services will help draft a will for free).
- » Talk to your funeral director. It’s free to make funeral arrangements.
- » List all your insurances and investments, including names, addresses, phone numbers, agreements, and account numbers and passwords. Also, if you receive income or a pension from another country, get the name of someone from the country you now live in on those bank accounts.
- » If you have a verbal agreement about borrowed money within the family, write down whether the debt is forgiven or needs to come out of the inheritance.
- » List favorite hymns or Bible verses to include in the funeral service. Include a list of pallbearers.
- » Draw what you want a headstone to look like, including all the wording and correct spelling. Decide on color, size, and texture.
- » Have a list of family names with correct spellings for the obituary. Also, include the name of your parents’ birthplace(s).
- » Include Bible verses and songs that mean the most to you and why.



- » Include a short overview of your life, an updated headshot, and multiple photos of yourself through the years.
- » Why not add letters to your loved ones? Include happy memories you have had with them, strengths you see in them, encouraging words for the days ahead, a Bible verse to cling to, and reassurances of love throughout.

Remember to regularly review and update this file.

I also cannot stress to you how important it is to forgive people before it is too late. Matthew 6:14-15 says, “For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.” Isn’t eternity worth any discomfort you might feel today?

Talking about death is not easy. Many ignore the topic as if they think they are invincible. But we are not; we are human. I was blessed to talk about

many things with my husband as he walked his two-year journey with cancer. Many people don’t have that blessing. One thing we discussed and then researched was whether I would continue to live in our house or move to town. Another topic was how we saw the end of life looking for us. Would it be the hospital, hospice, or home? Life support or not? These are all things you need to discuss with your loved ones no matter how old you are.

We even talked about what one thing or few things we would be most disappointed not to have completed if God took us today. This gave us purpose, a goal. It made us realize what was important in life and streamlined our purpose for today.

Jim also talked to me about finding someone else one day. This is so important to do. Don’t say flippantly that you don’t want your spouse to find happiness in another relationship when you are gone. Your opinion matters to them. Whether they know it or not, what you say will play into their thoughts and emotions later.

Then there are those discussions we didn’t have that I wish we had, such as: What did he want me to do with the insurance money? Should I continue paying into my life insurance? It would have been nice, too, if he could have helped me find my new path without him, or at least point me in a direction. I felt lost without him. We had hopes and dreams that belonged to both of us together. The plans we had made all those years before took an unexpected turn, and I was lost. After flailing for almost three years, I believe I have found where God needs me. (See Eph. 3:16-21.)

I encourage you to take the first step in securing your legacy today. Trust me, your family will thank you. **B**

Documentary Heralds South Korea's Heroines of the Sea



THE LAST OF THE SEA WOMEN is a timeless story about traditions and customs pushing back against the tides of an ever-changing society. For the *haenyeo*—the female sea divers who harvest abalone and other sea delicacies off the coast of Jeju Island in Korea—theirs is a time-honored vocation—perhaps even a calling. But as this documentary shows, they face opposition on many different fronts.

The Last of the Sea Women weaves personal testimonies, the rich history of the *haenyeo* culture, and breathtaking cinematography to create an immersive viewing experience. The *haenyeo*'s remarkable dedication to their craft is awe-inspiring. Winter or summer, these women stay in the ocean for hours at a time, diving as deep as 60 feet on a single breath that they can hold for up to three minutes. But because of the strenuous nature of their work, the number of *haenyeo* has been steadily decreasing with each passing generation. There are easier ways to make a living these days.

But cultural shifts aren't the only battle these women face. In this film, produced by Nobel Prize laureate Malala Yousafzai and directed by Sue Kim, the *haenyeo* also step out of the waters and fight against the biggest threat to their livelihood: ocean water contamination.

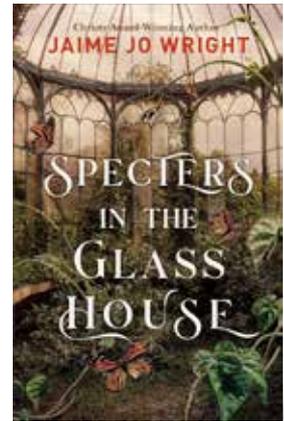
In August 2023, the Tokyo Electric Power Company, in conjunction with

the Japanese government, decided to release nuclear waste-contaminated water into the ocean. It was a controversial decision protested by Japan's own citizens. The *haenyeo* of Jeju Island have seen up close the effects of pollution and how it has already diminished their livelihood. So with the support of the Korean government, 73-year-old *haenyeo* Soon Deok Jang was sent to the United Nations to represent not just the divers, but the entire country in protest of this threat to the environment.

