

1866-2026



BANNER

MAY/JUNE 2026

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Decluttering

BANNER

BY THE NUMBERS

Did you know the Christian Reformed Church synod has approved eight specific Bible translations for use in worship by Christian Reformed congregations and one additional translation that can be used only in Bible study?

Translation Tabs

The King James Version was the original accepted version. Other versions were approved in the following years:

- 1926** American Standard Version (ASV)
- 1969** Revised Standard Version (RSV)
- 1980** New International Version (NIV)
- 1982** New American Standard Bible (NASB) for Bible study only
- 1992** New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)
- 2006** Today's New International Version (TNIV)
- 2007** English Standard Version (ESV)
- 2008** New Living Translation (NLT)

Source: crcna.org/welcome/beliefs/bible-translations

WHAT'S ONLINE

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

- » News reviews of four synod reports:
 - Addressing Accountability in Pastoral Misconduct
 - Defining Membership
 - Task Force to Study Multisite Churches
 - Task Force on Procedures for Disciplining Officebearers
- » Music: *Only a Prayer Away* by Jonathan Cain
- » Movie: *Project Hail Mary*
- » Book: *Unshaken* by Shelly Shephard Gray

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BANNER

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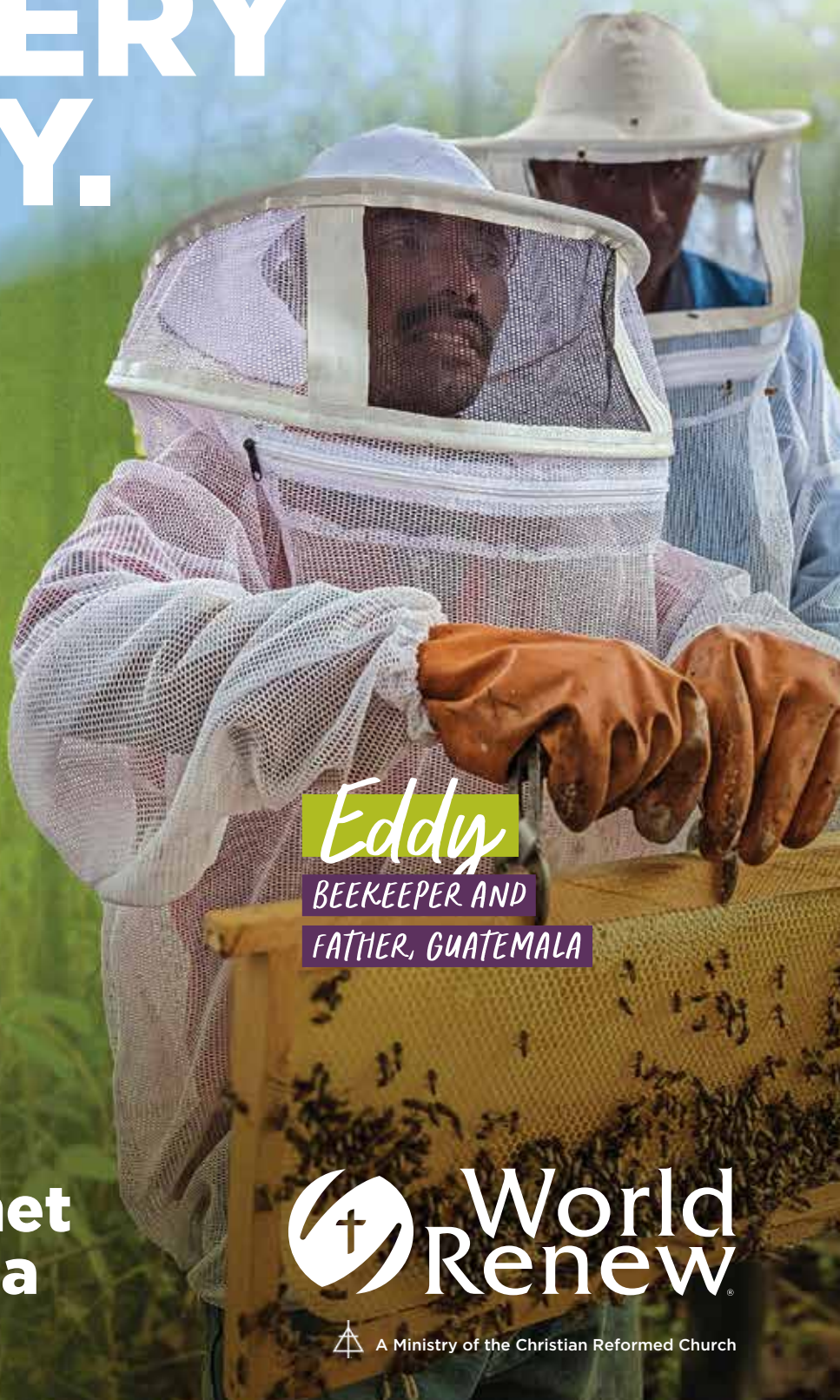
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A Ministry of the Christian Reformed Church

Transformed Eyes

Sometimes in
talk of structures
and spheres,
Jesus gets lost in
all we intend to
transform for him.



Lora Copley is interim editor for *The Banner*. She serves as director of Areopagus, a Christian Reformed ministry at Iowa State University. She and her husband, Joel, have four children and worship at Trinity CRC in Ames, Iowa.

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.

IN FIRST GRADE, everything Mrs. Zuidema wrote on the chalkboard looked fuzzy. I'd break my pencil point so I could walk up to the sharpener, slo-o-owly passing the board to read it. I schemed how to sneak a peek with my brother's binoculars.

I'll never forget the day I got glasses. Trees weren't blobs of green; I saw leaves! Grass had blades! Tetherballs need not terrorize! I was singing "A Whole New World!" years before Aladdin because my worldview changed.

This is the final editorial in this series focused on eyes. In "Lifted Eyes," I encouraged us to raise our gaze to Jesus as a peculiar people's banner. In "Fixed Eyes," we riveted that gaze on him to sustain us for the long haul.

Now I ask what happens when our fixed eyes are transformed ("fixed") by Jesus so everything comes into focus.

Seeing the risen Christ, Saul's eyes changed. He wrote, "We regard no one from a worldly point of view" and "to live is Christ" (2 Cor. 5:16, Ph. 1:21). Jesus gave Paul a whole new world.

We seek a Christian worldview. But does our vision of *Christ* remain vivid? Sometimes in talk of structures and spheres, Jesus gets lost in all we intend to transform for him.

Yes, we must think big! But transformed sight is also small—within the "square inches" of my scrolling, spending, fretting, and frittering. I've been wondering if CRC old-timers had a worldview that more concretely pressed the gospel into their lives, in daily sacrifices and ordered hours.

I'm reading a biography about H.J. Kuiper, editor of *The Banner* (1929-1956). Though imperfect, Kuiper consistently asked how Jesus, and the magnitude of "sin, salvation, and service," reshape the nitty-gritty of life.

For example, he asked if parenting circled around an "altar" of daily Scripture, prayer, and instruction. Did leisure pull hearts toward or away from Christ, and did money build Christ's causes? Did preaching and worship sing Christ's saving work?

From Sabbath to schools to service, Kuiper asked how these showed our eyes for Jesus. We may rightly evaluate Kuiper's conclusions, but we should not miss his seriousness: no activity is exempt from Jesus' claim. If it is, our salt loses its saltiness.

Kuiper's call brings to mind the prayer in the song: "Give us one pure and holy passion... to know and follow hard after you."


How does that vision, that holy passion, impact *The Banner*? We seek that each article would show transformed eyes. So, in this issue, our features address cultural idols of stuff and sex. With stuff, we hear, "Hold possessions loosely, generously, for Jesus is our all; why cling to excess?" With sex, we hear, "There is a deeper story in Jesus, to which sex points. How we care for each other in sexual discipleship is shaped by him."

May every page of *The Banner* reflect a Jesus-transformed view.

May our denomination also have a worldview of big structures and everyday holiness, believing that transformed lives and homes precede transformed spheres and societies.

Perhaps change in our denomination depends less on strategy and more on sight. It's about lifted, fixed, and transformed eyes on Jesus, who makes us sing, truly, "a whole new world."

*So shall no part of day or night,
from sacredness be free,
But all our life, in every step,
Lord, be fellowship with Thee.*

—Fill Thou My Life 



REPLY ALL

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

Thanks

Over the years I've developed a real appreciation for the writings and wisdom of Rod Hugen. However, in this last piece ("Thanks for What You Do," January/February 2026) Hugen hit a new high. Thanks for what you do!

» Steve Van't Hof // Grandville, Mich.

I always enjoy Rod Hugen's stories, especially his most recent, "Thanks For What You Do." The message tells us to "serve the Lord with hand and feet" (Matt. 25:35-40). Going to get groceries, I picked up what I needed and went to the counter. Attempting to pay the \$68.50, my credit card was denied. I said to the cashier, "Can you put this aside? I will go to the bank." She answered, "The banks are closed sir; it is Family Day." I stood there for a minute when the cashier said, "Here. Take your purchase. It has been paid for." "Pardon me?" "A man just before you paid it; he's just leaving." I ran after him and said, "Incredible! Thanks for what you did." "That's OK. It is Family Day."

» George Lieuwen // Langley, B.C.

Interim Editor

I found the latest editorial column to be one of, if not the, best in recent memory ("Lifted Eyes," January/February 2025). Not only did Lora Copley provide some interesting data and newsworthy information, but she pointed us to Christ, without baggage. There was no lament over something that half of the denomination celebrates. Rather, she directed us to the One to whom all our allegiance is due. Keep it up!

» Rob Golding // Artesia, Calif.

Lora Copley is one of the most skilled writers I have ever read. She writes from her soul directly to our hearts. ... She makes the Bible personal and relational. That is so needed in today's technological world. I hope she stays on as our senior editor.

» Ren Vandesteeg // San Antonio, Texas

It was refreshing to see Synod 2025 take action to reform *The Banner* to better reflect the confessional standards of our denomination. Many at my church, First Artesia Christian Reformed Church, have expressed excitement at this news. We're excited to see how Lora Copley will lead the magazine!

» Kenneth Gonzalez // Artesia, Calif.

Schizophrenia

The author of the article ("The Least of These," March/April 2026) talks about curing the homeless man's schizophrenia. At the risk of sounding picky, as a former regional advocate living with schizophrenia since 1986, there is no cure for schizophrenia. The only thing the medication does is control symptoms. But you have to take that medication until the day you die.

» Michèle Gyselinck // Montreal, Quebec

Supporting *The Banner*

I just sent a check to *The Banner* in response to your letter about the annual appeal because *The Banner* is truly a magazine that binds our denomination together. It consistently gives insightful, challenging, and spiritually uplifting articles. Classis and Synod updates have been vital to share the denomination's vision. News articles about other churches have been an inspiration to all congregations. Every editor has had unique gifts that were used for the church's benefit. Lora Copley brings a wonderful new way of discerning things. God bless all of you as you continue to further His Kingdom. Soli Deo Gloria!

» Margaret Brassler // Sheboygan, Wisc.

Learning to Read in Color

We received your letter this morning, requesting ongoing financial support for *The Banner*. Unfortunately, Synod 2025's decision regarding the mandate of *The Banner* and its expression, which led to the former editor's resignation, was a huge disappointment for our family. We have been longtime financial supporters of *The Banner* and have been enriched by the intelligent, thoughtful, and open-minded conversations the former editor facilitated. Synod 2025's decisions and the manner of discussions and the comments made by many who spoke caused us much concern, pain, and grief for the direction in which our denomination is headed. We have been actively engaged members of the CRC for more than 67 years. We feel like we are the ones described by some at Synod as "not in" but "outside." ... It is with heavy hearts that we can no longer financially support *The Banner* or the direction in which Synod 2025 pushed the CRC.

» Susan and Art Schaafsma

As I Was Saying

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

- » A Christian Look at Artificial Intelligence
- » In Praise of Obscurity
- » More Than a Metaphor: Resurrection in John's Gospel

OVER THE PAST FIVE YEARS, I received an unexpected gift that came at an unlikely time. I had stepped away from my role as a worship director to be home with my growing family. When the opportunity to study theology arose, I said yes—one of the costliest "yesses" of my life. Completing the master of divinity at Calvin University demanded much from me and my family, but God's provision met us at every step.

I don't know who I would be today without deeper theological formation. The experience shaped me in ways I'm still discovering. One unexpected outcome is how often I now meet people who do not know Jesus. I no longer hold back. My weeks are filled with conversations and invitations to read the Bible with strangers God places in my path.

Since childhood, I've carried God's Word in my heart. Yet something is different now. I don't love God more because I earned a degree, but I do know God better through disciplined, sustained study of Scripture. I've learned to stay with a passage longer, listen more carefully, and trust that God meets us in patient attention.


For many of us, Bible study feels insufficient. The words seem distant, our understanding thin, and our hunger grows. Maybe God is nudging you toward theological or biblical education. People can pursue formal training without any desire for ordination. Preparing for ministry without an official role can equip believers to speak with those outside the church who might feel intimidated by pastors or leadership.

I entered seminary reading Scripture in black and white; I left reading what feels like a Bible with pictures in full color. I learned it's okay not to digest everything in one sitting. We often

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God meets us.

set large goals—such as reading the Bible in a year—but I've grown most by learning to look very small.

Sometimes I focus on a single word in a passage—a name for God, a repeated verb. I trace it to its Greek or Hebrew roots and imagine how the original audience heard it. Color emerges, bringing depth and life. At times it's as simple as noticing which verbs are ongoing, meant for us now, and which point toward completion at Christ's return.

Seminary replaced my black-and-white Bible with one bursting in color. I learned from my professors just how much I don't know. That sparked a childlike wonder and curiosity to explore Scripture's context more deeply. I encourage you to seek how you might encounter the living Christ in his Word—whether through formal study, a course, or gathering with friends to dive deeper into Scripture. 



Jennifer Fortosis, M.Div., is a pianist, composer, liturgist, and speaker. She has released a recent single, "The Presence," available on Apple Music. She is a member of the Christian Reformed Church and lives with her family in Zeeland, Mich.



Rich in What Matters: Decluttering Home and Heart

By Lorilee Craker

I had traveled from Michigan to my Winnipeg hometown to help my parents move and say goodbye to the house I grew up in. My brother was hauling my childhood dresser down the driveway, where it was loaded into a stranger's truck.

"What are you doing?" I demanded hotly.

"What?" He couldn't fathom why I was angry. "It's not like you were going to bring it to Michigan!"

I've thought many times of that fraught moment, where sentimental me clashed with pragmatic him in our old driveway, with our initials DR and LR etched in cement. I realize now that it wasn't really about the dresser. It was about me losing the chance to go through the things in my old room and other places in the house that meant so much to me.

Now, faced with my own decluttering journey as we contemplate downsizing in a few years, I realize that removing unnecessary items from my home is a rich, purposeful experience if done right. It is all about owning less, giving things away, and, in the words of minimalist author Joshua Becker, "the intentional promotion of the things we

most value and the removal of everything that distracts us from it."

I didn't get the chance to declutter my childhood home of things I loved. I decided to do things differently this time.

A Life-Draining, Stuff-Filled Home

At first, decluttering was like emptying a swimming pool with a teacup. I was overwhelmed, and I wasn't alone. According to Julia Ubbenga, the author of *Decluttering Your Home and Heart*, a majority of us are overwhelmed with clutter, and most have no idea what to do with it.

Influenced by her wealthy grandmother, Ubbenga used to believe an overriding message of society: "More stuff equals more happiness."

After marrying and having children, Ubbenga was swamped by too many possessions and too much debt. When she cried out to God for help, he led her to Luke 12:13-21, Jesus' parable of the rich fool, in which listeners are commanded to not "store up earthly wealth" and thus forego a "rich relationship with God" (NLT). Realizing she had lost her way and become "a cog in the wheel of consumerism," this Scripture realigned her heart and she began

the journey of decluttering. As I have learned during my own home edit, it's more than just getting rid of stuff and curbing purchases. It's paying attention to the soul-deep reasons behind the buying and accumulating.

Superfluous Stuff

So much of what we own goes unused. It sits in cupboards and drawers, boxes and closets taking up valuable space. We think we might need it someday, but we rarely do.

I own too much. (So do you.) When this finally sank in, I had a mindset shift. Tons of my stuff—clothes, books, "seasonal door crap" (what my husband calls my festive, seasonal wreaths, etc.)—had to go. I was justifying keeping everything "just in case," and it was taking its toll.

"The true cost of our excess physical stuff goes well beyond the money we already spent on it," writes Ubbenga. Superfluous stuff (piles of books and papers and clothes) causes a stress response in our bodies. This leads to feeling flooded, scattered, and tense. "Our physical and mental health is far from optimized in a cluttered environment," Ubbenga writes. "We were

designed for adventure, connection, freedom, space to create, explore and love. We weren't designed to live surrounded by piles of stuff."

