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BY THE NUMBERS

The annual denominational survey asks respondents to select from 28 phrases in response to the prompt "To me, the term 'Christian Reformed' means...." In 2026, 13 phrases were selected by at least 30% of respondents. Here are those top terms, with the ones chosen by the highest percentage of respondents most prominent. **Christ-centered 83.7%** (75.9% of 2025 respondents selected this term); **Scripture-centered 81.5%** (72.4% in 2025); **Conservative 60.0%** (56.3% in 2025); **Faith formation for all ages 59.5%** (54.2% in 2025); **Traditional 53.7%** (47% in 2025).

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Christ-centered
Intellectual Conservative
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"Every Square Inch" belongs to Christ
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Surveys conducted by DataWise Consulting LLC with 1,359 respondents (1,067 in 2025).



Cover: This year's Young Adults Writing Contest winners wrote about what sustains their faith.

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: Two Shrinking Congregations Determined to Endure
- » Church Worldwide: Bethany Christian Services Reverses LGBTQ Inclusion Policy
- » Book: *The Correspondent*, by Virginia Evans
- » Book: *A Kingdom of Shadows*, by Emily Bain Murphy
- » Movie: *Young Washington*



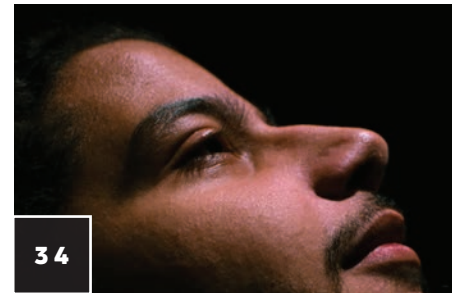
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Thanksgiving
to our Canadian
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Ken Nydam // It can be difficult, but not impossible.



Sustaining Faith

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BANNER

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BANNER

We Begin on Our Knees

The 10-year
vision's stated
foundation
is "prayer
and fasting."



Lora Copley is editor of *The Banner*. She and her husband Joel have four children and recently welcomed a daughter-in-law to the family. The Copleys worship at Trinity CRC in Ames, Iowa.

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

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

"THE HARD PART IS NOW. The hard part is prayer," said my friend, referring to the CRC's 10-year plan. He shared how pumped he was after Synod 2026's decision that the CRC would multiply disciples. He spoke to his men's group. And to the council. And an education team. Folks were polite—but mostly the big plan prompted blank stares and lead balloons. After all, our needs are great! Is this vision too ambitious? How to even begin?

Prayer.

"When God has something great to accomplish for his church, it is his will that there should precede it the extraordinary prayer of his people," wrote Jonathan Edwards, in 1742.

Prayer preceded the moves of God in Acts: before the first Pentecost, the Samaritan outpouring, the Gentile breakthrough, and the sending of missionaries. Prayer marks every page of the early church's story—33 times to be exact.

The modern mission movement began in 1727 with a continuous 100-year prayer meeting (yes, 24-7) out of a rural German church. The first Great Awakening, the Prayer Revival of 1857, the Korean Revivals of 1903-1907, and what's happening in China in our day show that extraordinary prayer precedes renewal.

The 10-year vision's stated foundation is "prayer and fasting." It recognizes the need to get small and to honor God with big requests.

We confess how small we are in truths like, "We do not know what to do, but our eyes are on you"; "It is not by our sword, nor does our arm bring victory. But it is your right hand, your arm, and the light of your face, for you love your people"; and, "Apart from you, we can do nothing" (2 Chr. 20:12; Ps. 44:3; John 15:5).

When my friend said prayer is "the hard part," I think it's because prayer admits this smallness—that we aren't enough—and invites God to change us.

We are also called to pray big.

Legend says that Alexander the Great's general asked Alexander to fund his daughter's wedding. But the royal treasurer balked at the sky-high amount: "That would be the most pricey event Greece has ever seen!"

But Alexander said, "My general does me honor. He believes I am rich enough to meet his request, and I am generous enough to grant it. Proceed."

John Newton urges that spirit in our prayers: "You are coming to a King. Large petitions with you bring. For his grace and pow'r are such, none can ever ask too much" ("Come My Soul, Thy Suit Prepare").

Our God can do "exceedingly, abundantly more than we ask or imagine." But we need to ask.

What if, in each CRC congregation, two people were set apart to pray every day for the "big ask" of our 10-year plan?

What if, during every Sunday service and at every fall classis meeting, time was set aside to ask God to move in our denomination?

What if you stopped reading this article to set an alarm on your phone for 10:02, so at that time daily you prayed Luke 10:02, asking the Lord of the harvest to call workers to his CRC field?

What if every pastor led his people into more corporate, more expectant prayer? It is said, "The pastor who is not praying is playing. No church is greater than her prayer life."