This documentary showcases the strength and perseverance of the *haenyeo* and their willingness to fight for their livelihood, their culture, and our natural resources. In an interview with *Forbes*, director Kim made it clear that these women are not passive victims forced to work into old age, but rather heroic "guardians of the ocean." In the spirit of the *haenyeo*, *The Last of the Sea Women* cements this claim with tenacity and style. (Apple TV+) **B**



Daniel Jung is a graduate of Calvin Theological Seminary and an ordained pastor in the Presbyterian Church in America. He lives in Northern California, where he serves as an associate pastor at Home of Christ in Cupertino.



Specters in the Glass House

By Jaime Jo Wright

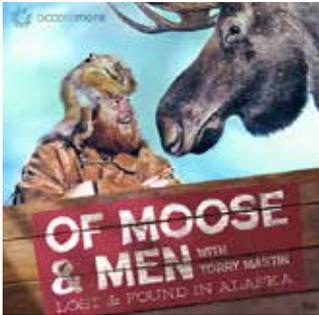
Reviewed by Sonya
VanderVeen Feddema

In 1921, Marian Arnold reluctantly returns to Mullerian Manor, her family's summer estate in the countryside near Milwaukee, Wis. Yet it is a residence she fears—for good reason.

When the first person is found dead in the glass butterfly house with broken butterfly wings nearby, the police are called and an investigation is launched. Who is the Butterfly Butcher?

In the present day, Remy Shaw finds employment as a research assistant for Elton Floyd, a famous biographer and the new owner of Mullerian Manor. Elton and Remy work together to unravel the history of Marian Arnold and the murders attributed to the Butterfly Butcher.

Wright exhibits a deep sensitivity to people marginalized by society's prejudices and paints a portrait of a loving God who remains when all else fails or falls apart. (Bethany House)



Of Moose & Men: Lost & Found in Alaska

Reviewed by Trevor Denning

This 25-episode podcast dramatizes Torry Martin's misadventures in moving to Alaska. A natural storyteller, Martin has a gift for seeing the potential in his everyday experiences, which include having his trailer attacked by what he thinks is a hungry grizzly bear. Martin adapted stories from his 2016 book with help from writer Marshal Younger.

Given the pair's work on the children's audio drama *Adventures in Odyssey*, it's no surprise that the 20-minute stories are filled with wisdom and whimsy. A true story about a reindeer in the kitchen might not seem like a natural transition to the parable of the prodigal son, but in Martin's mind, it is.

What *Of Moose & Men* illustrates so well is that God is always whispering truths to us; we just need the ears to listen. Then, when we're ready, we can share that truth with others. (AccessMore)



Signora Volpe

Reviewed by Cynthia Beach

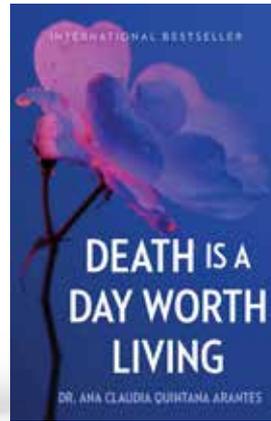
A disillusioned British spy-turned-detective starts a new life in the beautiful heart of Italy, but she soon finds trouble following her wherever she goes.

This British television series showcases lovely Sylvia Fox and Italy—specifically Panicale, a stunning village.

We meet Fox as she's handed the last straw at her workplace, which happens to be MI6, the British foreign intelligence agency. A new boss and her ex make her job harder. Thankfully, her niece's wedding whisks her to beautiful Panicale, where she can solve crimes away from those frustrations.

Fox's competence as a spy adds enormous entertainment value. It's the surprise of it all. She's good at what she does and inserts herself into dicey situations where we watch her figure it out.

Violence and language are minimal. (Acorn TV)



Death Is a Day Worth Living

By Anna Claudia
Quintana Arantes

Reviewed by Mary Li Ma

Written by a hospice care doctor in Brazil, this book is an international bestseller on the rare topic of how to die.