Where to start, when decluttering a whole house feels impossible?

Many organizing experts suggest setting a timer for five minutes and then depositing everything you no longer love, use, or need into a donation box, which, when full, gets donated to your favorite thrift store.

Some experts recommend starting with one room or even one closet or drawer. I felt lighter and on top of things when I organized the Lazy Susan cupboard in my kitchen. I sorted every lid and container, donated a big bag, and kept only the containers with lids that fit well into the cupboard. This left me with fewer storage options but an easier, more efficient system.

This brings me to another excellent tip, a maxim promoted by Dana K. White, author of *Decluttering at the Speed of Life*: "Accept the limitations of the space you have, and declutter enough that your stuff fits comfortably in that space." "Comfortably" is the key word. Books go in the bookshelf only, for example, not in a pile next to it. If it doesn't fit the space, edit. (I admit, book storage for me is a "work in progress.")

Also, buy less. Decluttering math: More needs to leave your home each week than comes in.

Once you begin decluttering, you will be amazed at how much less you buy. Try pausing spending for a week or more, buying only necessities. Or strictly apply the "must love, use, or need" rule to every purchase.

Would I Move With This?

I love an idea inspired by Margareta Magnusson, author of *The Gentle Art of Swedish Death Cleaning*. Rather

At first,
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swimming pool
with a teacup.

than ask if an item "sparks joy," ask "Would I move with this?" The answer is a resounding "no" much of the time, especially things crammed into drawers, closets or boxes.

Treasures are by far the hardest things to get rid of: baby clothes and books; gifts from people, especially those now deceased; handwritten letters; small works of art.

Magnusson, who was 85 when she wrote her opus, advises saying goodbye to some items that meant something to you in the past but you have outgrown, savoring their nostalgic charm one more time.

Keep one to represent many. If you have inherited a china cabinet of teapots, pick one to keep, or see if others would like them. Donate the rest.

"Who would enjoy or use this item?" is a question Magnusson advises asking. Her own mother-in-law, who had run a shop of exquisite Japanese imports, "had slowly and unobtrusively given away a lot in a quiet, kind way." She suggests writing little notes to go with old furniture, paintings, and art objects to increase their heart value, if not their monetary worth.

As I survey my desk right now, I know I will keep (and move with) notes from my late dad, Bookseller Abe. But the Winnie the Pooh collector stamps my parents gave me in 1997? I will give them away to a good home. It's definitely time.

Own Less, Love More

As my decluttering odyssey continues, dozens of bags and boxes of stuff have left my home, and loads of things remain to be dealt with. Surrounding myself with an excess of material things was not good for my soul, but the Great Edit is. I'm buying less and being more thoughtful about my purchases. I feel lighter, less stressed.

"Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have," Hebrews 13:5 says. This editing expedition has attuned me to the contentment that comes from God, not material things.

Decluttering is meaningful and weirdly fun. It has helped me bring life back to once-cluttered spaces, let go of things that don't serve a purpose, and reflect joyfully on the memories that make up my existence. It's helped me own less and love what I keep more.

Own less, love more? That sounds countercultural, swimming upstream in a consumeristic, stuff-crazy world. I hope that's true. Most of all, I hope that means I am learning how to be truly rich—rich in what matters. **B**



Lorilee Craker, a native of Winnipeg, Man., lives in Grand Rapids, Mich. The author of 16 books, she is the Mixed Media editor of *The Banner*. Her latest book is called *Eat Like a Heroine: Nourish and Flourish With Bookish Stars From Anne of Green Gables to Zora Neale Hurston*.

BIG QUESTIONS

Relationships

My daughter has cut us out of a relationship with her and our grandchildren. I'm not sure how we got here. What can we do?

"Cutoff culture" has become a controversial topic in today's families. This occurs when adults, or even teens, demand space from loved ones to feel peace. As a therapist, I have sat on both sides of these situations, and it's important to remember that each situation is unique and it's often incredibly painful on both sides.

Trauma can factor into this conversation. Generally, trauma is real harm and abuse. It causes life-altering changes to an individual's mind and nervous system. Abuse, addiction, and abandonment are examples of painful experiences one might have to carry into adulthood. These forms of adversity often require time and special care to heal. When parents and family members continue to engage in abusive or addictive behaviors, are unrepentant, or are mentally ill, distance might be necessary.

However, when parents and family members demonstrate typical failures such as losing their patience, poor



Illustration for The Banner by Gisela Bohórquez

communication, or are overwhelmed or ineffective comforters, it should not warrant being cut out indefinitely. Even when the relationship takes much work or is uncomfortable to repair, the goal should still be to "live at peace with everyone" (Rom. 12:18).

Counselors observe that the most common mistake estranged parents make is responding to rejection with defensive behavior, repeatedly defending themselves, listing sacrifices made, pointing out ingratitude, or speaking negatively about the child's partner or therapist. One counselor, Tania Khazaal, who specializes in issues of estrangement, writes, "These reactions confirm the child's narrative that the parent is reactive and problematic," Khazaal writes. "This defensive approach makes the child defend their position harder and creates additional distance."

Sometimes family members are repentant of the harm they have caused and want to make amends. When grace, humility, and forgiveness are extended, healing comes. But if the "offender" is met with cold and confusing rules, it can make reconciliation almost impossible. Grief and regret are common feelings that must be managed while waiting for a loved one to trust again.

The Bible has a lot of guidance to offer. Parents should not provoke their children to anger (Eph. 6:4) and are called to

teach and guide them on the right path (Deut. 6:6-7, Prov. 22:6). Children have a responsibility to honor their parents (Ex. 20:12) and listen to their instruction and teaching (Prov. 1:8-9). Jesus calls us to freely forgive (Matt. 18:21-22) and be reconciled before worship (Matt. 5:23-24). Additionally, God continually draws people toward repentance, forgiveness, and restoration.

Time, humility, prayer, and repentance can open the door to healing, which God desires for our families.

Tara Boer, LISW, is a professor of social work at Dordt University and a licensed mental health therapist. She is a member of Hope Christian Reformed Church in Hull, Iowa. Website: drtaraboer.com.

Faith Formation

How do we teach our children about the rainbow God showed Noah when they see a rainbow flag in their neighborhood that has different connections?

Children are natural-born inquisitive thinkers, and their observations can offer a significant opportunity for parents, teachers, and mentors.

When a child sees a rainbow in the sky, we have a chance to focus the conversation on God's promise to Noah in Genesis 9. These moments are divinely provided opportunities to share how God promises to care for and protect his people.

Joshua 4 provides a blueprint for using a child's curiosity to discuss God's character and works. After God stopped the flow of the Jordan River so Israel could cross on dry land, Joshua commanded that 12 stones be set up on the riverbank. He explained that when future generations saw the stones and asked what they meant, adults would have a natural opening to share the story of God's faithfulness to the Israelites. When a young child sees a rainbow in the sky, we have a similar opportunity to share the promise God made to us and his creation in Genesis 9.

As children grow older, these conversations can expand when they encounter rainbows on posters, flags, or in other contexts. While parents, teachers, or mentors might initially feel hesitant to engage with this topic, acknowledging a rainbow flag can be an invitation to a deeper discussion rather than a moment to avoid.

You could begin by asking a few questions, such as what they think a rainbow symbolizes or what they've been told it means. While acknowledging that different people hold varying views on marriage and sexuality, parents and teachers can use a rainbow flag as an opportunity to share that God made marriage to be between a man and a woman and that we look to Scripture to understand God's good plan for our lives.

By engaging this topic with openness and a non-anxious presence, you communicate to children two vital truths: that God's Word speaks to this cultural moment and that their questions are always welcome.

Rick Zomer has worked with young adults for over 30 years and currently serves as a faith formation consultant for the CRCNA. He lives in Grand Rapids, Mich., and attends Fifth Church.

Ethics

Should we pray for our nation's victory in war?

On Feb. 28, the United States began a massive air offensive against Iran. Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney said he supported the U.S. strikes, albeit "with regret." The war placed many of our Christian brothers and sisters in harm's way, including those serving in or supporting the U.S. military as well as those living in Iran and neighboring Gulf states.

Pastors and worship leaders face difficult questions. How should we pray about the war? Should we pray for an American victory, or simply for peace? Should we ask God to protect Christians from harm, or all people, even Iran's leaders? Should we ask God to overthrow the Iranian government since it is oppressive and has killed many of its own people?

The best guide for our prayers is 1 Timothy 2:1-4, where the Apostle Paul writes, "I urge, then, first of all, that petitions, prayers, intercession, and thanksgiving be made for all people—for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. This is good, and pleases God our Savior, who wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth."

Note several things about Paul's teaching. First, we are to pray not only for our own leaders or nation, but for all people. Second, we are to pray for them, not against them. Third, one goal of our prayers should be that we may live peaceful and godly lives. As

Jesus teaches in Luke 18:1-8, such prayers should include urgent cries for justice. Fourth, the ultimate goal is that all people will be saved. Thus, we should pray for both the U.S. and the Iranian governments, as well as the people who live under them; we should pray that they might have peace and justice; and we should pray for their salvation.

But what about the many places in the Old Testament where Israelites prayed for the defeat of their enemies? This was a very different situation. God made a unique covenant with Israel in which he commanded them to fight and destroy pagan nations. He has made no such covenant with any other nation.

In Ephesians 2:14-17, Paul writes that Jesus "has made the two groups (Jews and Gentiles) one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility ... to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace. ... He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near." This is our mission as churches, and this should guide our prayers.

Matthew J. Tuininga is professor of Christian ethics and the history of Christianity at Calvin Theological Seminary. He lives in Wyoming, Mich.

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

Alberta Church Sets 'Family Table' for Discipleship Support

NEWS

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

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Got a news tip?

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

Bethel Community Christian Reformed Church in Edmonton, Alta., encouraged families in home-based discipleship this year with conversation-focused meals and additional online resources.

The ministry, called "The Family Table," launched in September 2025 and includes five in-person events scheduled up to June.

A collaboration between the church's director of children's ministries, director of youth ministries, and family ministries champion, the series focuses on prayer, Scripture reading, sharing the gospel, and fellowship.

"The Family Table came from a deep desire to support families in discipleship of their children in practical, sustainable ways," said Selikke Duthler, children's ministries director. "We wanted to build a space for fellowship and community that would encourage and equip parents in their family faith journey, without adding stress and busyness to already complex schedules."

Seventeen families have participated, with children from age 5 to teens.

Besides the Sunday gathering built around a shared meal, participants receive podcast episodes on each topic featuring informal conversation among the ministry leaders. More resources are shared through a WhatsApp group, allowing families to stay connected and encouraged between gatherings.

"When we sit around a table to share a meal, we share so much more than food," said director of youth ministries Camila Lazzarotto. "We share stories, moments, memories, and experiences. Whether that table is online through a podcast or in person on a Sunday after church, it becomes an opportunity for people to share what they bring to the table and what they can receive from it."

Early gatherings were organized as full potlucks, but leaders realized that expectation created stress for busy families. More recently, organizers have provided the main dish and asked families to bring a simple dessert or vegetable. "We are trying to remove as many barriers as possible," said Christie Thomas, the family ministries champion.

For participant Erica Dunichand, whose son is 5 years old, the series has provided both encouragement and practical tools for nurturing faith at home.

"I love God and I love my son," she said. "I want to instill God into his life and lead him with God's Word and love. Doing that together with other parents and kids through the church is perfect for us."

Dunichand said the gatherings help make faith conversations accessible for parents and children with "interactive stories, activities, and crafts that help both parents and kids learn how God works in our lives."

—Dan Veeneman

Families at Bethel Community CRC create prayer journals as part of The Family Table discipleship sessions.



Bethel Community CRC

Noteworthy



George Harinck, historian, scholar, and professor of Neo-Calvinism at the Theological University Utrecht, the Netherlands, **received the 2026 Kuyper Prize for Excellence in Reformed Theology and Public Life** at the Kuyper Conference, hosted March 26-28 at Calvin University in Grand Rapids, Mich. Host and producer of two acclaimed documentary series on prize namesake Abraham

Kuyper's international travels, *Varia Americana* and *Around the Old World Sea*, Harinck is credited with bringing Kuyper's legacy to life for new generations. "His ability to connect the academy with the public square through scholarship and media makes him an exemplary Kuyper Prize recipient," said Calvin University president Greg Elzinga. Calvin Theological Seminary co-sponsors the annual conference and prize.



Peter Noteboom, a commissioned pastor of the Christian Reformed Church in Classis Toronto, **who has served nine years as general secretary for The Canadian Council of Churches, is leaving the ecumenical organization as of June 30, 2026.** The Council announced the transition in its March newsletter: "Peter began serving as acting general secretary in 2017 and was appointed as general secretary in May 2018. Since that time, Peter has served The Canadian Council of Churches faithfully and well, providing visionary leadership, diligent accountability, and unwavering commitment to the mission of the CCC." Noteboom said, "At its best, the Council cultivates a spirit of unity, appreciation, friendship, and affection for its members to deepen their mutual understanding and to coordinate and collaborate, acting together in love."

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Derek Buikema, pastor of Orland Park (Ill.) Christian Reformed Church and president of the CRC synod in 2024, **was one of eight new members named to The Gospel Coalition council on Feb. 23.** TGC is a para-church organization founded in the mid-2000s by Tim Keller and Don Carson to help renew and unify the contemporary church in the ancient gospel.

Buikema, who joins three other Illinois-based pastors on the council, is the first Christian Reformed pastor to serve. "While there hasn't been formal council participation before, there have been a number of CRC men and women who have benefitted from the gospel-centered work of TGC," Buikema said. Other pastors recently named to The Gospel Coalition council are from Presbyterian, Anglican, Southern Baptist, and non-denominational churches, for a total of 52 pastor members, all men. Appointments are not term-limited, with long-term participation expected.



Mildred "Millie" Meyer, 96, unofficially surpassed the record-holding length for tenure as a church pianist/organist, held in the book of Guinness World Records by an Ohio woman for 80 years and 188 days. Meyer has been playing for Bunde Christian Reformed Church in Clara City, Minn., for 82 years.

One of "quite a few players" for the congregation, Meyer said she still plays occasionally for Bunde CRC and also, for close to 27 years for Raymond (Minn.) Methodist Church for two or three services a month.

[READ MORE ONLINE](#)

Synod 2026: What to Expect

Two of the biggest items on the Synod 2026 agenda are receiving the 10-year proposal for church planting and renewal, as requested by Synod 2025, and figuring out how to pay for that and the rest of the denomination's costs.

The Council of Delegates, the ecclesiastical board of the Christian Reformed Church in North America that acts on synod's behalf between meetings of synod, released a report last September with suggestions for reducing governance costs. Synod will deliberate on those recommendations as well as consider four requests and one communication from classes rejecting one of the ideas—to reduce meetings of synod to every other year.

Another classis asks for “budget and ministry-share transparency” by way of detailed line items, including salaries, to be included in the yearly synod agenda, and it wants the denomination to dedicate 50% of ministry-share money received from churches to mission work—15% to ReFrame Ministries and 35% to Resonate Global Mission—starting in fiscal year 2027-28.

Synod will also consider a classis request for a two-tiered ministry share system with mandatory “governance giving” (being unfulfilled would affect participation in assemblies) and flexible “agency/institution giving” (non-participation might incur a fee for accessing services).

In addition to its cost-savings report, the Council of Delegates presents updates to the Rules for Synodical Procedure (including removing the parliamentary position and eliminating the expectation that synod provide ministry-related learning opportunities); a review of the Dignity Team, a body developed in 2021 to offer “a pastoral response to abuse-of-power situations within the CRCNA”; a proposed charter for the Ministries Leadership Council; and (to come in the agenda supplement), rubrics showing the desired qualities in board membership



A 10-year plan for church planting and renewal, something delegate Scott Vander Ploeg, Classis Southeast U.S., championed at Synod 2025, is expected to come to Synod 2026.

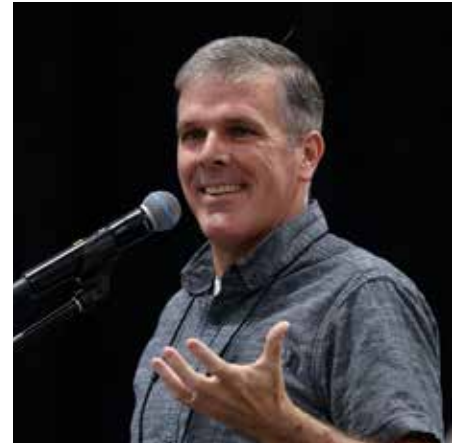
for various agencies and institutions of the CRCNA.

Also expected in the supplement, available late May, are a nominee for editor of *The Banner* (the interim role is currently filled by Lora Copley); and new appointments for directors of ReFrame Ministries and Thrive, to replace the retiring Kurt Selles and Lesli van Milligen (see p. 18, 19).