Yes, prayer is hard. The vision is daunting. It's bigger than our ability, bigger than our resources—but not bigger than our God.

Let us pray. 

REPLY ALL



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

Books About Gaza

Regarding the reviews of two books of the Palestinian West Bank and Gaza (*Daughters of Palestine*, online Jan. 23): in 1972 through 2019, I worked as an archaeologist in and out of the West Bank, and since I was excavating at Philistine sites, I have been in the Gaza Strip several times to examine the biblical site of Gaza. In addition, in the mid-1980s and into the '90s we were able to use Gaza workers for the day, until the Israelis closed the gates for them to cross back home. Over the decades, I have watched the Palestinian Christian churches in Gaza and West Bank close into empty shells. What would Jesus want us to do?

» Neal Bierling // Ada, Mich.

Elder Service

I have thoughts in regards to "Recruiting Elders: Why Won't They Stand?" (online, April 17). Having been an elder and deacon in the CRC, I have gone through the recruitment process many times and am very familiar with the reasons people decline the invitation to serve. I wonder how much synod's decisions regarding homosexuality over the past several years are accelerating the decline. I certainly could not serve any longer.

» Harry van der Meer // Goudsboro, Penn.

Dignity Team

Synod's dismissal of the Dignity Team is another proof that we as a denomination do not want to do all we can to support and hear the voices of those abused by the CRC leadership. The current avenues to report abuse often do not work because they are "pastor protected." I am not convinced that anyone on the advisory committee knows firsthand what abuse in the CRC looks like or have experienced it themselves, because if they had, they would have not directed synod to dismiss the Dignity Team. Repeatedly, for many years, I have seen advisory committees at synods, who are assigned to present abuse of power issues, fail in standing up for victims. This time, it also means the delegates who voted to dismiss the Dignity Team, failed our brothers and sisters at the convenience of saying, "We have enough services for victims. We need to end this one."

» Judy De Wit // Sioux Falls, S.D.

Marriage

Rev. Dave Beelen's feature article in *The Banner* was very problematic in terms of biblical exegesis, theological assertions, logical development, and pastoral sensitivity ("A 3D Look at Human Sexuality," May/June 2026). Moreover, while it presumed to convey and affirm the recently declared synodical position on matters of human sexuality, it did not. Particularly striking was its pastoral advice to both church leaders and to those in our Christian Reformed congregations who are not heterosexual in their self-understandings. The assertions made, in this regard, were not in line with a number of painstakingly developed

elements of intentional pastoral care expressed in the human sexuality report.
» Wayne Brouwer // Holland, Mich.

2026 So Far

I congratulate you on your January-February issue. I thought it sent a very positive message about the future of the CRC. I appreciated: 1. The emphasis on mission in your editorial, with your question "What is a banner?" To be led to Jesus was uplifting. 2. The bracing report on the church-planting conference in Florida. 3. The column by Mary Vanden Berg on our confessions. 4. The story about what's happening in ordinary churches. 5. The online piece by Herbert Schreur. The emphasis on repentance and the items needing repentance were to the point and do call for serious discussion! I believe these are the kinds of articles that the majority of CRC people have longed for in *The Banner* but have not often seen in recent years.

» Vance Hays // Portland, Ore.

Rather than "quietly quitting," I will share why I decided to no longer financially support *The Banner*. I had looked forward to each new *Banner* for its insightful, interesting, and sometimes challenging articles, and would tell people that they should read it as it doesn't just tell them what they want to hear. Unfortunately that is no longer the case, which is disappointing to me personally, but also disappointing because it's following the wider culture of siloed thinking and refusing to see that issues are not black or white. For a time, *The Banner* was a place of nuanced, grace-filled Christian thought that didn't just make us feel more comfortable with what we had already decided to believe.
» Bev Harkema // Hudsonville, Mich.

Breath

I have never sent a note to *The Banner* before, but I need to say how much I appreciate the new editor Lora Copley! It has been so refreshing to me that *The Banner's* editorial section focuses on my heart and relationship with Jesus instead of feeling slightly complaining about our denomination. I also appreciate the new direction *The Banner* has taken. I know there have been letters lamenting the changes but many of us feel *The Banner* now matches the teachings our church taught when we made our professions of faith.

» Janice VerMerris // Dorr, Mich.

As I Was Saying

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

» Called to Bear the Image,
Not Build One

» Room for Milk

» The Problem of Attention

WHEN I WAS YOUNG, I had asthma. During an asthma attack, my lungs got tight and heavy, and my throat felt like it was closing in on itself. You don't realize how much you love breathing until you become conscious of the effort a single inhale can take. Though I was filled with panic as my lungs burned with every gasp of air, I was desperately grateful for each breath that followed.