From her rich experience caring for dying patients, Anna Arantes reviews the physiological, emotional, and spiritual dimensions of this last and most intimate stage of life. Arantes observes that death might "trigger one's transformation" spiritually because it is the moment "when you come to understand a ... new version of God."

Death offers so many lessons about how to live and how to let go. "If you live and love to the fullest," Arantes writes, "then you can let things and people go on their way. If you have experienced all that the relationship has to give, then you are free." (Broadleaf Books)

The Lowdown

Why Your Work Matters:

In this newly expanded and updated version of his 2011 book *Work Matters*, author and pastor Tom Nelson wrestles with the latest trends and dynamics of work, including remote work, work-life balance, technology, the meaning of sabbath, and working for the common good. (Brazos Press)

Miss Austen: The fictional story of the lives and loves of British writer Jane Austen and her sister Cassandra, starring Keeley Hawes as Cassandra Austen. (May 4, PBS Masterpiece)

Bono Pulls Back the Curtain: *Bono: Stories of Surrender* is a vivid reimagining of the Irish singer-songwriter's critically acclaimed one-man stage show *Stories of Surrender: An Evening of Words, Music and Some Mischief*. He pulls back the curtain on a remarkable life and the family, friends, and faith that have challenged and sustained him. (May 30, Apple TV+)

Voices of the Future: Christian Reformed Church member and university student Annika Crum has a story published in the anthology *Voices of the Future: Stories of Bravery & Belonging*. Books are available via Crum's website (annikacrum.com), and free copies of her 2022 award-winning story are available by joining her email list.

Eyes to See: Witnessing Christ in Unexpected Places

I've prayed a good number of prayers asking God to grant me eyes to see God's presence all around me.



Madelyn Vandermeer, 19, is a student at the University of British Columbia, where she studies addiction science. She has spent her past two summers working in downtown Guelph, Ont., particularly with Royal City Mission. She is a member of Bethel Christian Reformed Church in Acton, Ont.

I ATTEND A CHURCH that meets right in the heart of downtown Vancouver. It's about a 40-minute bus ride from my place, and a good part of the route goes through Vancouver's notorious Downtown Eastside, a neighborhood with disproportionately high levels of homelessness, drug use, and mental illness. When our bus drives through early Sunday mornings, the sidewalks are lined with makeshift tents from the night before. Men and women stumble across sidewalks. Broken crack pipes litter the pavement like autumn leaves. It's a sight that sometimes feels better left unseen.

One rainy Sunday in late September, a thin, young figure trudged onto the bus with a bright-red blanket wrapped around his shoulders. An older man stumbled on close behind him. The pair sat down across from me, their movements mimicking one another. After a few moments, I realized they were father and son.

I could smell the rain on them—not fresh rain, but the kind that must have soaked their clothes a day or two before, now carrying the smell of mold and rot. The older of the two had his arm slung around his son's huddled shoulders, drawing him close. The boy's body rose and fell with heavy breaths. Soft snuffles made their way from the cave he created around himself. The older man rocked the two slowly, whispering calm, quiet words. For a few moments, I glanced back and forth between them, trying to understand what it was about the smelly, rain-soaked men sitting across from me that felt familiar.

Then, quite suddenly, I caught a glimpse of Jesus within the man in front of me, his arm stretched out to embrace the young man next to him.

There was the image of Christ, reflected in God's creation of man.

There was Jesus, comforting the brokenhearted.

Jesus, weeping with them, and me, and you.

I've prayed a good number of prayers asking God to grant me eyes to see God's presence all around me. God has answered this prayer in some beautiful, incomprehensible ways, showing himself in sky-spanning sunrises and freshly freed butterflies. But the image of Christ, though fractured, is also reflected in those living in dirty tent cities and cardboard boxes under highways. Regretfully, I think it is often my fear of brokenness that stops me from seeing Jesus, as though he himself wasn't broken and rejected. I turn my face from the cross before he has the chance to redeem it.

There used to be a tent city in the heart of my hometown's downtown. It wasn't a pretty sight; there is a deep ugliness that lingers amidst heartbreak, continual suffering, and ongoing trauma. Yet beneath the tarps and tents, there was a beauty I have seen in few other places. Our unhoused neighbors are walking, breathing reflections of Christ. They can have deep, unconditional love for one another and often express it audaciously. They mourn in the face of death and suffering, weeping just as Christ did 2,000 years ago.