Reports and Standing Committees

Synod 2026 will receive four reports assigned by Synod 2024: the Addressing Accountability in Pastoral Misconduct report; the report of the Task Force to Study Multisite Churches; the Defining Membership Task Force report; and the report of the Task Force to Develop Church Order Procedures to Discipline Officebearers. Each includes recommendations that Synod 2026 will deliberate and decide on.

Reports of synod's standing committees—Candidacy, Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations, Historical, and Judicial Code—cover 43 pages. Candidacy, the committee to foster development of the CRC's pastoral leadership and



Tim Sheridan, director of church planting with Resonate Global Mission, will be part of presenting the CRCNA 10-year plan, developed over the past year.

recommend candidates for ministry, includes a report reviewing the office of commissioned pastor, with recommendations to develop lay leader training pathways, affirm the training guidelines for commissioned pastors, and make changes to Church Order Article 23 and its supplement to better express “the specialized nature of the office of commissioned pastor and its distinction from the office of Minister of the Word.”

The Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations Committee will include, in the agenda supplement, an update from the first of its five-year review of the CRC-Reformed Church in America relationship. It has also reviewed the denomination's membership in the World Communion of Reformed Churches, as requested by Synod 2025. It recommends “continued engagement, faithful presence, and critical participation in this global body.”

The EIRC proposes *church in cooperation* status for the Nederlandse Gereformeerde Kerken, a Dutch denomination formed in 2023 by the reunification of the Dutch Reformed Churches and the Reformed Churches Liberated.

Photos by Steven Herppich

Overtures

There are 37 formal requests, known as overtures, on synod's plate this year, including a request to study CRC polity to clarify relationships among the assemblies of the church, which has been deferred since Synod 2023.

Other significant requests include the following:

- » requiring that an overture not approved by a council or a classis be accompanied by an appeal when directed to the next assembly
- » requiring the involvement of synodical deputies in matters concerning the organization, affiliation, disaffiliation, and disbanding of congregations
- » establishing a permanent standing committee to review and advise on matters of Church Order
- » introducing more neutral language and a simpler process for tracking church membership
- » replacing the Church Order article pertaining to the regulation of worship services, to ensure "that the biblical wisdom that has been developed over the church's history be more practically communicated"
- » revisiting the regulations for gravamina (formal expressions of concern with a point of doctrine), which were clarified by Synod 2024 and further defined by Synod 2025
- » requiring "all those employed at our denominational agencies ... (to) show that they are professing members of a congregation in the CRCNA who fully support and defend the fullness of God's Word and that the Creeds and Confessions of the CRCNA faithfully reflect Scripture's revelation"
- » requiring trustees and faculty of Calvin Theological Seminary to sign a covenant of confessional commitment annually
- » requiring "full confessional alignment" for Calvin University faculty and Calvin University trustees
- » limiting future membership on the Council of Delegates to current or former officebearers
- » removing mention of "contemporary testimony" from the Covenant for Officebearers
- » updating the vision and mission statements of the CRCNA
- » affirming the traditional Reformed understanding of church and state as a guard against Christian nationalism.

—Alissa Vernon,
News Editor

IN MEMORIAM



*Rev. Dr. Marvin
VanderVliet*

1944-2025

Marv Vander Vliet "was a wise person with a deep understanding of God's Word and a great trust in God," said a colleague who ministered with him for 15 years at West Michigan Youth for Christ. Marv, 80, died May 20, 2025.

A graduate from Calvin College (now University) and Seminary, Marv later obtained a Doctor of Ministry degree from Sioux Falls (Minn.) Seminary. Ordained in 1975, he pastored Ellsworth (Mich.) Christian Reformed Church; Hillside Community Church, Grand Rapids, Mich.; Hawarden (Iowa) CRC; and First Jenison (Mich.) CRC. From 2004 to 2019 he served the Juvenile Justice Ministry for West Michigan Youth for Christ, continuing to volunteer there after retirement.

He was passionate about using outdoor activities to model Christianity and help foster deep conversation with the young people he served, taking teenagers from the Kent County, Mich., Juvenile Justice System sailing on Lake Michigan. "These kids have thousands of questions, about Jesus Christ in particular," Vander Vliet said in a 2008 story in *The Banner* ("Navigating Young Souls," April 2008, p. 15).

Marv is survived by five children, their spouses, and nine grandchildren. Barb, his wife of 56 years, died Jan. 12, 2026.

—Janet A. Greidanus

IN MEMORIAM



Rev. Matthew Le

1956-2025

"I am a servant," pastor Matthew Le said when his physician asked "What do you do?" Matthew, 68, died Jan. 27, 2025.

Born in Vietnam, Matthew escaped in 1982 with his younger brother and others in a small boat. "Experiencing the presence of God in the midst of danger gave me a deep faith and confidence in God," said Matthew in a 2017 article for the CRC Network.

Eventually sponsored to live in the U.S. and having experienced a clear sense of God's call to ministry, Matthew graduated from Reformed Bible College (now Kuyper College) in Grand Rapids, Mich., and Azusa (Calif.) Pacific Seminary. After a year at Calvin Seminary, he was ordained in the CRC in 1993. With the support of Home Missions (now part of Resonate Global Mission), he planted Fellowship Vietnamese, a congregation in Tustin, Calif. A year later it merged with Little Saigon CRC in Westminster, Calif., where Matthew served until he retired in 2022. He continued volunteering there as a mentor until his death.

Matthew loved reading and always carried a book with him everywhere he went.

He is survived by Nikie, his wife of 35 years.

—Janet A. Greidanus

Classis Watch: Winter 2026

Here are actions of classes (regional groups of churches) in the past several months (as received by April 8), guided by articles of Church Order.

Candidates **examined and approved for ministry in the Christian Reformed Church** (Arts. 6 and 10): Peter Urie Bae, Joseph Bartels, Tha Bawi, Josiah Chapman, David Kerkstra, Dylan Kern, Young Geol Lee, Kevin Lobert, and Matt Mulder.

Ministers welcomed **from other denominations**: Revs. Yordanys Diaz and Samuel Lim (Art. 8-c) and Shawn Gerbers and Derek Noorman (Art. 8-b).

Ministers **loaned** (Art. 12-d): Revs. Tim Holwerda to Heliopolis Community Church in Cairo, Egypt; Matt Mulder to Midland (Mich.) Reformed Church; Kathy Vana to Rehoboth Reformed Church (Alliance of Reformed Churches) in McBain, Mich.

Ministers released from ministry in a congregation via Art. 17-a: Revs. Tom Vander Ploeg from Fellowship CRC in Grandville, Mich., and Chad Pierce (ordained in the Reformed Church in America) from Faith CRC in Holland, Mich.; via provisions of the Alliance of Reformed Churches: Rev. Joel Zuidema from First Reformed Church of Fremont, Mich.

Declared eligible for call: Vander Ploeg.

Leaving Ministry in the CRC

Classes may end a pastor's ordained ministry status guided by Church Order articles 14 and 17. In the case of Art. 14, designations of release (reflecting the manner and spirit in which the minister acted during the time leading up to and including resignation from office) are "honorably released," "released," "dismissed," or in the "status of one deposed."

Honorably released via Art. 14-a: Kristen Pikaart; Art. 14-b: Sheri Admiraal, Sam Boldenow, Calvin Chen, Adrian R. de Lange, Steve Dykstra, Richard Ebbers,

Marcia Fairrow, Cari Fydirchuk, Siang Hup, John Luth, Jessica Maddox, Mark Mohrlang, Summer Mohrlang, Joseph Nasvytis, Kory Plockmeyer, J. Scott Roberts, Loretta Stadt, Eric Snyder, Jay Stringer, Mark Van Anandel, Everett Vander Horst, Ashley Van Dragt, Geoff Van Dragt, Thyra VanKeeken, Paul W. Verhoef, and Derek Zeyl; via Art. 14-c: Andy Carlson.

Released via Art. 14-b: Travis Jamieson, Greg Janke (effective Nov. 7, 2025); via Art. 14-d: Noah Kruis; via Art. 17-c: Brian Kornelis and Brian Tebben.

Ministers retiring/granted emeritus status (Art. 18): Revs. Joseph Bak (as of Dec. 31, 2019, not previously reported), Greg Kett, Hankyu Park, Jack Van de Hoef, Gilbert Varela, Norman Visser, John Ritsema, Dan Ackerman (effective May 27), Randall Bergsma (effective June 30), Wendell Davelaar (effective July 1), Henry Kranenburg, (effective Aug. 31), and Rick Mast (effective mid-September).

Resigned as minister emeritus: Ted Boswell, Tom DeVries, Ronald De Young, Larry Doornbos, Al Gelder, Adrian Helleman, Michael Kooy, Graham Morbey, Roger Nelson, Peter Stellingwerff, Ed Top, Cecil Van Niejenhuis, John Van Sloten, William Steele, Mark Vermaire, Jon Westra, and Richard Williams.

Commissioned Pastors

Approved as **commissioned pastors called to specific roles within their classes** (Art. 23): Julian Ochoa, Jorge Tellez, and Joey Wright (Atlantic Northeast); Canaan Ee (B.C. North-West); Josh VanTil (Columbia); John Dwyer (Greater Los Angeles); Mitchell Leach and Wes Jones (Northern Michigan); Bill Craig (Pacific Northwest); Andres Sancho and Pierre Leclair (Southeast U.S.).

Ending service as commissioned pastors (Art. 24-d): Bert Adema and Harrison Cho (Alberta South and Saskatchewan), Joseph Paravisini (Atlantic Northeast), Marcel deRegt (B.C. South-West), Annie Jamieson (Central

California), Amy Schenkel (Grand Rapids South), Marja Fledderus (Hamilton), Chris Roberts (Hudson), Tim Soerens (Pacific Northwest), Danny Vera (Southeast U.S., effective June 1, 2025), and Shiao Chong (Toronto).

Granted **commissioned pastor emeritus status** (Art. 24-e): Rod Hugen (Arizona), Angela Elliot (B.C. North-West), and Danny Skelton (Rocky Mountain).

Removed from **commissioned pastor emeritus status** (Art. 24-e): Gerry Muller (Columbia).

Deposed (Arts. 83-84): Gabe Colangelo (Classis California South).

New Ministries and Ministry Changes

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

Recognized as **organized**: City on a Hill in Plainwell, Mich.; Gibson CRC in Holland, Mich.; King's Covenant Church in Bridgewater, N.J.; and Inland All Nations Church in Rancho Cucamonga, Calif.

Recognized as **emerging**: Cornerstone CRC in Kitchener, Ont., Eglise Baptiste de Salem D'Orlando (Fla.), and Vive Church Milwaukee (Wisc.).

Moved from "**organized**" to "**emerging**" status: New Hope Community Church in Fort Lauderdale, Fla. (as of October 2025).

Disbanded, dissolved, or closed: Tampa (Fla.) Korean Presbyterian Church and Our Community Church in Suwanee, Ga. (both as of Dec. 31, 2019, not previously reported); East Bay Church of the Light in Fremont, Calif.; Iglesia de Camino a Cristo in Sunnyside, Wash. (had been emerging); Mountain Springs Community Church in Salt Lake City, Utah; The Neighborhood in Providence, R.I. (had been emerging); Olentangy CRC in Columbus, Ohio; and Western Springs (Ill.) CRC.

Affiliated: Grace Christian Church of Staten Island (formerly Reformed Church of America).

Disaffiliated: Akron (Ohio) CRC; Avenue CRC in Edmonton, Alta. (had been emerging); Bridge Community Church in Langley, B.C.; Comunidad Cristiana Internacional in Wyoming, Mich. (had been emerging); First CRC in Toronto, Ont.; Good News Fellowship CRC in Winnipeg, Man.; Hessel Park CRC in Champaign, Ill.; The Journey in Longmont, Colo.; Lantern Community Church in Calgary, Alta.; Meadowlands Fellowship CRC in Ancaster, Ont.; Palo Alto (Calif.) CRC; Pullman CRC in Chicago, Ill.; River Park CRC in Calgary, Alta.; and Sanctuary CRC in Seattle, Wash.

Other Matters

Classis Central California dismissed a team that had been established to “review any outstanding allegations against David G. Zandstra in light of his (Jan. 2025) legal acquittal ... (and) to respond to the Fairfield CRC council’s recommendation regarding his ministerial status.” Zandstra died Dec. 15, 2025. **“It is not the practice of our denomination to continue to deal with discipline matters posthumously,”** the March 2026 agenda for Classis Central California noted. Fairfield CRC, which held credentials for the retired pastor who lived in Marietta, Ga., had suspended his ministerial status in 2023, after his apparent confession and arrest for a 1975 murder.

Classis Chicago South has instituted a three-year Church Planting Residency Program.

Classis Columbia and Classis Yellowstone are exploring merging their two classes.

—Alissa Vernon

IN MEMORIAM



Rev. Peter Breedveld

1931-2026

In ministry, Peter Breedveld’s desire was to be “a healer of the wounded human spirit,” his son John recalled at Peter’s memorial service. Peter, 94, died Feb. 2.

Born in Rotterdam, the Netherlands, Peter’s early years as one of six siblings were difficult. They experienced war, extreme hunger, their father’s death, and becoming foster children when their mother was hospitalized. In 1951 the extended family immigrated to Canada.

After graduation from Calvin College (now University) and Westminster Seminary, Peter was ordained in 1963 and pastored Strathroy (Ont.) East Christian Reformed Church. There he met and married widow Janny Zwart and became father to her three young children. He served Bethany CRC, Bloomfield, Ont.; Holland Marsh CRC, Newmarket, Ont.; Community CRC, Kitchener, Ont.; and Ottewell CRC, Edmonton, Alta. He was loaned to Gereformeerde Kerk in Grootegast, the Netherlands, then served Trinity CRC in Edmonton before retiring in 1999.

Peter enjoyed organ music, was an avid reader, and loved sharing life stories, often surprising a listener with a story he’d never told before.

Predeceased by his wife, Janny, and a son, Edward, Peter is survived by four children and their spouses; 12 grandchildren; and 20 great-grandchildren.

—Janet A. Greidanus

IN MEMORIAM



Rev. James (Jim) R. Kok

1935-2026

Jim Kok, who served in chaplaincy ministry for 50 years, was the first supervisor of clinical pastoral education in the Christian Reformed Church. At 6’6”, “Jim was a giant of a man in both stature and kindness,” a fellow chaplain recently reflected. He died Feb. 17 at age 90.

Jim graduated from Calvin College, where he played four years of basketball; Michigan State University, where he obtained a master’s degree in counseling; and Calvin Seminary. Ordained in 1963, he pastored Trinity CRC, Iowa City, Iowa for four years, then served for 15 years at Pine Rest Psychiatric Hospital in Grand Rapids, Mich. In 1984 Jim began serving the Reformed Church in America’s Crystal Cathedral in Garden Grove, Calif., as director of care ministry. After retirement in 2013 he continued visiting those in need, led an adult Sunday school class, and volunteered at the VA hospital in Long Beach, Calif.

A prolific writer, Jim wrote seven books and a column for *The Banner* for many years. In 2009 he received Calvin Theological Seminary’s Distinguished Alumni Award.

Jim is survived by Linda, his wife of 63 years; four children and their spouses; and nine grandchildren.

—Janet A. Greidanus

IN MEMORIAM

*Rev. Jacob (Jack) Hielema*

1931-2026

Jack Hielema's life was marked by steadfast faith, thoughtful counsel, faithful ministry, and deep care for people. He died March 10 at age 94

Jack studied at Calvin College (now University), Westminster Seminary, and the Free University of Amsterdam, before graduating from Calvin Seminary. Ordained in 1963, he served Forest (Ont.) Community Church and Victoria (B.C.) Christian Reformed Church before returning to the Netherlands with his wife and four children. Feeling it was important that his children experience their Dutch roots, he pastored a church in Surhuisterveen, Friesland, completed a doctorate in pastoral counseling, and for two years was director of Christian Television for NCRV, a Dutch public broadcaster.

Returning to Canada, Jack served Maranatha CRC, Calgary, Alta., then accepted a position with the Middle East Reformed Fellowship in Larnaca, Cyprus.

In 1990 Jack was called to Smithers (B.C.) CRC and then to the CRC of Prince George. He retired in 1999, moving a few years later, to Alberta. After 17 years in Red Deer, the Hielemas moved to Calgary.

Predeceased in 2025 by Alice, his wife of 67 years, and in 2020 by daughter Anna, Jack is survived by three children and their spouses; 13 grandchildren; and eight great-grandchildren.

—Janet A. Greidanus

First Thrive Director Retires

As Lesli van Milligen retires as director of Thrive, a ministry of the Christian Reformed Church, she looks back on more than 30 years in ministry. Her last day is May 29.

In 1995, starting her career as an evangelist (now called commissioned pastor), van Milligen was one of the first women ordained in the CRC. She co-pastored with her husband Thom in Troy, Mich.; Cincinnati, Ohio; and Guelph, Ont., where they now reside.