Every single breath is a gift, even the labored ones. Most of us do not need to actively think about every inhale and exhale. But if we stop and consider how many breaths we take every day, even every minute, we notice one way our loving Father sustains us.

God "himself gives everyone life and breath" (Acts 17:25). The same God who first breathed life into humanity continues this gift. It's incredibly intimate to be that close, to be so close that someone's breath fills your nostrils. Our Holy God chooses to lean down to us, as sinful and broken as we are, and quicken us with the breath of life.

Over and over, he fills our lungs. Moment by moment, he sustains our lives—even though he knows I sometimes use that breath to praise his name and other times to slander. I defile that precious breath by lying, swearing, and gossiping. God has every right to snatch that air straight out of my chest and deprive me of it forever, yet he shows mercy. I inhale and exhale, again and again, in the faithful providence flowing through my nostrils from the living God.

Oh, how he must love us! I'm in awe of how he sustains us not only during the day, but also at night. When we're fast asleep, God continues to provide breath in our lungs while we are vulnerable.

Every morning as we wake to the light of a new day, we ought to use

We cannot survive
without God's own
sustaining breath
in our lungs.

our breath to praise God for providing what we never could on our own. We cannot survive without God's own sustaining breath in our lungs.

God's breath not only gives us life, but new life as well. God's breath filled the dry bones of Ezekiel. After he rose from the dead, Jesus told his disciples, "Receive the Holy Spirit," and then he breathed on them (Acts 20:22).

Take a moment. Close your eyes. Inhale and exhale.

Picture God so close you can feel the warmth of his breath on your cheeks as he breathes air, his own life-giving gift, into your lungs.

Thank God for this tangible way he so graciously sustains you. Thank God for the gift of breath. 



Lyndee Ten Pas is an OB-GYN sonographer. She and her husband, Derek, attend Trinity Christian Reformed Church in Ames, Iowa.

Searching for Stray Sheep

Ministry to the “stray sheep” of a congregation is slow and difficult. But there are things the church staff and members can do.



Ken Nydam is a retired CRC minister now working as a licensed mental health/marriage counselor at Hope Way Counseling Services (hopeway-counselingservices.com) in Byron Center and Allegan, Mich. He attends The River CRC in Allegan.

I WAS PLEASANTLY SURPRISED to see John at church one Sunday. I caught up with him just before he left the building. “So good to see you here this morning, John!” He looked at me with a cynical grin and said, “Yeah! And the church is still standing,” as he scooted out the door.

Later in the week I stopped by his auto repair shop for a visit. After comparing our recent fishing success I asked him if he would explain his parting comment from Sunday. “I figured that got your attention, Pastor. It’s nothing, really,” he said.

“Oh, I’m not letting you get off the hook that easily, John,” I replied, returning his grin. He looked at me in a frozen pause and then signaled me to follow him into his messy office where he offered a more heartfelt explanation.

John told me that he came to worship that Sunday because he had had a bad week and thought he would “give God another try.” But he wondered if when he walked into the church, feeling so much like a hypocrite, God just might topple the roof down on top of him. He was half kidding, of course, but he also was telling me something true and serious. I could count on one hand the number of times John had been to church in the past three years. That was his pattern since his profession of faith at age 17. He is now 42.

After high school his parents divorced, and John seemed to get lost in the chaos of that sad event. He drifted into a lifestyle spotted with alcohol, losing jobs, unfaithfulness in his own marriage, and his wife divorcing him. He’d been arrested a couple of times for drunk driving over the years and spent a few months in jail. He had always been told by his parents that he was the black sheep of the family, which became a self-fulfilling prophecy. But eventually John went to

AA, quit drinking, and, being a hard worker, grew a successful auto repair business. Most people in town liked John because he liked people and was the “kind of guy who would give you the shirt off his back.” But he believed that he’d burned too many bridges to the institutional church and always felt like he didn’t fit in and had not been forgiven for his reckless living.

Interestingly, at his mom’s request and with his permission, the church never removed his name from the church directory despite his lack of involvement. As a result, he occasionally got a phone call from a church elder checking in with him, which he cordially received, but he always side-stepped any further discussion about his spiritual life. John was discussed at elders’ meetings, but nobody knew how to get through to him to draw this “stray sheep” back into church fellowship. They just shrugged their shoulders and went to the next person on the pastoral need list. In the four churches I have served, each had a few “Johns” who kept a safe distance from official discipline but yet remained connected to the church by a thread.

Ministry to the “stray sheep” of a congregation is slow and difficult. But there are a few things the church staff and members can do as they prayerfully wait for the Holy Spirit to do what only he can do, which is to energize John’s spirit to thirst for a deeper walk with God.