Witnessing Christ in this way is heavy. It opens my eyes to things that are sometimes easier left unseen, leading to heartbreak that's sometimes easier left unfelt. Yet I find myself praying for eyes to see regardless, eyes to recognize the image of Christ in men pushing shopping carts and women gripping tightly to cardboard signs, eyes to notice the image of Christ in every bus driver, university professor, and construction worker, in my classmates, teammates, and friends.

Christ in all the unexpected places.

In a manger, on a cross, and maybe even in smelly, rain-soaked men. **B**

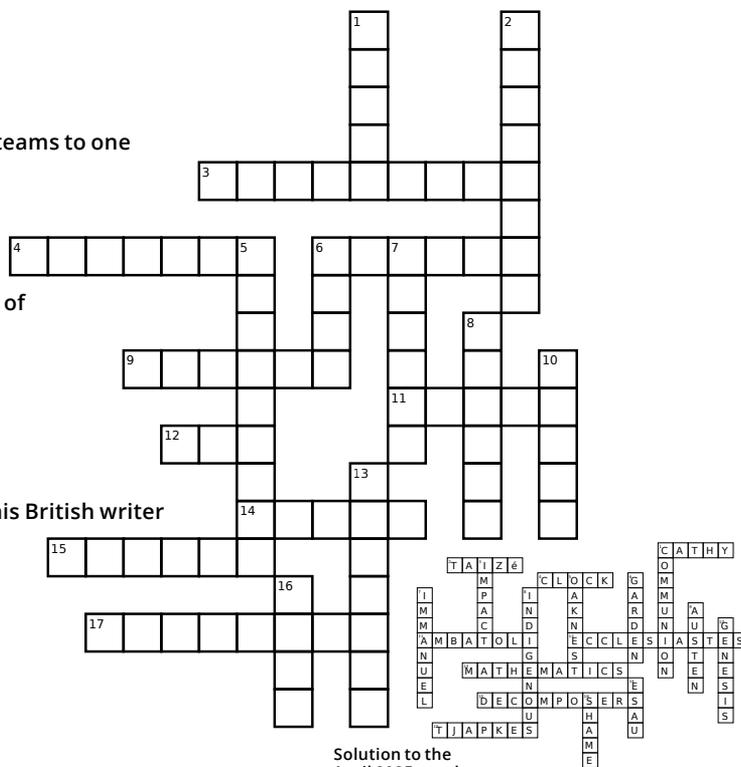
Find the answers to this crossword puzzle throughout this issue of *The Banner*! See the solutions in the next print issue. (Please note we do not publish Word Play in the July/August issue.)

Down

1. Last name of a master weaver and CRC member
2. World Renew served this region in Kenya
5. The regional disability advocate for Classis Zeeland
6. Where Resonate Global Mission recently merged two regional teams to one
7. 46.4% of U.S. adults are _____
8. A Washington city with an outreach support specialist
10. Podcast *Of _____ and Men* is about Christian comedian Torry Martin's move to the rugged North
13. A new documentary heralds the _____, the female sea divers of Jeju Island, South Korea
16. Start one of these in preparation for death

Across

3. Madelyn Vandermeer saw Jesus on a bus in this city
4. Scripture calls us to love them
6. *Miss _____* is a new PBS miniseries about the life and loves of this British writer
9. Early Christian theologian Athanasius was from this continent
11. Daily Spanish practice with Duo _____ inspired a pastor to turn to writing daily devotions instead
12. Director of the Chaplain Family Life Training Center
14. Several Christian Reformed members in Canada received a King Charles III Coronation _____
15. A pastor in Uganda
17. Terminal _____ is the fastest something can fall



Solution to the April 2025 puzzle

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Christian Reformed Church

DEADLINES: Ads for the June issue are due May 2, 2025; July/August: June 13, 2025. Subject to availability. Details online at thebanner.org/classifieds, or for display ads see thebanner.org/ads. Advertising in *The Banner* does not imply editorial endorsement.

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warden IA. To find out more about Hawarden CRC, check out our Hawarden CRC Profile: <https://network.crcna.org/sites/default/files/hawarden-crc-profile.pdf> Website: hawarden-crc.com. Interested candidates are encouraged to send a cover letter, resume, and/or a video/audio recording of a sermon to the search committee at dsbyker@gmail.com.