In 2016, having obtained a Master of Divinity and all other training required, she was ordained a Minister of the Word. That year she began working for the denomination as director of Faith Formation, one of nine congregational ministries that were combined as Thrive in 2023. Van Milligen and Chris Schoon were Thrive's first co-directors. She became sole director in 2024.

Van Milligen sees no downside to having combined the ministries. "As budgets tighten it is harder to replace some staff, but because we have a team, we can step in, fill gaps, and still provide resources," she said.

She noted that as a team Thrive is also able to provide more proactive resources, including *Deacon Essentials* and *Elder Essentials* and more recently produced materials. "We just produced *Employment Essentials*, sharing best practices in HR for churches. When synod decided we needed to support pastoral spouses,



we already had resources we could put together almost immediately. We pivoted at our pastoral gathering and included a track for spouses."

She describes Thrive as "a 'yeast' ministry" whose work is primarily behind the scenes. "Oftentimes people wonder how we impact churches," she said. But "when people use the Dwell curriculum, Thrive is there. When they need help with pastoral church processes, Thrive is there." She wants churches to remember Thrive as a ready-to-help partner.

She thinks the biggest challenge her successor will face is constant change and adjusting to "best serve the church in the midst of all this change."

Uncertain what her next role will be, van Milligen believes there is no real retirement from kingdom work. "I'm guessing God will have me back in the pastorate," she said, noting she would like to consider serving as solo pastor of a congregation, which she hasn't done before.

Lesli and Thom are members of CrossPoint CRC in Brampton, Ont.

—Gayla R. Postma

ReFrame Director To Retire

Kurt Selles plans to retire in July after 14 years as director of ReFrame Ministries, the media ministry of the Christian Reformed Church.

During that time the agency relocated from Palos Heights, Ill., to Grand Rapids, Mich.; changed its name to ReFrame Ministries from Back To God Ministries International; and changed its ministry approach by employing local ministry leaders for its overseas ministry projects, partnering with Presbyterian and Reformed denominations outside of the CRC.

Started in 1939 as a radio broadcast, then called "The Back To God Hour," the organization grew to include print, television and, more recently, digital media, and is currently operating in nine major world languages.

While ReFrame reaches a wide audience, financial support comes primarily from within the CRC, Selles said. As funding for denominationally shared ministry has declined, "we've had to cut back on ministry," Selles said, noting that last year three English language programs were closed and the Russian ministry was suspended. Despite those setbacks, Selles said he believes ReFrame will see growth in the years to come.

He's appreciated working with ReFrame staff and international partners. "We meet once a week for devotions and prayer, and I can't count how often I've left those times giving thanks for our staff and ReFrame's mission," he said.



Ordained in 1987, Selles began his career as a missionary in Taiwan, moving to Beijing in 1993, where he also directed the Calvin College Semester in China program. When he returned to the U.S. he took a position as a missions professor at Beeson Divinity School in Birmingham, Ala., while also pastoring Leeds (Ala.) Presbyterian Church.

In retirement, Selles is looking forward to hiking, writing, and teaching two classes this fall at Calvin University.

He and his wife Vicki are members of Shawnee Park CRC in Grand Rapids.

—Gayla R. Postma

IN MEMORIAM



*Rev. Epke (Edward)
Vander Berg*

1942-2026

As a missionary, Epke Vander Berg shared his gifts of faith, service, and leadership with many people around the world. He died Feb. 27, at age 84.

After graduating from Calvin College (now University) and studying at Michigan State University, Epke was a school social worker before being called to ministry. He graduated from Calvin Seminary and was ordained in 1973, then served 15 years on the mission field in the Philippines and Jordan with Christian Reformed World Missions (now part of Resonate Global Mission).

After the Vander Bergs returned from overseas, Epke served several Grand Rapids ministries: Mission India, preaching for Gold Avenue Christian Reformed Church and the English service of Hahn-In CRC, teaching at Davenport University, and volunteering in refugee resettlement. For 13 years until his death, he was chaplain at the Village of Heather Hills retirement home.

Epke was an avid reader and enjoyed religious and detective books. He and his wife were part of the charter group that organized Church of the Servant in 1973 (the congregation disaffiliated from the CRC in 2025).

Epke is survived by Nita, his wife of 63 years; son, Steffen (and Ann); five grandchildren; and four great-grandchildren.

—Janet A. Greidanus



A 3D Look at Human Sexuality

By Dave Beelen

My wife of 49 years died about a year ago. I am often sad. But I am not going to come apart. Why?

Because the story of my marriage is a subplot of the main plot of God's story.

My subplot's chapter is closed. I am no longer married to Melanie. Yet I am still in a marriage. The grand story we're in is about a Bridegroom, and I am part of his Bride.

What does that grand story have to do with sex, singleness, and marriage? Everything. Our sub-plot relationships are to mirror, accurately, the main plot.

Here's what I mean: Our Bible, in 66 books, is a single, all-encompassing story. As meaning-seeking creatures, our souls need stories like our stomachs need food. And the Bible is a grand, dramatic romance of God and his people.

Within that story, marriage and sex function as a major metaphor. Metaphors point beyond themselves to a deeper reality. It is imperative not to confuse the pointer with the greater thing pointed to.

This is essential: We are made in God's image. God is the original; humans are the copies. Our earthly marriages reflect only shadows of the true reality. Christ's marriage to his Bride—the Church—is the sun; our marriages are the reflecting moons.

Our Triune God did not create sex and marriage as a biological necessity—to populate his new planet—and then later decide to use marriage as a helpful illustration of his intimate, committed love for us. It's not that our marriages are the pattern, the original, which then illuminates Christ's marriage to the Church.

No. It is the other way around! Christ's marriage to his Bride is original and lasts.

There are far more dimensions to this than meets the eye. If we look at marriage, sex, and singleness in only one dimension, we are lost before we even begin.

Think of marriage and sex in three dimensions: God's biblical *drama* births biblical *doctrine*, which guides biblical *decisions*. Drama forms doctrine forms decisions. Our ethical decisions about sex and marriage make no sense unless they are

grounded in doctrinal teaching, and that teaching itself is grounded in the epic drama of the Bridegroom who pursues his Bride.

This is what allows us to hear God's exhilarating "yesses": to sexual desire and marriage, to celibate singleness, to our identity as members of the Bride, and to his personal, passionate, intimate commitment to us.

And this also helps us to understand God's clear "nos": to divorce, to pre-marital sex, to adultery, to pornography, and to same-sex sex.

Any account of a "no" that bypasses the Bridegroom-Bride drama hangs untethered. It becomes what might be called "cut-flower ethics"—looks okay for a time, but it is severed from the living roots that produce them.

Too much of our conversation about sexuality, including debates about homosexuality and gender, suffers from this rootlessness. It is not a three-dimensional account: drama, doctrine, decision. It is just 1D rules without God's romance: just "yesses" and "nos."

» Our brothers and sisters in the Church who experience LGBTQ+ attractions and desires need more

than prohibitions. They need the alluring beauty of the greater story, the 3D marriage metaphor.

- » Our young people, growing up in a sexually saturated culture and internet, need the alluring beauty of a better love story, God's great marriage metaphor.
- » Single people need to see that they are being wooed by their great Bridegroom; singleness is not a "plan-B" life.
- » Married people need to see that their marriages—often imperfect and even disappointing at times—are only glimmers of the ultimate marriage to come: Christ with his Bride.
- » All of us need this robust retelling of our daring, passionate, committed Rescuer.

From beginning to end, Scripture is saturated with the imagery of Bridegroom and Bride. Scripture begins with a wedding in a garden (Gen. 2) and concludes with a wedding feast in a garden-city (Rev. 21:2). The metaphor loops throughout Scripture (Is. 54:5). At the center stands a Savior who calls himself a Bridegroom and who by his death rescues his Bride.

Doctrine flows out of drama. Christian doctrine of the definition of marriage is not arbitrarily made; it is discovered within the story God tells about himself, from a God who wishes to unveil himself to his Bride.

What then is the Bible's definition of marriage?

The Bible teaches marriage is a life-long, one-flesh union between two sexually different persons—male and female—whose covenant union is for the purpose of reflecting God's story of faithfulness and fruitfulness. Sexual

Christ's marriage
to his Bride—the
Church—is the
sun; our
marriages are the
reflecting moons.

relationships outside of this covenant are sin.

This understanding emerges from Genesis 1 and 2, where God creates a world of unity across difference, of complementary pairs throughout: heaven and earth, evening and morning, land and sea, day and night, light and darkness.

God brings the cosmos out of chaos, often expressed in paired symmetries (such as heaven and earth). These differences, these complementary pairs, are God's way of creating patterns. Our Creator God is the original artist. God created the crown of creation as one humanity expressed in two sexually different creatures. Unity and diversity: "So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them (Gen. 1:27)."

The three-in-one God creates a two-in-one humanity.

Paul later calls marriage a profound mystery, because sexual union is meant to function as a window, not an endpoint. It points beyond itself to Christ and His Church.

Our culture has lost this mystery. We trivialize sex ("it's just physical release") and at the same time idolize it ("something's wrong if you aren't

having regular sex"). We've reduced sex and lost the mystery God intended.


Sex is not God; sex points to God. It is not merely physical; it mysteriously unites the physical and the spiritual. It is designed as a reflection of the real thing—the greater union, greater intimacy, greater faithfulness, greater fulfillment.

How is this good news to those who are single and those who experience same-sex attraction? I quote my friend Greg Coles, a same-sex-attracted believer. "I love having people stare at me like I've sprouted a third eyeball when I explain what Jesus means to me, the things I've given up for him, and the joy I've received in exchange. I love telling people how I've experienced the faithfulness of God to look out for my well-being in the moments I stop putting myself first. I want to be remarkable, not because of my sexuality, but because of the all-consuming way in which I love Jesus."

I have lost a marriage. But I have not lost The Marriage. The Bridegroom still holds his bride. He still holds me.

And this is where the gospel—the good news—lands.

The good news is that all who are rescued by Jesus—married, single, widowed, same-sex or opposite-sex attracted—will discover that every true longing will only be fulfilled at the true Wedding Feast.

Let's live our stories in the light of the Greater Story we're in. 



Dave Beelen is a retired Minister of the Word in the Christian Reformed Church. He formerly served as lead pastor at Madison Church in Grand Rapids and is a visiting instructor and formation specialist at Calvin Seminary. He has three children and two grandsons.



It's Time for Phase Two

By Syd Hielema

During the past five years the CRC has invested tremendous energy in drawing clear boundary lines concerning human sexuality. We might call this “phase one” of working through the 175-page 2021 Human Sexuality Report. The report calls for much more than clarifying boundaries. Now it's time for phase two: developing the report's pastoral recommendations.

A couple of years ago an elder from a neighboring congregation called, inviting me to preach. “I need to tell you,” he noted, “our council told me to ensure that all our preachers support the entire HSR.” I paused. I was aware of members in his church personally affected by the report.

I asked, “In what ways has your council carried out some of the pastoral recommendations in the report?” It was his turn to pause, and finally he admitted, “We've done nothing.” “So,” I replied, “is it fair to say that your council does not support the entire report?” Another pause. “Yes, that would be fair,” he replied. And he scheduled me in.

After I preached, another elder whose family was quietly dealing with LGBTQ+ issues pulled me aside so we could not be overheard and thanked me for encouraging congregations in our region to work out the pastoral implications of the HSR. I was glad to be thanked, but I had to wonder, “Why did he ensure that no one heard him?”

I have served as a resource for a small number of churches in pioneering phase two. Two classes (Toronto and Alberta North) have gathered cohorts to explore pastoral practices. Pastor Ron DeVries in Edmonton was grateful for small steps in his classis but noted how challenging this is. Rev. Gary Brouwers in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, writes, “Reactions and responses have been rooted in fear of people we label as sinners. Our fear has built walls that have made us ineffective in showing the love of Jesus as he commands. Now that we have once again established our position regarding same sex relationships, we don't need to be afraid any longer. We can extend hospitality, because there is no fear in love.”

Gary's observation reminds us that phase two is more difficult than phase one. Even so, we have begun to

take steps, and we're ready for every congregation and classis to build on these. As the HSR notes, “Despite repeated and strong exhortations of past study committee reports to love and care for brothers and sisters who are attracted to the same sex as equal members of the body of Christ, the church has all-too-often ostracized, shunned, or ignored such Jesus-followers” (p. 114).

Practical Suggestions

The good news is that there is such a variety of ways to enter into phase two that every congregation and classis can discern what is best for them. Here's a brief sampler.

- 1. Remember that clarifying positions is a first step.** Positions are a foundation on which we love God above all and our neighbor as ourselves. The harder work is pastoral.
- 2. Repent of fear and judgment.** The Reformed tradition places a high value on self-examination and confession of sin. The HSR admits our weak pastoral care. As one council chair in Iowa noted, “I was shocked to realize how much

the slurs we threw around the Christian High locker room were still shaping me today.” He calls us to pray with David, “Search me, O God, and know my heart; see if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting” (Ps. 139:23-24).

- 3. Utilize conversation spaces.** At one church the pastor introduced an HSR evening by saying, “It makes me nervous to have this conversation, but it makes me more nervous not to have it.” What a beautiful intro! We Reformed folk have sturdy conversation spaces: congregational prayer, weekly prayer of confession, elder visits, and congregational meetings. We need to use them.
- 4. Remember how far the ripples expand.** Human sexuality issues also affect parents, grandparents, siblings, friends, extended family, and more. I have seen parents break off contact with their children while grandparents deepen their contact with them (and vice versa). I have seen parents and grandparents hide behind a wall of shame. Small steps of love, empathy, and compassion begin to break down such walls.
- 5. Use good resources.** There are many! CRC’s Thrive funds congregational learning cohorts. Excellent video series and books for group use abound. Find the communities that are proactively being pastoral and learn from them.
- 6. Cultivate a teachable, humble heart that can handle messiness.** “Positions” are neat and tidy. Life is not. The gospels portray our Lord as surrounded by people who are hurting, who don’t belong. My deepest teacher has been a gay young adult (rejected by her parents) who


We can extend
hospitality,
because there is
no fear in love.

had carefully read and agreed with the HSR, had committed to lifelong celibacy, and, after following the livestreams of synodical discussions, concluded there wasn’t room for her in the CRC. She tearfully told me, “As I listened, I realized that the vibe at synod was one that seemed eager to tell me how I am supposed to live, but did not know me as a human being, and did not want to get to know me or attempt to love me. They know nothing of the suffering I experience and they don’t want to know.” Her heart-breaking story reminds us that pastoral care is messy and requires taking risks that often leave us uncomfortable.

- 7. Remember the biblical understanding of unity.** There are many approaches to human sexuality. Recognizing the complexity of approaches reminds us that the Bible describes unity as having the mind of Christ, which prioritizes embodying the fruit of the Spirit. In challenging situations, we remember that “as iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another” (Prov. 27:17).
- 8. Be ready for anything.** An elder contacted me to say, “Ten years ago a gay young adult in our church

took his life, and we never dealt with it properly. Are you aware of any liturgical resources that would help us deal with this now? Isn’t late better than never?” What a brave and difficult request! The journey of exploring pastoral care will generate hundreds of unusual requests that will refine the resilient wisdom of our discipleship. Our good Lord is not afraid to entrust us with complex calls to obedience.

- 9. Remember the heart of God.** Our good Lord invites us to place these challenging callings inside his easy yoke: “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.” That’s the “phase two yoke.”

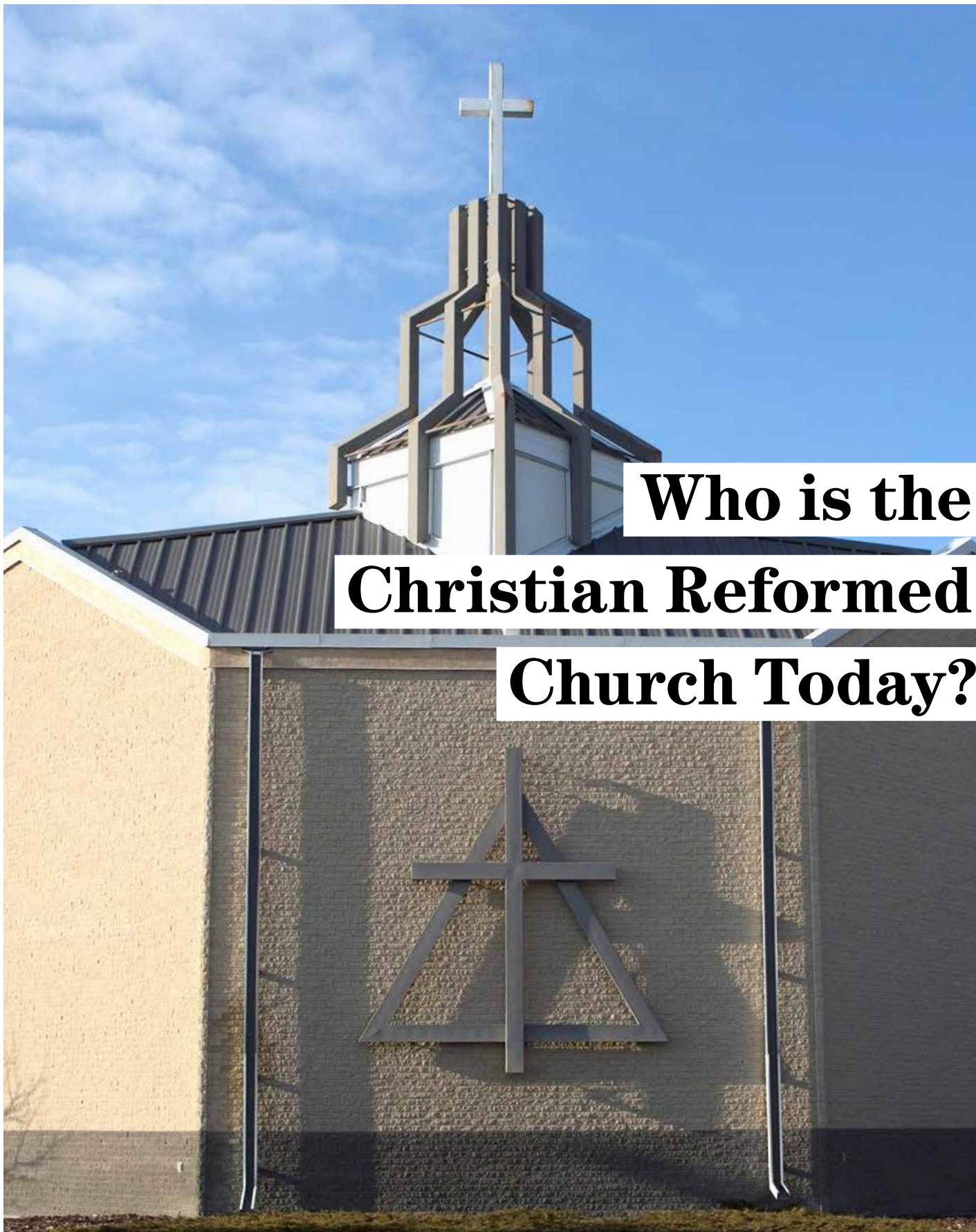
This list of suggestions could easily be twice as long, but you get the idea. My prayer, as we continue to build momentum in phase two, is that the CRC will increasingly reflect Paul’s call: “Let your gentleness be evident to all; the Lord is near” (Phil. 4: 5). 



Syd Hielema serves as regional pastor for Classis Hamilton. He worships at Meadowlands Fellowship Church in Ancaster, Ont.

More Resources

- » crcna.org/sexualityresources
- » lauriekrieg.com/podcast
- » centerforfaith.com
- » coramdeoassociation.org/trackscourses



**Who is the
Christian Reformed
Church Today?**

The View From Here

WHAT IS IDENTITY? For many of us, our personal identity might be bound up in vocation. For example, Belinda is a banker; she always has been and thought she always would be. But when she retires, what is she? For others, identity is bound up in a relationship—often a child (or spouse). Darryl is Tyler’s dad. Darryl coached Tyler’s baseball team, took his friends on spring break to Florida. But when Tyler goes to university, who is Darryl? Questions of identity are tough and disruptive. They not only guide our approach to today, but they affect our orientation to the future.

Through the prophet Malachi, the Lord said, “I the Lord do not change.” Except for the Lord (and his Word), everything else changes—including the church. Similar to Belinda and Darryl, the church in North America is going through a time of shifting identity. Once at the center of society, the church finds itself increasingly at the periphery (or fighting for a seat at the table) and is anxious about it.

Denominations that were once ethnically and culturally homogeneous find themselves negotiating diversity as first- and second-generation immigrants move into leadership and influence. The epidemic of polarization, fueled by social media, that plagues our politics and our dinner tables has boiled over into the church and affected our relationships with each other.

These and other changes have shifted the identity of North American churches in the past 30 years. The Christian Reformed Church is no exception.

The only constant
in our world is
change. Yet, through
all our upheavals,
one thing has
remained the same.

Orientation to Culture

So, what is CRC identity? Perhaps no single confession has been more critical to the identity of Reformed churches in general, and the CRC in particular, than the sovereignty of God over all creation (Belgic Confession, Art. 13). From this confession comes our Reformed understanding of salvation. Also from this confession comes our understanding of common grace (God’s favor given to all humanity to restrain sin and sustain life in society and culture).

And from this teaching comes the “transformationalist strain” of our identity—that we seek God’s kingdom in all areas and endeavors of life. As a result, we have had a long history of social engagement through building institutions such as schools, universities, seminaries, mission agencies, retirement homes, labor unions, mental health hospitals, adoption agencies, etc. This aspect of our CRC identity has attracted so many (including me) from other Christian traditions with more ambivalent attitudes toward life outside the church to join the CRC.

Yet the growth of secularism and the marginalization of the church in society in the past several decades has challenged this aspect of our identity. The call to seek God’s kingdom in all areas of culture and life remains strong in the CRC, but it is tempered by the recognition that until Christ returns, our efforts to “claim every square inch” will be provisional. We are learning that faithfully proclaiming Christ in culture can sometimes lead to discomfort, pushback, and even persecution. We are becoming “tempered transformationalists” who entrust ourselves to Christ’s victory while eagerly awaiting Christ’s return.

Orientation to Mission

Another key aspect to the identity of the CRC is that we are a covenant people. God covenanted with Abram to make him a blessing to all peoples (Genesis 12). God covenanted with Israel to make it a light among the nations (Is. 49). God has covenanted with us and our children to be a royal priesthood, “proclaiming the praises of him who called you out of darkness” (1 Peter 2:9).

Despite the orientation of covenant toward mission in Scripture, at times CRC folks have leaned into isolation. In our annual denominational survey, items related to local mission, such as showing mercy, seeking justice, and sharing the gospel, have consistently ranked as activities we do not participate in well individually or promote strongly as congregations.

Yet there is a new movement of Spirit-empowered mission shaping us today. Whether because of changing neighborhoods or aging congregations, God has reminded us that the gospel and growth go together. Discipleship, evangelism, and church planting are high on the CRC agenda. We are recognizing that the good news is not just good words but also good deeds done in gratitude.

At the center of this movement of mission is a movement of prayer. Growth is an act of God, and we heed the call to pray for renewal. We are becoming “prayerful preachers” of gospel words and gospel deeds.

Orientation to Togetherness

A final critical confession to the CRC identity is that we are one in the Lord. We confess our connection to one holy catholic and apostolic church (Nicene Creed). We acknowledge “Three Forms of Unity” (our Reformed confessions) binding us to Reformed and Presbyterian communions around the world. But we are broken.

In the words of one of the CRC’s contemporary testimonies, *Our World Belongs to God*, “We grieve that the church, which shares one Spirit, one faith, one hope, and spans all time, place, race, and language, has become a broken communion in a broken world” (Art. 40). Upholding a traditional view of marriage and sexuality was essential for our witness, yet we lament the ways our anxiety and anger on these topics contributed to our disunity in the past several years.

Despite this, today God is weaving CRC congregations into a new tapestry. Decades ago much of our unity and identity was cultural, based on a shared Dutch immigrant experience. Today 25% of our congregations are primarily non-caucasian, and many more are multiethnic.

New members and new generations bring different practices and perspectives. With this new identity often comes conflict and misunderstanding. Many point out that today there is a “lack of trust in the system.”

Trust is a choice, graciously offered and gratefully received. Will we give and receive? In the midst of all of this, there is a growing appetite for an identity in togetherness rooted in a shared vision for Reformed mission and ministry. Our identity is shaped by “toughened togetherness.”


Unchanging Identity Rooted in Christ and His Word

The only constant in our world is change. Yet, through all our upheavals, one thing has remained the same. As a communion of churches our identity is centered on Christ and his Word (see page 10 of the denominational survey). Hebrews reminds us, “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever” (Heb. 13:8). Therefore we have hope.

While our Christian Reformed communion and our congregations might be temporary, the gospel will go forth. The church will endure. Therefore we are “sent with the gospel of the kingdom to call everyone to know and follow Christ and to proclaim to all the assurance that in the name of Jesus there is forgiveness of sin and new life for all who repent and believe. The Spirit calls all members to embrace God’s mission in their neighborhoods and in the world: to feed the hungry, bring water to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, care for the

sick, and free the prisoner” (*Our World Belongs to God*, Art. 41).

Going back to the beginning, Belinda is still a banker, but she can now use her skills of administration and finance in other ways. Darryl is still a dad; he just needs to change the way he interacts with his son. In the same way, much of our CRC and Reformed identity has stayed the same. We remain united in Christ, committed to our confessions, and are called to mission.

With these roots of our identity continuing, I wonder how God is calling us to live into these things today as he continues to shape and mold us in new and different ways. Let’s have a conversation about this. Please share your reactions and thoughts about our CRC identity in response to this post on the Network. 



Rev. Zachary King is the general secretary of the Christian Reformed Church in North America. He is a member of Cascade Fellowship CRC.

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 Church Filled With Joy

John 15 reminds us that God is the vine into whom we are all grafted. While we might undergo pruning from time to time, if we remain faithful, keep his commands, and love one another, we will bear fruit and be filled with joy. In fact, John 15:11 promises that our joy will overflow. With that in mind, the ministries and educational institutions of the CRCNA wanted to share a few stories this month that demonstrate the joy flowing in and around our communities thanks to the shared ministries you support. Praise God for the way he is working in and through the Christian Reformed Church.

Bringing the Bible to Life

By Kristyn DeNooyer, Thrive

The children's ministry hallway at Second Christian Reformed Church in Grand Haven, Mich., used to be a plain space. Today, it is a journey through the rugged landscapes of first-century Israel. Through a vibrant new mural project, the church has transformed blank walls into an immersive experience designed to help children move beyond hearing Bible stories to being in awe of God's big story and his invitation to be part of it.



A painting of En Gedi (Christ, our Living Water) adorns the wall.



Maria Etchegaray (right) is one of the artists who created multiple murals for the Second CRC children's ministry hallway



Second CRC members transformed this hallway with painted murals to help children engage with Bible stories.

The vision for the project was sparked by Annie Hoekzema, Second CRC's director of children's ministries and a member of Thrive's Children's Ministry Leaders Network. After transformative study trips where she walked the Mount of Olives and hiked the mountains of Galilee, Hoekzema felt called to bring that same life-changing context to her students.

"We want to stir children's imaginations to feel what it was like to be a character in the Bible stories we read," she

shared, noting that the ultimate goal is to help children understand the Word in new ways.

Transforming the hallway was a true community effort. Over an ambitious six-day period, a team of seven artists and five painters from the congregation worked to bring the desert and sky to life. The result is a series of landscapes that allow for layered meaning.

"After a story about David in the desert," Hoekzema explained, "we can point out En Gedi and invite children to reflect on ways that Christ is our Living Water. As we pass by the Mount of Olives during Advent, we point out the olive stump in the mural that has a green shoot sprouting up.

Weekly, we can walk by Qumran with gratitude for those who preserved the Ancient Words in jars of clay.”

Last summer, children spent each week focusing on a different mural, culminating in an event where they dressed up to teach the congregation about what they learned.

“Part of our approach in our Sunday morning children’s ministry is encouraging children to be still, to look, wonder, and ask questions,” Hoekzema reflected. “We use artwork regularly for children to help reflect and keep their epiphany eyes and spirit awakened all year.”

Mission of Faith

By Victoria Veenstra, Resonate Global Mission

The spark of joy that Diego and Camila Hiriart are witnessing is one of community—in Italy, where they are planting their fourth church.

As Resonate Global Mission church planters, the Hiriarts have long served Latino immigrant communities through church planting in multiple countries. Wherever they go, their calling is consistent: to walk alongside people, helping them find not only spiritual growth but also a church family where they belong.

Several years ago while in Italy reconnecting with Camila’s Italian roots, they encountered an immigrant community of Argentinians and Italians born abroad, who were hungry for both faith and fellowship.

What began with shared devotions soon deepened. A family they met in Italy felt called to formally join the Mission of Faith International CRC in Spring, Texas, where Diego and Camila serve. (Mission of Faith was started as a Resonate church plant in 2012 and organized as an established church in 2018.) That family now participates actively in the life of the Texas congregation while remaining deeply rooted in the growing community in Italy. Over time, this relationship has grown into an intentional, two-way connection between the church in Texas and the emerging church in Italy.

“We didn’t want people to only watch church on a screen,” Diego explained. “Our desire was for people—especially immigrants far from home—to have a real church family in Italy. A place where they can gather regularly, be known, and grow together in faith.”

During a six-month stay in 2023, the Hiriarts began formalizing an evangelical church community in Italy. Serving immigrants has remained central to that calling. “Many of



Diego and Camila Hiriart meet with the growing church in Italy.

the people we met had strong faith,” Camila noted, “but they felt alone. We wanted to walk with them day by day.”

Today a small but committed group of about 20 people gathers regularly for worship, prayer, and Bible study. Sometimes they meet online, but increasingly in person. A recent retreat in Pietragalla marked a milestone: their first in-person communion. “It was a powerful moment,” Diego said. “We realized this was no longer just a group meeting; it was a church.”

Act Five Trip to Manitoulin Island

By Kristen Parker, Canadian Justice Ministries

In November 2025, Act Five students took a trip to Manitoulin Island in northern Ontario, where they learned about land, story, and relationship. Act Five is an eight-month learning and mentoring journey for young people who have finished high school. They live in community, build relationships, and grow in faith as they explore their callings and future.

Cindy Stover, justice mobilizer with the CRC in Canada, and other Canadian Indigenous Ministry staff support Act Five with learning experiences and opportunities to debrief. In reflecting on the recent trip to Manitoulin Island, Stover shared that joy comes from seeing students fully come alive as they engage in embodied learning.

Taken midway through the trip, the photo (next page) shows students gathered where Lake Kagawong meets Lake Huron, as they hiked down from Bridal Veil Falls. There they met with an Indigenous Christian leader who shared a story about integrating his Christian faith with his Indigenous identity.

“This isn’t just sitting in a classroom listening to a lecture,” Stover said. “The students are out walking on the land together.” She pointed out how students listened to the pastor as he shared about his life and created space for deeper understanding of Indigenous ways of being in relationship with the land and with Creator God.

The visit to Manitoulin Island is part of Act Five’s course titled Place, Home, and Land. The course invites students to reflect on what it means to belong somewhere, to understand home as a place of safety and hospitality, while also recognizing their responsibility toward the land and how they are shaped by it. During their week on the island, students spent time immersed in Indigenous community life, learning directly from local leaders and exploring what it means to care for creation while also living out their Christian faith.

Stover takes on the role of a “conversation partner,” helping students process what they are learning about Indigenous peoples and thinking about reconciled relationships. While



Coach Aaron Sagraves leads a huddle of Calvin University's men's volleyball team.

she does not position herself as an expert, she helps bridge understanding, creating space for questions and guiding students as they encounter new perspectives.

More Than a Scoreboard

By John Zimmerman, Calvin University

Long after the final whistle blows and uniforms are packed away, the moments that continue to endure in sport often have little to do with the scoreboard. For Coach Aaron Sagraves, head coach of Calvin University’s men’s volleyball team, they begin with faith.

Belief in Jesus Christ serves as the guiding principle behind everything he does as a coach—shaping how he builds relationships, runs practices, approaches games, and talks with players.

Shaped by decades of athletics and coaching experience, Sagraves’ philosophy has remained consistent throughout his career. Success isn’t defined only by wins or championships, but by the kind of people players become during their time in the program.

“Coaching has always been about people,” he said. “Sport gives us an opportunity to walk alongside young people during an important time in their lives.”

Practices are competitive and expectations are high, but development extends beyond tactics and performance. Conversations regularly turn toward purpose, accountability, and growth on and off the court.

“We’re preparing students for life after college,” he said. “Academics are essential. Sport is important, but it can’t come at the expense of why they’re here.”



Act Five students gather where Lake Kagawong meets Lake Huron.

He wants to win, but there is more to it than wins and losses. Modern college athletics present unique challenges. Rosters often include transfers and international players arriving from different cultures. Bringing those individuals together into a unified team requires intentional leadership.

For Sagraves, faith plays a key role in creating that connection. “When players understand they’re valued as people first, it changes everything,” he said. “You build trust and relationships.”

Those relationships often matter most in moments away from competition, when players face challenges beyond athletics.

“When players come off the court, they need support,” Sagraves said. “They need someone who cares about them beyond performance.”

Years from now, when players look back on their experience, Sagraves hopes their memories go deeper than wins or statistics. “I want them to remember relationships. I want them to remember how they grew—not just as athletes, but as people,” said Sagraves. “At the end of the day, sport brings people together, but faith gives direction to everything we do.”