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Church Anniversary

CHURCH ANNIVERSARY 75 YEARS

DRAYTON CRC With thanks to God for His faithfulness, the Drayton CRC anticipates celebrating 75 years of service to the community in June. All are invited to a Service of Celebration on June 15, 2025 at 10am. For more information contact worship@draytoncrc.org

Anniversary

WEDDING ANNIVERSARY 65 YEARS

BAKKER, JOHN AND HELEN (DYKSTRA) are celebrating 65th Anniversary, May 20; 1346 S. 59th Court, Cicero, IL 60804. God bless you mom & dad/grandma & grandpa.

WEDDING ANNIVERSARY 70 YEARS

JAGER, HENRY AND SHIRLEY celebrated 70 years of Christian marriage on April 15! Their children Sue (Scott) Boot, Doug (Deb) Jager, Tom (Laura) Jager, and Kristie (Jeff) Nolta, 13 grandchildren, and 20 great-grandchildren are thankful for their committed devotion to God, each other and family. 2920 Crystal Lane Rm 425 Kalamazoo, MI 49009

Obituaries

HOEKSTRA, KEN 91, of Hudsonville Mi, formerly of Evergreen Park IL, heard Jesus call his name January 24, 2025. His family; wife Elizabeth (Betty), Lynn & Steve Huizingh, (David & Alyssa Huizingh, Lora & Luke and John Bosscher), Karl & Rebecca Hoekstra, (Zach & Lydia and Samuel Hoekstra, and Emily Hoekstra) miss him dearly and look forward to reuniting with him in Heaven.

VANDERZEE, CHESTER age 93 of Volga, SD began celebrating Jesus fully on February 14, 2025! Chester is survived by his wife, Betty; children: Karen (Ron) Knutson, Darrel (Carol) VanderZee, Thelene (Mike) Tornow, Sheila (Brian) Kruijs; 11 grandchildren, 13 great-grandchildren. Chester served in the Korean War and was a teacher for 34 years. He also served Jesus faithfully through CRWRC World Relief, Habitat for Humanity, Lions Club, Hope Haven Wheelchair Ministry, Gideons, American Legion and various prison ministries.

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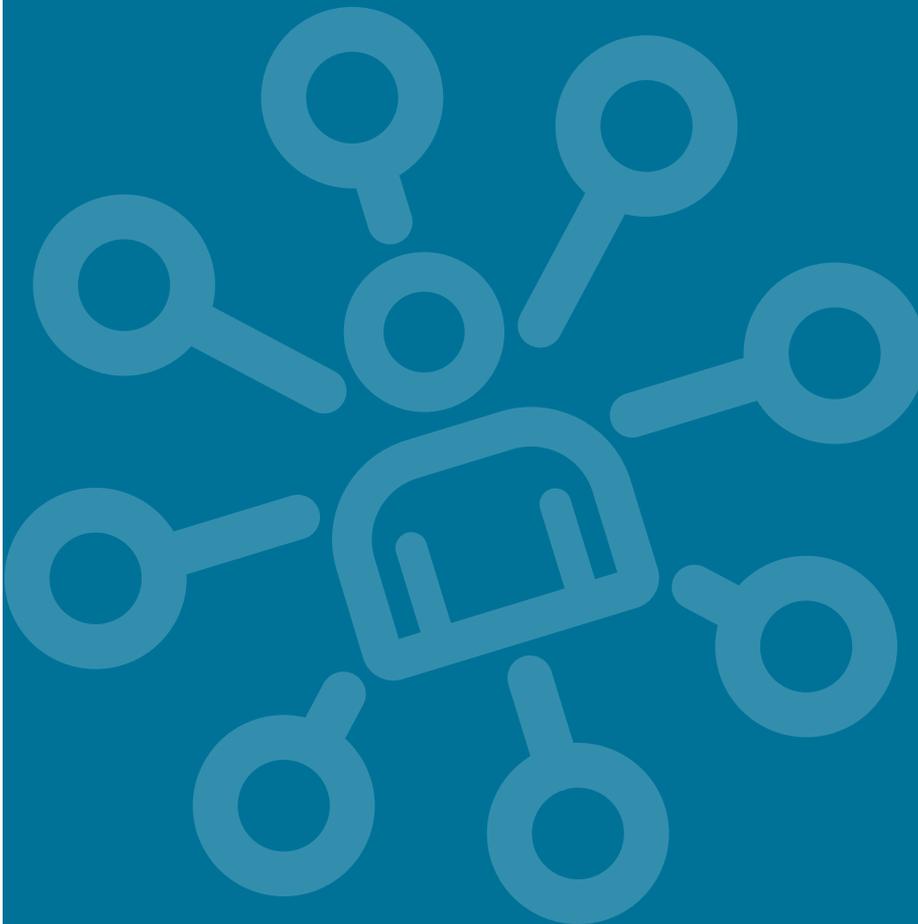