Alice Renews Her Joy

By Samson Sifa, World Renew

For 31-year-old Alice, joy once felt distant. Living in rural Kenya, she, her husband, and their three children had endured five difficult years of drought. Her crops were failing, and she had almost given up on raising chickens after losing many to disease during dry spells. But when Alice was invited to join a Farmer Field School through World Renew, a spark of excitement returned.

At FFS, Alice eagerly absorbed everything she could. She learned conservation agriculture techniques—such as using mulch to protect the soil’s moisture—and new skills in raising chickens and goats. She also joined a Village Savings and Loan Association, where members saved money together and offered each other low-interest loans. For Alice, this community support brought a sense of relief and hope.

During one training session on poultry disease management, Alice shared how she had lost five chickens to fowl pox and had only six left. The project team guided her through the right treatment, and her remaining birds survived. This moment revived her passion for keeping chickens.

With her confidence restored, Alice borrowed KSH 3,000 (USD \$23) from her VSLA and bought 10 improved chicks



Alice and her husband now have the tools and confidence to provide for their children's future.

(specially bred to be hardier and more productive). She also purchased 30 eggs for her hens to brood. Today, she proudly cares for 41 chickens and has five more on the way. She even built a new, well-ventilated poultry house and now feeds her flock a balanced diet. “I never thought chickens required such great attention,” she said with a laugh.

The joy didn’t stop there. Inspired by animal-rearing lessons at FFS, Alice and her husband bought their first goat and plan to add more soon. She also started a kitchen garden using a multistorey method that saves water and space. By mulching half an acre before planting season, she saved KSH 1,500 (about USD \$12) in tilling costs.

Looking at all she has accomplished, Alice’s smile says it all. “I will put in my best effort to use everything I learned,” she said, now grateful, hopeful, and full of renewed joy. **B**

Where Is Your Treasure?

ON A BASIC HUMAN LEVEL we know we demonstrate our values by what we spend our time and money on. If you value education, you might spend time educating yourself or educating others, donate to educational institutions, or pay for school for your children. Indeed this truth is called out by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount: “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matt. 6:21).

As director of the Christian Reformed Church Loan Fund, I have deep appreciation for investors who have been the heartbeat of the Loan Fund for decades. Through investment rate and denominational changes, many individuals, churches, classes, and other CRC organizations have remained invested in the Loan Fund.

When I started in this role, the Loan Fund was in a state of decline and needed a turn-around plan. In trying to understand the underpinnings of the Loan Fund’s previous success, I reached out to investors to understand their motives. While a few mentioned good investment rates, the deeper reason underlying their dedication was faith and commitment to the denomination.

Recently I spoke to a few active investors to try to understand this further. As it turned out, two were retired pastors and one a retired accountant representing the Heritage Center at Graafschap CRC in Holland, Mich. All grew up in the Christian Reformed Church and all bore witness to the challenges and changes in the denomination over the years.

One knew he wanted to be a pastor at age 6 and pastored for 40 years. In his retirement he fills interim roles for churches experiencing pastoral




The Heritage Center's replica of the log church Dutch immigrants erected in 1849.

vacancies. He hopes churches can continue to extend their reach and views the Loan Fund’s work as supporting that goal.

Another retired pastor, who served an East Coast church for over 40 years and was involved in a variety of other things within the denomination, recalled witnessing the difficulty church plants had finding space to meet. He found investing in the Loan Fund to be a tangible way to serve churches. He trusts the people he knows on the Loan Fund Board and expressed hope that the denomination would survive and thrive. He believes God is still doing amazing things across the denomination.

The Heritage Center at Graafschap CRC is a more recent investor in the

Loan Fund. The Heritage Center was started in 2006 in anticipation of the sesquicentennial celebration of the denomination in 2007. Individual contributions funded the project, and visitor contributions have allowed the Heritage Center to give back by investing in the Loan Fund. More information about the Heritage Center can be found at graafschapcrc.org/about/heritage-center.

The CRC Loan Fund would not be able to fulfill its role to churches without faithful support. A heart for Christ is fundamental, as is trust and knowing those involved. 

—Layla Kuhl,
CRC Loan Fund

A Conversation with Greg Elzinga: Faithfully Forming Leaders for a Changing World

The CRC has a long history of working together and pooling resources in order to further God's kingdom work around the world. This year features a special column in each issue of *The Banner* that includes an interview with leaders of these shared ministries: Thrive, Resonate Global Mission, ReFrame Ministries, World Renew, Calvin University, and Calvin Theological Seminary. This issue focuses on Greg Elzinga, president of Calvin University.

Q: As Calvin University celebrates 150 years, what does this milestone represent for the university?

Above all, it represents God's faithfulness. For 150 years, Calvin University and Calvin Theological Seminary have shared a ministry rooted in the belief that Christ is Lord over every part of life. Generations of students have been shaped not only academically, but spiritually—prepared to serve God's kingdom in churches, communities, and professions around the world. This anniversary is a celebration and a reminder that we are stewards of a mission much bigger than ourselves.

Q: Many Christian colleges are navigating uncertainty in higher education. How is Calvin approaching this moment?

We recognize the challenges facing higher education today—changing demographics, financial pressures, and rapid technological change. But moments like this call us back to our foundation. Our confidence isn't in trends; it's in Christ. Calvin is responding by renewing our mission while thoughtfully innovating, ensuring students are prepared to live out their faith with wisdom, courage, and humility in a rapidly changing culture.



Q: How does faith shape the educational experience at Calvin?

Faith is woven into everything we do. Professors serve as mentors who help students discern calling and purpose, not just career paths. A Christian liberal arts education teaches students to think deeply about God's world—to pursue truth, engage differences with grace, and seek justice and reconciliation. The outcomes are encouraging. Our graduates succeed in highly competitive fields but, just as importantly, they leave prepared to serve others and lead with integrity grounded in their faith.

Q: How is Calvin preparing students for the future while remaining rooted in its Christian mission?

Emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence raise important ethical questions, and Christian higher education has an important role to play in that conversation. We are integrating AI and digital literacy across disciplines while grounding students in Christian ethics and responsibility. Through internships, global learning, and community engagement, students learn to use their gifts in service to others. Our hope is simple: to graduate men and women who think deeply, act justly, and live wholeheartedly as Christ's agents of renewal in God's world. 

Defending the Body

DO YOU KNOW WHY you get a fever when you are sick with a cold or flu? You get a fever because your body is working extra hard to fight off the invaders that are making you sick.

When God designed your body, he designed it to be able to fight off sicknesses, but how does this design work? God gave you an immune system that is trying to protect you. It tries to protect you in many ways.

Imagine your body is a castle. This castle is amazing, but sometimes sneaky invaders called germs try to get in. These germs can make you feel sick, like when you get a cold or the flu. But you have several lines of defense.

First, the germs have to get past the guards. You have several guards including your nose hairs, mucus in your throat, and your skin. These are all designed to keep germs out.

If the germs get past your skin, the next line of defense is the fever. Your body turns up the heat to make it uncomfortable for the germs.

In your blood stream float your white blood cells that form the army to defend your body. There are several kinds of white blood cells. There are granulocytes, lymphocytes and monocytes.

One kind of white blood cell is like a scout; it recognizes the germs and sounds the alarm. Other white blood cells are defenders; these attack the germs to destroy them. Still another kind of white blood cell is like a strategist. It produces antibodies that mark the germs and remember them for next time, so that if it sees that germ again, it remembers it is bad and tries to attack it quickly. Finally, the last kind of white blood cell cleans up the mess after the invasion.

You can even give these guards a “head start” with a vaccine, which acts like a secret training camp where your cells study a practice version of a germ to learn exactly how to defeat the real thing.

So the next time you feel sick, remember that your brave internal army is hard at work keeping your castle safe!

God has designed your body to defend itself. It is amazing to think you don't have to tell your body to defend itself—it simply does! Even while you are fast asleep or playing with your friends, your internal guards are constantly on patrol, watching over your health without you ever having to say a word. 📖



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

Mercy

My neighbor
stood before me,
and I was faced
with a choice.



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

IT WAS MAY IN ARIZONA, and the only slightly appealing place to eat in the tiny highway town was a fast-food restaurant. I was on a cross-country road trip taking my daughter back to her college town. Sighing at the limitations of our choices, we stopped to grab some lunch. After placing our order, I turned and found myself face-to-face with a small woman carrying a listless child.

“Excuse me, sir. Can you buy me some food? I have children. Please, sir, have mercy.”

Have mercy.

Mercy? My gut reaction was swift, her use of the word immediately making me picture a cinematic, heartfelt plea for leniency. Perhaps that was an unconscious expression of my own privilege, my own belonging to a historically oppressive group of society. Still, I did not feel like the oppressor in a transaction between two strangers in a fast-food restaurant. Besides, she really looked hungry. So I agreed to her request and asked what she wanted. She mentioned a combo meal, the child on her hip watching me timidly. Sheepishly, I looked at the price before consenting.

She asked if we could order at the counter, instead of using the self-ordering screen in front of us. Again, I agreed. We went up to the counter and she ordered the combo meal. As I reached for my wallet to pay for the meal, she very quickly rattled off several more meals and a number of add-ons. I watched, dismayed, as the numbers slipped upward to a shocking total (even for McDonald’s). She then turned to me and said, “Thank you, sir.” Her simple words stopped my protest, her face lined with definitive gratitude and sadness.

I felt trapped. My sinful heart reacted with an unspoken feeling that I had

been duped by a person who had done this before. What was I to do?

Suddenly, the word “mercy” became much more real. A stranger specifically asked me for help, something I had been taught to expect, and even look for, in countless sermons, Sunday school lessons, and Scripture readings. My neighbor stood before me, and I was faced with a choice. Was I willing to love them as I love myself? I knew the answer had to be yes.

Despite this, I felt a tinge of resentment, followed by guilt. Reluctantly, I pulled out my card and paid. My daughter and I waited awkwardly until our food was ready, then walked out without saying goodbye to the woman.

By silent mutual agreement, we got in our car and waited, waiting for the woman to emerge. We were curious, but we were probably also ready to play judge and jury for the women’s situation. We wanted to see how badly we’d been fooled. After a few minutes, she came out to two vehicles that were parked next to each other.

Three adult men exited the vehicles, along with several more children. The vehicles were brimming with suitcases, boxes, and clothes, almost as if they were in a caravan. Many of the windows seemed covered with fabric, and the cars were dirty, as if they had been collecting road dust for miles. Questions peppered my thoughts. What was the story of this group? Were they traveling somewhere? Were they family? Was this all they had?

I replayed the sequence of events in my mind. The men had not come into the restaurant. Instead, the woman had entered, carrying a child. She may very well have told the truth, since she volunteered her status as a mother of children. Was it wrong that she did not tell me about the other members of her family that I would also be



feeding? Was she manipulating her situation to make me pity her? Would I have agreed to her request if she had presented all aspects of her plan up front? Was I the one at fault for not asking more questions up front?

None of these questions would have answers unless I decided to exit my vehicle and ask—which I didn't. As we drove away, my daughter and I talked about context. If I had all my family with me, plus a set of parents or a couple of friends, would I have happily paid the bill for the meal without thinking about it? Quite possibly. And if I was willing to display my love for my family through generosity, surely I am similarly called to love the stranger.

The woman exemplified that asking for help requires courage and vulnerability, no matter the circumstances. While I did not plan on covering the bill for strangers in every restaurant we visited, I could afford what the woman asked me to purchase that day. God had given me resources, and I was

reminded that I should never refer to money in the bank as "mine."

Deuteronomy 15 reminds us to give generously, and "not let your heart be grieved when you do so." If I am honest, that day gave me a few moments of grief. I am grateful that God forgives our lack of faith, like when we forget that he might put people in our path so that we have an opportunity to show mercy.

May we continually ask God to open our hearts to whatever we encounter each day. There may be times where we utilize prayerful discernment and give something besides money, food, or other resources. Our default should always be a generous spirit, filled with joy and gratitude for what we have been given. Have mercy. **B**

—Meg Pheifer
contributed to this article.



Tussles over the balance between confessional boundaries and editorial freedom are not new.

160 Years of Editorial Freedom

WHEN SYNOD 2025 MET in June, one of its most-discussed decisions was a change in the editorial policy of *The Banner*. While many readers were shocked, even appalled, at the change, tussles over the balance between confessional boundaries and editorial freedom are not new. Last year's decision is just the latest in a 160-year-long discussion of the role of *The Banner* (formerly called *The Banner of Truth*).

In 1984, synod showed the continual difficulty in finding the right balance. Synod 1984 warned that *De Wachter*, the Dutch-language predecessor of *The Banner*, "may not ... weaken the ecclesiastical and religious unity of our people. Synod reminds the writers to be moderate in their expressions."

Already back in 1922, synod declared, "(Our periodicals) must delineate the boundaries properly, even though this in spite of all caution, can easily be the cause of friction." Then in 1934, synod noted that the articles that contain constructive criticism should not be refused merely because of their critical content, but editors should refuse articles that "imperil the purity of the church in doctrine or life."

Synod 1941 expressed the desire to allow the greatest possible freedom of expression to writers but stressed "the denominational character, scope, and purpose of our official church papers."

The mandate adopted in 1976 most closely resembles what exists today: that the purpose of *The Banner* is to inform our membership of what is happening in the denomination; provide meaningful devotional materials written to build and encourage our Christian families; and include editorials, studies, and articles to guide and challenge our members, all in the light of our Reformed faith.

Synod continued: "The goal of (the church's) weekly periodical is that the

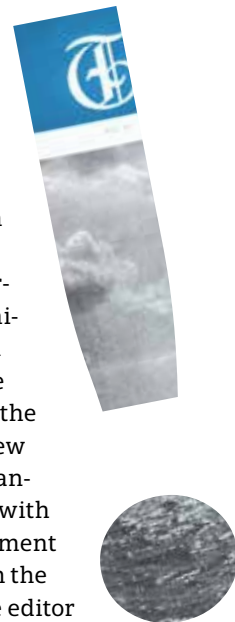
will and work of God, as defined by the Scriptures and by our confessions, shall be promoted in church and world. ... The editor shall exercise care in communicating our Reformed heritage and ... at the same time acquaint the membership with new insights into the meaning of Scripture and with the ongoing development of thought and life in the Christian world. The editor shall recognize and respect diversity within the CRC, while striving for such unity as will build up the church." To that end, "The editor shall be accorded a wide range of editorial freedom while being obliged to fulfill the purposes for which *The Banner* is published."

In 1984, some readers were irritated that news was reported without editorial comment. The denomination's Board of Publication (which supervised *The Banner*) responded that telling readers what a "real Christian Reformed person" must think would treat readers as children.

The Board of Publication noted that the editor should always defend the Reformed confessions but should not always defend Christian Reformed practices and traditions, nor does the editor need to defend every position taken by CRC synods.

Testing

The Banner's editorial freedom was tested in 1998 when the IRM Corporation defaulted on its payments to investors, among them members and ministry agencies of the CRC. The CRC's Board of Trustees prohibited *The Banner* from investigating the



Gayla Postma retired as news editor for *The Banner* in 2020.



situation, on the advice of legal counsel. *The Banner* staff believed that this decision “is in conflict with synodically approved guidelines covering *The Banner’s* accountability and freedom.” Delegates to Synod 1998 affirmed guidelines first proposed in 1993: that the editorial staff must be granted the freedom to encourage “a responsible discussion of the issues important to the life of the church, through editorial comment and articles that represent the various views held within the church,... and permit people of the church to voice their views and reactions.” At the same time the guidelines stated that *The Banner* was called to be faithful to Scripture and the confessions, ... and nothing deliberately inflammatory, insulting, or divisive should be published.”

The editorial freedom of *The Banner* was again tested when the magazine ran two controversial articles in 2013 (June 2013: “Tomorrow’s Theology,”



and July 2013: “Where Do We Draw the Line?”). Synod 2014 received several overtures objecting to the inclusion of the articles. That synod declared its lament that the articles were published, the editor apologized, and Synod 2014 called for a review of *The Banner’s* mandate.

The committee that reviewed the mandate told Synod 2015 that the 1998 mandate was “fundamentally sufficient” and the concerns raised in 2014 were brought about “by an error in judgment on the part of the editor.” Synod added wording to the mandate’s introduction, noting that stimulating critical thinking about issues must be done “in a way that encourages biblical thinking ... in line with our confessional heritage.”

Synod 2015 also took note that since the last review of the mandate, *The Banner* was now operating in an online

world and that potential editors need to consider how that affects the style, ethos, and content of the magazine.

Present Day

Fast forward 10 years, and *The Banner’s* mandate was again under discussion. Synod 2025 received complaints that *The Banner* was publishing articles that were out of line with the CRC’s confessional heritage. Synod recognized that in the online world, articles could be found out of context with other parts of the magazine, causing confusion about the CRC’s theological positions.

As a result, Synod 2025 mandated that the magazine present to readers issues pertinent to the church, but rather than allowing inclusion of “diverse positions within the church,” it would present “the position held by the church.” *The Banner* retains the freedom to “stimulate critical thinking” but has to locate that “in the larger convictions of the denomination.” It may inform about relevant problems, needs, and concerns, but must properly acknowledge and respect “the official positions of the CRCNA and within the confines of our confessional covenant commitments.”

Only time will tell how the changed mandate will play out on the web and print pages of *The Banner* in the coming years. But most certainly it won’t be the last time the CRC debates the editorial freedom of its magazine. **B**

Turning the Pages as Spring and Summer Bloom



South of Somewhere: A Novel

By *T.I. Lowe*

Reviewed by Ann Byle

Juniper (Junie) Wilder retreats to her beloved grandmother's beach-front home on Sullivan's Island, S.C., after time in jail and rehab. Grief at losing her husband and then her grandmother spiraled into a drunk driving charge and the hardest grief of all: losing custody of her toddler daughter Fern.

Readers will root for Junie as she faces her past, lives courageously in the present, and looks forward to a future with her daughter and a new, healthy love. They also will gain empathy for those struggling with addiction and the pain that brought them there.

South of Somewhere is much more than a good story. It's an excavation of what makes us human—the good and the bad—and the redemption that can save us. (Tyndale)



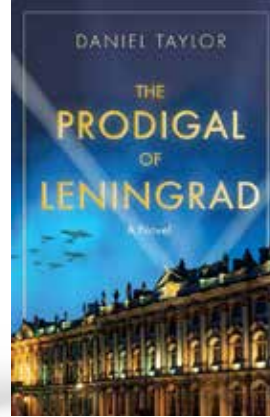
Time for Courage

By *Rob Currie*

Reviewed by Sonya VanderVeen Feddema

Set in 1944 against the Nazi occupation of the Netherlands, this adventure-packed, deeply stirring novel for readers ages 9-13 relates the story of the Ingelse family as they resist the Nazis to save Jewish children.

Author Rob Currie's stellar storytelling, rich insights into spiritual questions asked during war times, scriptural understanding of prayer, and portrayal of a devoted and loving Christian family make this book a must-read. It would be a great fit for family read-out-loud times, with parents and children sharing a few chapters each day and taking time to talk about the story and what they learned about God's grace and provision in difficult settings. (Tyndale Kids)



The Prodigal of Leningrad

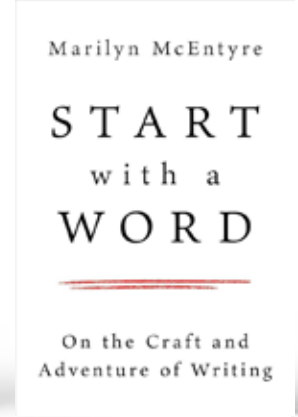
By *Daniel Taylor*

Reviewed by Sonya VanderVeen Feddema

Leningrad, 1941: Daniil Aslanov has always loved his volunteer job as a docent at the Hermitage Museum. It has become especially important to him since his wife died, a place to go to forget his grief and nurture his love for art and beauty.

Now, Daniil's role and that of the other docents is irrevocably changed at the onset of the siege when all the paintings are removed from their frames—while the frames are left hanging.

The Prodigal of Leningrad is a deeply moving story of struggle, deprivation, and inhumanity on the one hand, and the poignant portrayal of how God's love can never be defeated, how the Holy Spirit inspires acts of courage, and how believers who put their trust in God experience his miraculous provision. (Paraclete Press)



Start with a Word: On the Craft and Adventure of Writing

By *Marilyn McEntyre*

Reviewed by Ann Byle

If you're looking for a master-class on the craft of writing, look no further than Marilyn McEntyre's new book.

She addresses topics dear, and frustrating, to writers such as how to begin and end, choosing the best word, choosing a narrator, and including pertinent facts. Her advice applies to those writing nonfiction, fiction, and poetry. Each chapter is accompanied by "Try this" exercises to help you take the next step in your practice, so bring a notebook and pen to your reading time.

This is a clear, concise, and meaty book for all writers eager to deepen their knowledge and practice of writing. Examples ranging from the Apostle Paul, to Kate DiCamillo, to Kathleen Norris, to Dante serve to deepen the experience. (Eerdmans)



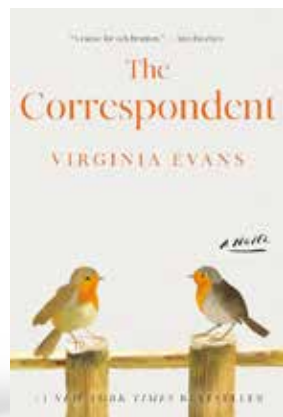
We Served Side by Side: The Cooperation of the Christian Reformed Japan Mission and the Reformed Church in Japan, 1951-2017

By Richard E. Sytsma

Reviewed by Lawrence K. Spalink

Because Richard Sytsma arrived in Japan as a missionary kid in the early 1950s, he knew the earliest generation of Christian Reformed missionaries. The CRCNA's thinking about and commitment to missions was still maturing and would go through many changes, and Sytsma's book tells part of that story.

Besides giving a thorough account of the work in Japan, of changing organizational structures (in North America), and how mission work might be more effectively carried out in the unique context of Japan, the author provides material for reflection that can help steer those who love Jesus' mission even now, decades later, and in many other locations around the world. (Van Raalte Press)



The Correspondent

By Virginia Evans

Reviewed by Sara Korber-DeWeerd

Virginia Evans' runaway bestseller *The Correspondent* unfolds the world of Sybil Van Antwerp, a 73-year-old retired lawyer, mother, grandmother, and divorcee. A woman who values order, Sybil cherishes her morning letter-writing routine, finding comfort in correspondence with friends, family, favorite authors, and even strangers. When letters begin arriving from someone linked to Sybil's past, she must face painful memories and deep regrets, gradually piecing together a personal history that has haunted her for decades.

In this stunning debut novel written entirely in letters, Evans offers readers a hopeful glimpse into the expanses of a human heart formed by a lifetime of small decisions of large consequence. Themes include finding comfort in literature, confronting past trauma, forgiveness, and finding love later in life. (Penguin Random House)



A Storm Unleashed

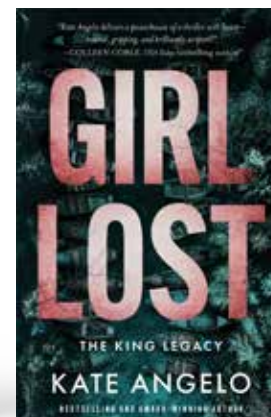
By Carol Matas

Reviewed by Sonya VanderVeen Feddema

Berlin, Germany, 1935: Mia's Jewish father runs a successful veterinarian clinic, but when he becomes secretive about his work, she learns that Father has been enlisted to train police dogs. Though the work seems innocent enough, Mia and Father soon realize Hitler's nefarious plan to train dogs for the war effort.

As the Nazi's noose tightens around Mia and Father, Mia ultimately convinces Father and another Jewish family that they must escape for their lives. They set out on their treacherous journey, assisted by kind people and aided by their dog Max's skills as a protector, forewarner, and entertainer.

Though recommended for children ages 9 to 12, this informative, heartrending novel, which depicts scenes of violence and cruelty, is better suited for ages 11 and older. (Scholastic Canada)



Girl Lost

By Kate Angelo

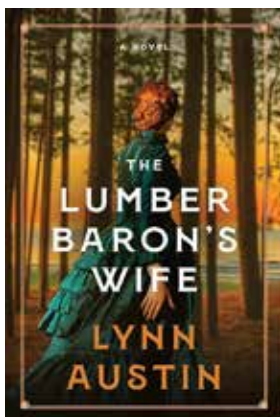
Reviewed by Sonya VanderVeen Feddema

In this first installment of the King Legacy series, readers are catapulted into the lives of former CIA counterintelligence officer Luna Rosati and Special Agent Corbin King.

In their teens, Luna and Corbin had fallen in love and had a baby. Now, 18 years later, Luna returns to her hometown to find answers about the baby girl she gave up for adoption from the only person who can help her—Stryker, her mentor and friend.

But when Stryker is kidnapped, Corbin, from whom Luna has been estranged, shows up to investigate, and they are compelled to work together to unravel the mystery.

Brilliantly plotted and emotionally intense, *Girl Lost* is a romantic thriller with a Christian message—God doesn't give up on people, no matter what. (Revell)



The Lumber Baron's Wife

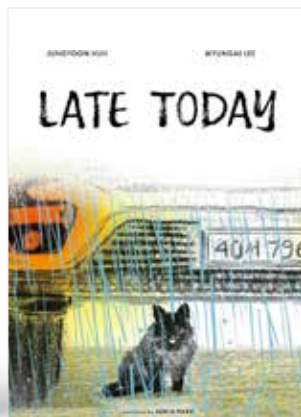
By Lynn Austin

Reviewed by Ann Byle

Hannah and John Wagner move from New York City to West Michigan, a fresh start after a devastating loss. Lumber baron Henry Abernathy offers to build them a house if John will become a doctor in town. Abernathy's new mansion and new wife Kate make major waves in the city, while Hannah grieves her loss and John struggles to help his wife and the townspeople who need his doctoring.

In the present day, David and Ashley Gilbert also move to the lakeshore town, purchasing the doctor's house. Ashley, a museum expert, takes an interest in helping restore the Abernathy mansion and becomes enmeshed in the mystery of what happened to Kate Abernathy, who disappeared and was never found.

Based on the true story of a missing lumber baron's wife, this is an enthralling dual-time story by best-selling novelist Austin. (Tyndale Fiction)



Late Today

By Jungyoon Huh. Illustrated by Myungae Lee

Reviewed by Sonya VanderVeen Feddema

It's a dark, rainy morning in Seoul, Korea, and traffic on a massive bridge is congested. A mom and her son are stuck on the bridge, hoping to get to work and school on time.

Soon, the boy and his mom and other travellers see a tiny kitten making its perilous way across the bridge. Suddenly the mom makes a choice that no one else on the bridge has dared to make.

Illustrator Myungae Lee's dark-and-light pictures portray the contrast between the rainy weather followed by sunshine, cowardly neglect and sacrificial kindness.

Christian parents and adults can use this book as a springboard to talk with children about Jesus' desire that his children offer help and kindness in situations of need, even if it costs them something. (Eerdmans Books for Young Readers)



Keeper of Lost Children

By Sadeqa Johnson

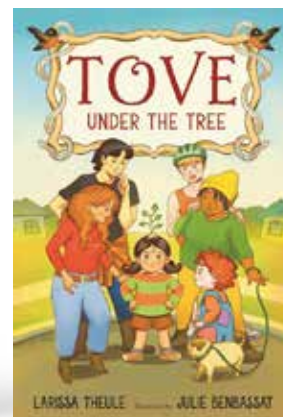
Reviewed by Lorilee Craker

Ethel Gathers (based on a real person) is an American officer's wife living in occupied Germany in the 1950s when she stumbles upon an orphanage filled with mixed-race children.

Ozzie Phillips is a Black GI volunteering for the recently desegregated army in 1948. His relationship with a German woman has long-lasting ramifications.

Sophia Clark is whip-smart and miserable at home, so she jumps at the chance to attend a fancy all-white boarding school in 1965 Maryland.

As Johnson interweaves her characters' stories together and brings a little-known epoch of history to life, she masterfully explores themes of racism, identity, adoption, and belonging. A redemptive and engrossing tour de force, this book will make my 2026 Top 10. Includes brief instances of profanity and sensuality. (Simon & Schuster)



Tove Under the Tree

By Larissa Theule. Illustrated by Julie Benbassat

Reviewed by Sonya VanderVeen Feddema

Author Larissa Theule's chapter book for children ages 6-9 was inspired by a painting called *Under the Tree* by Yoshitomo Nara.

When Tove returns from school one day, she is horrified to see that the giant ficus in front of her house has just been chopped down.

Tove brings a little branch inside, studies it, and notices that the branch doesn't have roots. Questions tumble through her mind: "How could it grow if it didn't have roots? ... Could Tove get the little branch to grow roots?"

Tove's ensuing plan—hilarious, touching, and creative—sets her and her community on a magical journey with joyful, real-life consequences. Illustrator Julie Benbassat's exquisite artwork combined with Theule's masterful storytelling make *Tove Under the Tree* a delightful visual and reading experience. (Candlewick)

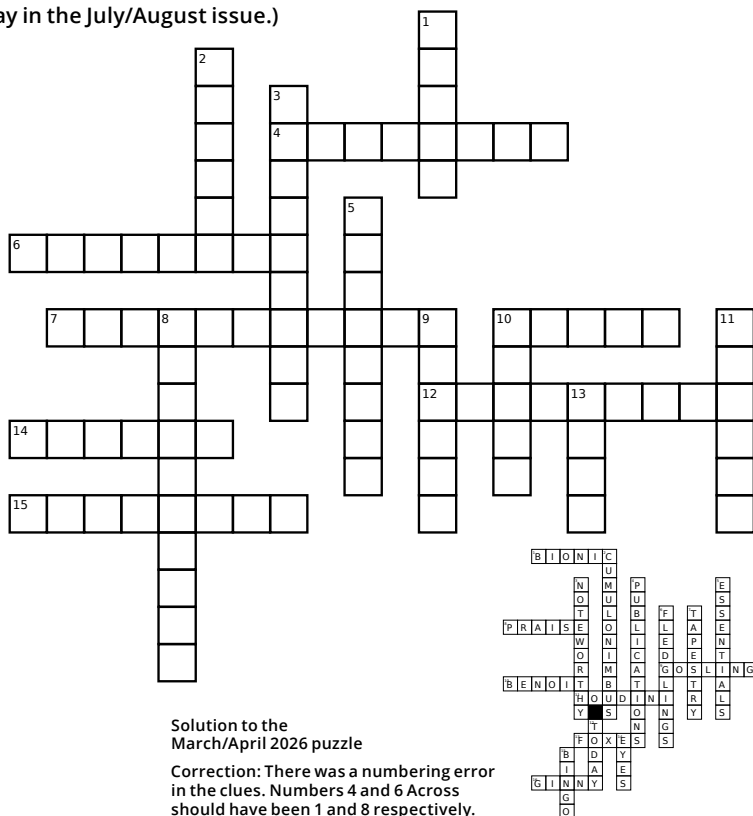
Find the answers to this crossword puzzle throughout this issue of *The Banner*! See the solutions in the next print issue. (Please note we do not publish Word Play in the July/August issue.)

Down

- 1. They make you sick.
- 2. *Banner* editor from 1929 to 1956
- 3. The place mercy was tested.
- 5. Studying this can help open up God's Word to you.
- 8. _____ and Interfaith Relations Committee
- 9. _____ CRC created a mural in the hallway.
- 10. Heroine in *South of Somewhere*
- 11. A prize given to George Harinck this year.
- 13. _____ sharpens _____.

Across

- 4. Classis exploring merging with Yellowstone.
- 6. *Keeper of Lost* _____
- 7. This stuff causes a stress response in our bodies.
- 10. The King _____ is the CRC's original accepted Bible translation.
- 12. Committee to foster development of the CRC's pastoral leadership.
- 14. Missionary kid who wrote about Japanese missions.
- 15. In the CRC, we are a _____ people.



Solution to the March/April 2026 puzzle
 Correction: There was a numbering error in the clues. Numbers 4 and 6 Across should have been 1 and 8 respectively.

"I am incredibly thankful for the opportunity to place ads in the *The Banner*. This publication has been a cherished read for my family for generations, and now that our ministry has gained from it, it holds even greater significance for us.

The number of Bibles collected for believers in Africa has reached such a magnitude that we've lost count!

Thank you for partnering with us to ensure faithful followers of Jesus have access to his Word!"

—Jess Sweitzer, founder and director, Project Bible Runners

BANNER

TheBanner.org/Ads **Expand your reach.**

DEADLINES: Ads for the July/August 2026 issue are due June 13; September/October: August 14, 2026.

Subject to availability. Details online at thebanner.org/classifieds, or for display ads see thebanner.org/ads. Advertising in *The Banner* does not imply editorial endorsement.

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

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

Church Positions Available

BARRHEAD CRC IN AB, a small town church is seeking a pastor to shepherd and lead our congregation. Our church family is active with a heart for children's ministry and community outreach. We value a pastor who knows and cares for his people well, reflecting the heart of a shepherd. We are seeking a male pastor within CRC called to faithful ministry and leadership. If you sense this calling we would welcome the opportunity to connect with you.

Contact us at plfag@telusplanet.net

CALVARY CRC OF THE TWIN CITIES (MN) is seeking a full-time Pastor of Discipleship. We value a gifted communicator who teaches with clarity and invests deeply in the spiritual formation of our congregation, especially our youth. Those eager to join a dynamic team ministry in a major metropolitan area can inquire at search.calvary@gmail.com. More information can also be found at www.calvarytwincities.org.