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AMSTERDAM TO BRUGES: A SCENIC BIKE & BARGE TOUR

Sep 9 - 18 | *John & Rachel Witte*

BIKE & BARGE: HEART OF THE NETHERLANDS

Sep 9 - 18 | *Mindy Miller & Eric Kuhn*

BENTHEIM HERITAGE TOUR

Sep 9 - 22 | *Mary Ann Knott*

BIRDING TOUR OF THE NETHERLANDS

Sep 15 - 25 | *Philip Vande-Riet & Sophia Witte*

PAUL'S MISSIONARY JOURNEYS IN GREECE

Oct 13 - 24 | *Dr. Jeffrey A. D. Weima*

BEST OF SOUTHERN ITALY

Oct 13 - 24 | *Denise Iarossi Taylor & Mike Bellomo*

SOUTH KOREA & JAPAN

Oct 15 - 28 | *Don & Kathy DeGraaf*

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Returning to the CRC

To join, you just
had to show up.
But in practice
our wall reached
higher than
churches with
strict rules.



Jeremiah Robinson attends Geneva Campus Church in Madison, Wisc., with his artsy wife and spunky daughter. He runs a data analytics firm by day and makes religious forecasts at night (americasreligiousfuture.com).

As I Was Saying is a forum for a variety of perspectives to foster faith-related conversations among our readers with the goal of mutual learning, even in disagreement. Apart from articles written by editorial staff, these perspectives do not necessarily reflect the views of The Banner.

TRADING TRAVEL STORIES and knocking back iced tea, our little tribe whiled away the summer afternoon into the evening on Karen and Tom's screened-in back porch. It was a respite from the hustle of 20-somethings trying to prove ourselves, a hustle which somehow didn't seem necessary that day. I met Sara that day on the porch.

Geneva Campus Church's young adult ministry—the reason for our gathering—in those days consisted of those long Sabbath afternoons, slowly digesting bagels or potluck chicken to the sound of unhurried conversation. Nothing feels quite like being absolutely and completely welcome.

On another afternoon, while chatting with Karen during a church-basement potluck, Sara walked right up to me and asked me out. An online dating service had connected us that week, she said. Excited as I was, Karen had stars in her eyes, eager for another young Geneva couple.

Later that fall I left Geneva and the CRC. Sara followed me.

The reason for leaving goes back to a moment years before, the moment when the faith of my childhood finally got under my skin.

My college friendships were intense and devoted, built on long, serious talks and high-mountain adventure. I wrote poems about them. But as graduation approached, one by one they committed to jobs and futures in different states, gone for good.

Loneliness has a flavor, and that day it was all I could taste.

On an aimless walk through a windless parking lot by the Yellow Breeches Creek near my Pennsylvania college, I watched a scrap of paper dance. For a full two minutes, it tumbled across the parking lot above the ground, never touching, until it stopped. I sat down and stared at it for a long time. Then I walked and sat by the creek, pondering the tiny bubble of my life on the flow of time. In that moment, an overwhelming sense of the divine took hold of me. "I care about you," it said, though not with words.

That little phrase made up the whole of my faith. God cared about people, including me. If you'd pushed me, I might have accepted that Jesus had something to do with that. Maybe.

By the time I reached the Canons of Dort five years later and 1,000 miles away, I'd already read the other CRC confessions on double-sided printouts from the library. After 100 pages, I set them down gently on the corner of my bamboo couch and stared at the ceiling till long after sunset. How can any mortal human be so sure of so much? I still had just that one scrap of paper, my whole faith.

By this point, I thought I wanted to become a pastor. If the confessions were bread and my soul a tub of butter, I could barely cover a tenth of the bread, even spread thin. The printouts lay on that couch for weeks, yellowing in the afternoon sun, as I began to work up the nerve to leave.

The Other Church

The denomination where Sara and I landed edits its 30-page confession triennially. To become a pastor, you need to "mostly agree" with it.

Their local congregation met late on Sunday afternoons, choosing a



cheap-rent space in order to give more away. I happened to visit on Harvest Sunday, a worship service hosted outdoors on picnic blankets. I soon met Mark and Janice, crunchy ex-missionaries to Indonesia. Mark wears flip-flops year-round in Wisconsin.

The church didn't hold many doctrines, but what faith they had, they lived. Almost everyone owned small houses despite some large salaries. Their lives overlapped heavily. In some cases families shared lawnmowers.

Sara and I married in that picnic-blanket church. Five families agreed to try for kids at the same time, and in a year we were raising them together.

If that sounds idyllic, that's how it felt.

I can't say when the slide began, and I won't tell you, dear reader, whether it was conservative or liberal. Woke and MAGA, in my opinion, reflect the same human impulse.

At first, politics was a side project. We volunteered, wrote letters, and visited politicians. We connected with other

churches who shared the vision, which made us feel a part of a movement bigger than ourselves.

Slowly we got a little less of the Bible that challenged us and little more of the part we liked. A new pastor took it a bit further.

You could call our blindness willful. Maybe it was. But when COVID-19 and Black Lives Matter showed up, the church worked itself into a froth. We went off some kind of cliff. To us it seemed to transform overnight, though in retrospect the signs had been there all along. Sara had noticed them, but I'd foolishly reassured her. By that point, we only used Scripture when it supported our preconceived notions. We might as well have ripped out the rest for a lighter book.

That's the irony of the centered-set church. We had this motto: "Centered on Christ, but not bounded." To join, you just had to show up. But in practice our wall reached higher than churches with strict rules. I remember watching recent arrivals smack into that wall

unawares. They'd say something that rankled our ideology—make a joke, perhaps—and our scorn would fill the air like a fog. Those people always left "of their own accord," or so we told ourselves. Nobody acknowledged that our wall was there, much less where it stood. It was made of politics.

Altogether the slide took 15 years.

On the way out, my daughter inadvertently stole a toy from the nursery, a wooden dog with wheels. She still loves that toy.

The Return Journey

In the following year, along with some other exiles, we darkened the doors of 30 churches. Slow learners that we are, we relentlessly sought one whose faith mattered more than politics, but who still shared our politics.

One church hooked us. It had a view of the lake, a dynamic preacher, compatible politics, an amazing organist, great kids' programs, and what seemed like a serious faith. Three visits in, we

got excited, but the next sermon was on sin. “Good,” I said to Sara. “Now we’ll see how they handle things.” In that beautiful sermon we heard how the sinner had to be invited, healed, restored, and made whole ... but never forgiven. You could’ve swapped the word “trauma” for “sin” and never been the wiser.

Five altar calls, 15 organ solos, and 20 communions later, we’d nearly given up.

A close friend mentioned that Jim, one of Sara’s oldest friends, had taken the lead pastor job at Geneva, the church where we met—an odd coincidence just weird enough to make us wonder if God was in it.

Meanwhile, during the spiritual decline of the picnic-blanket church and our great search, I started asking hard questions. If the past few years taught us anything, it’s that a church needs durable forces to counter its own worst tendencies. In a conservative town you’d better find some reliable source of compassion. In a liberal town, you need something to temper your big ideas. In both there’s the trap of overreaction, as I’d witnessed first-hand. The slope is so slippery.

If you can’t see anything preventing a church from sliding into the great open maw of politics, that’s likely because nothing is.

To join a church where faith went first, we finally admitted that we had to surrender some of our own political attachments. I won’t pretend that realization didn’t hurt or that it has stopped hurting. Some pain you live with.

After a couple visits to the church, Jim came to our house. Following some catch-up—we were old friends, after all—he described with complete transparency Geneva’s strengths

and shortcomings, and we disagreed openly about both theological and political matters. Two things stand out from that visit. First, I detected no pretense or ego in his honest and open responses. Second, despite our disagreements, I sensed only deep respect. “I hope you come to Geneva. But if you don’t, I completely understand.” That was how he left it.

When you go house hunting for a few months, you develop an intuitive sense for home values. Walking inside a house you just know, for example, “This house is worth \$240,000.” After a year of church hunting, we sensed Geneva’s faith the moment we walked back through the doors and heard people talk. There’s a steadiness to it and a quiet confidence, like deeply-rooted trees. In high school, we called people who wanted to seem like skateboarders (but weren’t) “posers.” Genevans were the direct opposite of that.