FAITH PRESBYTERIAN CRC GUAM is seeking a pastor for our multi-ethnic congregation. Desire a candidate with strong Bible-teaching skills and a heart for evangelism. Web:www.faithchurchguam.org. Interested applicants may email kvoldsteadt@gmail.com or fprrc-guam@gmail.com or call 1- 671-734-7778.

FAMILY MINISTRY PASTOR Hope Christian Reformed Church, Thunder Bay, ON \$45,000 to \$60,000 per year. Resumes can be submitted to clerk@hopecrc.com by May 15th, 2026.

FT PASTOR POSITION Delaware Reformed Church, Lennox, SD is seeking a full-time pastor. Please see our website for a full job description and to apply at <https://www.delawarereformed.com/employment.html>

FULL-TIME PASTOR Trinity CRC in Abbotsford, BC is seeking a full time pastor who, alongside our council, will help provide leadership to our congregation. The successful candidate will have a strong spiritual vitality expressed through inspiring biblical preaching and empathetic pastoral care. A strong commitment to Reformed theology and to our denomination is essential. Inquiries and applications can be sent to office@trinitycrc.ca

LEAD PASTOR Emmanuel CRC in Calgary, Alberta is seeking a lead pastor. This church of about 230 people is well established in this growing community. After having gone through the difficult departure of half the congregation almost a year ago, the church has prayed, grown closer together, and set out on a new path of celebrating God, community, and each other. We are seeking a pastor who can lead alongside us and guide us with God's precious Word. For more information about Emmanuel church please see our website at emmanuelcrc.org, or send us an email at pastorsearch@emmanuelcrc.org, or check out our church profile information at the CRCNA Network under Church Jobs at <https://network.crcna.org/jobs>.

PASTOR Baldwin Street CRC, located in Jenison, MI, is seeking a Christ-led, Scripture centered Senior Pastor. This pastor will provide spiritual oversight and will partner with elders, deacons, and church ministry leaders to guide our congregation. This role also includes inspiring Biblical preaching, empathetic pastoral care, and a passion to shepherd believers in their walk with Jesus. It should be our pastor's goal to perform these duties with godliness, humility, and integrity, all to the glory of our God. Please contact Ray Van-Dam at baldwinsearch9@gmail.com or call 616-457-9440.

PASTOR OF CONGREGATIONAL LIFE First Christian Reformed Church (Sioux Falls, SD) seeks a Pastor of Congregational Life to lead and oversee pastoral care, fostering spiritual growth and discipleship across the congregation.

View the Church Profile, job description, and application details at: <https://firstchristianreformed.org/>

Questions: Search@FirstChristianReformed.org

PASTOR POSITION: Blyth CRC (Ontario) is seeking a full-time pastor to lead our congregation into a new season of ministry. As we approach our 65th anniversary in 2027 and celebrate a recently expanded facility, we value Biblical preaching, discipleship, pastoral care, and Reformed theology. Contact Val Shortreed at valeriesthortreed@gmail.com

UNIQUE OPPORTUNITY FOR A FT SR. PASTOR at Golden Gate CRC (ggcrc.org) in San Francisco to provide leadership, direction and vision for our 3 diverse congregations and 4 associate pastors. Qual: M.Div. accredited theological seminary. Min 5 yrs. church pastor exp. Proficient in English; fluent in Mandarin or Cantonese. Authorized to work in the US. Inquire at srpastorsearch@gggcrc.org.

WORSHIP & CHILDREN'S MINISTRY COORDINATOR Zion CRC is hiring a talented musician/singer with experience in ministry for our growing church in Oshawa. Seminarians and students welcomed. Visit www.zioncrc.ca/careers.

Retirement



BERGSMA, PASTOR RANDALL R. The Council at Sunrise Christian Reformed Church of Lafayette, Indiana announces the June retirement of Pastor Randall R. Bergsma. Pastor Randy faithfully led Sunrise church through challenging situations, joyful events, and weekly services for the past twelve years. In addition, he pastored at Faith CRC in Highland, IN and Immanuel CRC in Sheldon, IA. Sandi, his wife, supported him in various ways. Pastor Randy's final service will take place on Sunday, June 28



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Wedding Anniversary

75 YEARS

LUBBEN, VERNON AND WILVINA of 3853 Pemberton Dr SE Grand Rapids, MI 49508 will be celebrating their 75th wedding anniversary on June 12, 2026. They are blessed with four children. Praise God from whom all blessings flow.

70 YEARS

WITH THANKFUL HEARTS Lawrence & Nancy DeRuiter (Knight) plan to celebrate their 70th wedding anniversary on June 29 with their five sons, Richard (Marcia), Ron (Renate), Randy (Dorothy), Bob (Lisa), Darryl (Shelly), 13 grandchildren, their spouses and 24 great grandchildren. Praise God from whom all blessings flow. Mailing address: 1527 Elizabeth Ave. Escalon, CA 95320

50 YEARS

STEVE & PAULA (DOZEMAN) HOEKZEMA We are grateful to God for his grace and guidance over 50 years. We will be celebrating with a Netherlands waterways tour and a family dinner in June.

"For the Lord is good and his love endures forever; his faithfulness continues to all generations."

Birthdays

95 YEARS



BOSVELD, MARTIN P.J. IS 95! Born on Easter Sunday, 1931, Martin celebrates another Easter birthday on Sunday, April 5, 2026. Husband to Lynn for 59 years and father to Pauline, Ed (Joanne), Ray (Lisa), and Sandra. Opa to 11 grandchildren and great-Opa to 2 great-grandchildren. God is good! Correspondence address: mpjb95@gmail.com.

90 YEARS



DEBOER, BOB will be celebrating his 90th birthday with his family and friends on May 9. Bob has been married to Carole (Decker), his high school sweetheart for 69 years. They were blessed with 3 daughters: Lori (Wayne) VanDerKolk, Terry (David)

VanDerKolk and Kimmy (Calvin) Rietveld and 1 son Bobby (Brandi) DeBoer. They are also blessed with 11 grandchildren and 18 great grandchildren. He enjoys being outside working around the house, helping Carole in their church's Food Pantry and doing anything for his family. He has always led by example with his strong faith and generous heart. We all wish him a Happy Birthday! Love you Dad

Obituaries

COOPER, BERDELLA In loving memory, at the age 92, of Clifton, NJ was welcomed into the loving arms of Jesus on February 21, 2026. Born in Graafschap, Michigan to Bert and Mary Brink, she was shaped by the farm but loved the Garden State. Berdella married Edward Cooper in 1956. A Christian School teacher (in California and NJ) and an LPN (Passaic General), she was loving, kind, hard-working, creative, hospitable, and deeply contented. Her sincere faith lives in her surviving children: Samuel (Leanne) Cooper, Douglas (Joanne) Cooper, Gregory (Amy) Cooper, Pamela Van Eck, and Lisa (Jeffrey) Donat. She leaves 23 grandchildren, 27 great-grandchildren, siblings, and many nieces and nephews. Berdella is pre-deceased by her husband of 68 years and their infant son, Jonathan.

DE VRIES, SARA "SALLY" JANE (NORTHOUSE) May 17, 1940 - March 9, 2026. Sally de Vries's enthusiasm and joyfulness was infectious. Her deep sense of integrity stemmed from her profound faith as charter member of Calvin Church. Sally was a helper, whether working with refugees and cultural heritage preservation in Jordan, or as a musician, teacher, or parent. Even as she sought peace, may she rest in peace.



ELLENS, JANICE (HOEKSTRA), age 85, entered her heavenly home on March 29, 2026. A devoted educator and faithful servant of Christ, she lived with joy, curiosity, and deep care for others. She graduated from Calvin College and earned a master's from Western Michigan University. After beginning at Kalamazoo Public Library, she taught for 30 years at Kalamazoo Christian Schools and continued mentoring beyond retirement. Jan's love of missions and learning took her to Nigeria, China, Oxford University, and the Middle East. She remained active in church and volunteer work throughout her life. She is survived by her husband of 62 years, Serenus "Sy" Ellens; her children, Marc (Julie) Ellens and Sue (James) Blood; her stepson, Tim (Jeanne) Ellens; her brother, John Hoekstra; and many grandchildren and great-grandchildren. She was preceded in death by her parents and her brother, Gerald Hoekstra. She will be remembered for her joyful spirit, deep faith, and the way she made others feel seen and valued.

LEUGS, LOUISE, age 96, went home to be with her Lord on February 19, 2026. Louise was preceded in death by her beloved husband, Rev. John Leugs; her son-in-law, Lawrence Bobbroff; and her six brothers and sisters. She is lovingly remembered by her daughter, Patricia Louise; her son, David John (Danelle); her grandchildren, Jessica Marie Wilson (Don), Patrick Jan Leugs, and Duncan Robert Leugs (Erin); and her six great-grandchildren. She is also survived by many nieces and nephews who held a special place in her heart.

IRELAND



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NIEHOF, PHILIP NIEHOF, Philip, age 96, of Hudsonville, Michigan, passed away peacefully in his sleep, on Monday, March 16, 2026. Phil was preceded in death by his parents, his brother John, his sister Henrietta and his wife Thelma. He is survived by his sister Florence Tanis of Sacramento, California, his daughter Diane (Sam D'Amico) Niehof of Phoenix, Arizona, son Thomas (Deborah) Niehof of Ames, Iowa, son Jeffrey (Janis) Niehof of Hudsonville, son Douglas Niehof of Albuquerque, New Mexico, seven grandchildren, several great grandchildren and two great great grandchildren.



ROELS, EDWIN DALE of Grand Rapids, MI passed into glory on February 20, 2026 at the age of 92. He is survived by his loving wife Bertie (Klamer); children Dawn (John) Kaptein, Rick, Karen (Bruce) Andres, Dale (Cheryl) Roels and Cheryl Guikema; 12 grandchildren and 16 great-grandchildren. The family is grateful to God for His faithfulness through the generations. May we never forget - it is All by Grace!

VANDERNAALD, THERESA "Terry" has gone to be with her Savior, and to rejoin her loving husbands, Leonard DeGroot (83), and Ben VanderNaald (23). Terry lived her life with a smile on her face and a song on her heart. She is survived by her 4 children and their families, Leonard (Sherry), Dennis (Diana), Cynthia (William) Fleming, and Yvonne (John) Evenhouse. She will be missed.

Employment

METROPOLITAN CHOIR IN GRAND RAPIDS MI is looking for an experienced director. Paid position. Contact micky.jelsema@gmail.com for further information

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Our Only Comfort: Heidelberg Catechism, Part 1

This combination of theologians and pastors birthed a confession that is remarkable for its theological depth and its pastoral orientation.

WE MOVE to what is likely the most well-known of the three forms of unity—the Heidelberg Catechism. If you have been around the Christian Reformed Church for many years you likely studied it, perhaps memorized parts of it, and might have heard sermons on some of the topics within it. This article will introduce you to the history and theme of the HC. You will find the HC at crcna.org under “Our Faith” if you want to refer to it. I should note that I am deeply indebted to Lyle D. Bierma, Ph.D., for much of the content of this article. I highly recommend his writings on the topic, especially his two books: *An Introduction to the Heidelberg Catechism* (2005) and *The Theology of the Heidelberg Catechism: A Reformation Synthesis* (2013).

The historical backdrop of the HC is the reformation in south-western Germany, specifically in the Palatinate, an important state within the Holy Roman Empire. Under the leadership of Elector Frederick III (ruled 1559-76) the HC was commissioned in part to bring together the various Protestant parties, specifically the Lutheran and Reformed. Although Frederick himself was more sympathetic to Reformed-leaning doctrines, the Lutheran territories were required to subscribe to the Augsburg Confession. Frederick, therefore, wanted this new catechism to fit well with the Augsburg.

Early in his rule, Frederick III found deficits in the spirituality of the young people of the Palatinate. The youth, he wrote in the preface, “are disposed to be careless in respect to Christian doctrine, both in the schools and in the churches of our principality—some indeed being entirely without Christian instruction.” Thus, the catechism would serve to instruct the children of the Palatinate in sound doctrine and offer pastors and teachers a guide for that instruction. The

preface also indicates that Frederick intended the HC to be a guide for preaching and a form for confessional unity within the Palatinate.

Frederick gathered a group to write the HC, including the theological faculty of Heidelberg University and all the leaders and chief ministers of the churches. The principal author, however, was most likely Zacharias Ursinus. This combination of theologians and pastors birthed a confession that is remarkable for its theological depth and its pastoral orientation.

The theme of the HC can be seen in the first question and answer: “What is your only comfort in life and in death?” While the Westminster Shorter Catechism opens with “What is the chief end of man?”—a question that primarily engages the head—the HC opens with a question and answer that beautifully brings together heart and head. The theme of comfort gives the HC a warm tone that not only explains the meaning of a doctrine, but also its meaning for us, why it matters to the life and experience of the believer and the Christian community. The HC, in other words, is not a dry, lifeless historical document. Rather, it is a theological document with a clear biblical foundation that explains biblical truths and applies them to the believer.

Look again at the first question and answer: “What is your only comfort ...?” This question is addressed to you. And the answer: “That I am not my own but belong to my faithful savior Jesus Christ ...” The HC offers more than knowledge; it offers an opportunity to grow in one’s love for God and come to understand how much God loves us.

In an age where anxiety is at record levels and uncertainty about life seems to creep into the news every day, what better could we offer our children—and ourselves—than the comfort that only God can give that is taught in the HC? **B**



Mary L. Vandenberg, Ph.D., is professor of systematic theology, emerita, at Calvin Theological Seminary, with a specialization in theological anthropology. Mary lives in Byron Center, Mich., and is a member of LaGrave Christian Reformed Church.

Two Blocks and a Cheeseburger

When I couldn't stand myself any longer, I'd decide to temporarily leave my desk and my apartment.



Amie Spriensma is an online chaplain for ReFrame Ministries and a regional disability advocate for the CRC. She lives, works, and worships in Allendale, Mich., where she is a member of Rusk Christian Reformed Church.

BACK WHEN I WAS A STUDENT at Dallas Theological Seminary, I would sometimes get stressed to the point of almost erupting. When I couldn't stand myself any longer, I'd decide to temporarily leave my desk and my apartment. I'd take a deep breath, lace up my shoes, step into the hallway, and leave my building behind. There was something satisfying about the clank of the security gate as it fell shut behind me. I couldn't go very far on my crutches, but I could go far enough.

During my sidewalk solace, I'd often circle the same block twice. I'd plod down Swiss Avenue toward one corner and then the next, letting my thoughts wander as I muttered to God about how tired I felt or what was going on in my heart. Some days I was silent as my feet shuffled: left, right, left, right. Though my pace was slow, I was moving forward, and gradually I'd relax.

The second time around the block was often easier than the first. Sometimes, God would speak just enough to let me know he was there: he knew, he cared, and he saw my leaking tears. I'd notice neighborhood children at play, hear voices in the nearby parking lot, and pause briefly to acknowledge life beyond myself. It wasn't green pastures or quiet waters, but it worked. The Good Shepherd was nearby and guiding me.

Sometimes God guided me right past the first corner toward the second; if I bypassed the second corner and approached the third, I'd end up across the street from a local McDonald's. I didn't find a table before me in the presence of my enemies, but I did find a dollar in my pocket for a wrapped-up cheeseburger on a plastic tray. It gave me some small sanctuary in the midst of my stress. I unwrapped the paper and slowly bit into the burger with the mushy bun; I temporarily dismissed

papers, printers, and practicum projects. I stared out the window and imagined myself in a different world. I watched people come and go for several minutes and smiled as some of my angst didn't seem quite so "angsty."

A cheeseburger can't erase my responsibilities, but it can shift my spirit slightly. I don't always have to be so serious if I remember that God is always sovereign. He knows every detail, every deadline, every disappointment, and every delight. Small things matter. The Lord doesn't always promise us tomorrow that which he gives us today. God invites us to enjoy him and what he provides with each new sunrise. We give up our pride, we yield him our strength, and we rest as we need to. We move through our days the best we can. We journey one life-affirming block, one shuffling step, and one cheeseburger at a time. **B**



Young Adults Writing Contest

Topic: Sustaining Faith

The Banner is pleased to present a writing contest on the topic of sustaining faith.

What does sustaining faith look like? What does it mean to be sustained in faith in today's world? How does God build a faith that lasts? Please use a personal story to illustrate the theme of your article.

We'll publish the top two winning articles in print and the top three online, plus award cash prizes of \$1,000 USD (first prize), \$500 USD (second prize), and \$250 USD (third prize).

- » Deadline for submissions is 11:59 p.m. May 31.
- » Contest open to anyone ages 16-23 who has not been previously published by *The Banner* and who is a member of or regularly attends a Christian Reformed church.
- » Articles should be no more than 1,000 words in length, submitted as a Word file or Google doc and accompanied by a separate cover letter that includes your name, address, phone number, where you worship, and brief biographical note. Do not include this information on the essay itself. Email to info@thebanner.org with the subject heading "Writing Contest."
- » Decisions of judges are final. We reserve the right to withhold one or more prizes if none are deemed worthy. Winners will be notified by July 6.

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