Those “durable forces” I spoke of earlier? Geneva has them in abundance. The college town keeps it liberal. The influx of InterVarsity people and its connection to the Christian Reformed Church keep it conservative. And the stubbornly moderate people there like it that way.

And so we return to the Canons of Dort and the other confessions. I’ll never completely affirm everything that’s in those documents. I can affirm the creeds, which is a big step up from that one scrap of dancing paper. But I seem to be constitutionally incapable of affirming over 100 pages written by humans (the Bible being a special exception).

All churches set up walls, and in the CRC the confessions are our walls. While I certainly prefer doctrine to politics as a building material, I really do wish that our walls were made

of something else. I’d be happy to renounce my cellphone, move to the church neighborhood, quit my job, or even wear a uniform. Those things I can do.

At the moment, though, I’m deeply grateful. I’m so glad for a wall I can see. That really is better than the alternative. Some days I want to just sit and stare up at it in astonishment and gratitude.

Home

“Are you back?” Karen asks, hopefulness and sadness openly competing. We’d visited twice in recent months and then disappeared again. We weren’t the first people she’d asked over the years.

This conversation replayed a dozen times that day, including with Jim. We hadn’t told him our decision.

Sara and I drove home slowly and quietly that afternoon, which was three years ago. Our daughter, who is seldom quiet, played contentedly with the wooden dog in the back seat. Sara and I just looked at each other. Nothing needed saying. We both knew we were home. 

Rice Pudding Epiphany

A proximity of two, three, or more events can at times offer a heightened spiritual clarity.

SPOONING FOOD into an open mouth—so natural, yet so strange.

It was so natural to spoon nourishment into the mouth of a toddler. It was so strange to spoon food into the mouth of a 90-year-old man. One, my granddaughter. The other, my father—the great-grandfather of my granddaughter.

Each was needy in his or her own way.

Two-year-old Ava was ascending into life—bursting with energy, filled with curiosity, soaking in new information and experiences like a sponge, and spontaneously displaying varying emotions, tears, and laughter. Yet she was unaware of her vulnerability and dependence on adults.

My dad was descending into increasing powerlessness—easily tired by too much stimulus and sometimes lacking clarity in thought or speech. Yet he was aware, from time to time, of losses piled upon losses.

A proximity of two, three, or more events can at times offer a heightened spiritual clarity—an aha moment where a person sees or experiences a deeply personal connection she has never considered as intensely before, when a biblical truth she has encountered through the years comes into sharper relief.

Several years ago I experienced such a juxtaposition of two events that took place a few days apart with two 113-gram plastic containers of rice pudding. Let me explain.

My elderly dad was living at home, unable to walk, incapable of feeding himself, and confined to a hospital bed in his living room. My husband, Rinke, and I stayed with him for a few days so his wife could have a break and visit her children. One evening, rice pudding was on the menu for dessert. After peeling off the container's lid

and stirring the contents, I spooned out a bite and put the rice pudding into my dad's open mouth. Delicious! He hadn't lost his sweet tooth and obviously enjoyed it.

About a week later, Rinke and I took care of Ava for a day. During lunch, Ava sat in her highchair, and I helped her finish the main meal. A dessert of rice pudding was next. I peeled off the container's lid and stirred the contents. I dipped in the spoon. I put the rice pudding into Ava's open mouth. Yummy! She clearly relished it.

I stopped—oh!—and looked at Rinke. It hit me—a rice pudding epiphany. God was teaching me through my dad and Ava, each in his or her own way, to “number my days” so that I would “gain a heart of wisdom” (Ps. 90:12). My dad and Ava were precious in God's sight, no matter their capabilities, no matter whether they were ascending into life or descending into bodily death with the hope of eternal life.

I reflected on the fact that decades ago, I was a toddler sitting in a high chair being spoon-fed when I couldn't yet feed myself. If I grow old enough, I will become frail and possibly need to be spoon-fed. Not the easiest thought to digest. But encouragement and hope took root when I considered the perspective of God's never-failing love and care displayed through the years, from high chair to hospital bed. Just as God graciously cared for Ava and my dad, his love held and still holds me from the beginning to the end through people who cared for me in my childhood weakness and others who will be by my side in my future elderly vulnerability. **B**



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