The first is to more fully understand the spirit of a person who is avoiding God. Why is avoidance necessary for them? It is simply to feel safe from confrontation. Most “stray sheep” have enough biblical teaching in their bones to have a conscience about God. Just like John imagined the timbers of the church building toppling down on him as God’s judgment, they sense the dissonance between where they



are spiritually and where they know God wants them to be. I wanted to tell John that God loves him and will forgive him for his sins, but neither did I want to remove that dissonance that the Holy Spirit, no doubt, was using to draw him closer. I mostly listened.

Second, for the same reason John's name remained in the church directory, we can intensify their sense of belonging to their home church by attempting connection consistently through the years:

- » With their permission, keep them on the church mailing list for social events, mission trips, parties, special worship services etc., so they are always informed and feel invited.
- » Invite them to play on church sports teams or other church recreational activities.
- » Use whatever helping skill they possess in the church's diaconal outreach. In John's case, ask him if he would fix the car of a single mom whom the church was trying to help.
- » Train the congregation to greet them warmly but casually when they do show up for worship or other events,

not making a big deal of their infrequent presence.

- » The pastoral staff and elders should address any crisis events in their lives with the same intentionality as they would for any active member of the church. The issue of avoidance should not be considered and the need for offering pastoral care should be assumed.
- » The elders might ask the person if it would be okay if an elder or pastor "checked in" with them annually, just to "stay in touch."
- » Most of us realize we have not walked in the shoes of our stray sheep, and there is much to understand about them and their life in order to make a fair assessment about their spiritual health. Spiritual avoidance is rooted not only in our inherited sinful corruption from Adam and Eve, but also in our formative relationships and in genetic, psychological, and medical science. Seeking to pastorally tweak the soul of a stray sheep without consideration of such realities might lead to spiritual malpractice. That is not to say that only professional

caregivers can help. But it does mean that earnest and patient listening is very important for bringing about appropriate care. And we can all do that!

Finally, church staff and church members must be willing to admit that the institutional church does not always do ministry well. We have all heard horrendous stories from people who have been mistreated by clergy or judgmental Christians that drove them out of church fellowship. There might be need for repentance, confession, and forgiveness on both sides of this ministry.

We must appreciate the biblical teaching that "there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over 99 righteous persons who do not need to repent" (Luke 15:7). As God uses preaching the Word to bring about saving faith, he also uses our long-suffering kindness, prayers, and sensitivity to draw stray sheep back to the flock. 

BIG QUESTIONS

Faith Formation

What are some parenting practices for various stages of my child's development to help them maintain an interest in faith?

When asked, most Christian parents say their deepest hope for their children as they grow into adulthood is that they “make their faith their own.” While this goal is widely shared, many parents worry about how to build an environment that fosters a lasting spiritual interest.

One effective approach is for parents to adopt practices in their own lives that set the stage for their children's faith formation. This begins by recognizing how the parent-child dynamic shifts over time. When children are young, parents direct most aspects of their lives—including attending a local church, engaging in family prayer and Scripture reading, and participating in Sunday school or youth group, among other things.

As children grow, however, a parent's role transitions from responsibility to influence. This shift can be challenging, especially if children begin making choices that don't seem to align with following Jesus. During these moments, parents must remember their ultimate goal: encouraging a genuine, personal faith. Achieving

this requires accepting that we cannot control our children's decisions as they mature. Instead, our focus should shift to offering thoughtful insight and gentle influence whenever possible.

What does this look like in practice?

An essential step is cultivating a home environment where questions about faith, God, and the world are always welcomed and encouraged (Deut. 6:7). This posture teaches children that no question is too big or off-limits for God—or for their parents. If children grow up in homes where their doubts and questions are shut down with responses like, “We don't talk about that,” they are far more likely to seek answers from non-faith sources or stop asking questions altogether. Neither outcome supports healthy spiritual growth or aligns with a parent's hopes for their child.

However, when parents remain open to their children's wonderings and doubts, it opens the door to explore answers together. This collaborative approach models a crucial truth: while the goal is for children to own their faith, spiritual formation is a lifelong journey best experienced within a supportive faith community.

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.



Illustration for The Banner by Gisela Bohórquez

Ethics

Should Christians be nationalists?

Reformed denominations are buzzing with controversy about Christian nationalism. Synod 2026 called for a study committee to consider the issue. Part of the problem is that the term “Christian nationalism” means very different things to different people. It might be helpful to consider whether any form of nationalism is compatible with Christianity.

Nationalism is also a contested term. According to Merriam-Webster's online dictionary, nationalism is “an ideology that elevates one nation or nationality above all others and that places primary emphasis on promotion of its culture and interests as opposed to those of other nations, nationalities, or supranational groups.” However, Merriam-Webster also posits a second, quite different, definition: “support for and promotion of the political independence or self-determination of a nation or people.” And there are many possible definitions that fall somewhere between these two.

Nationalism first emerged in Europe during the late eighteenth century in the wake of the Enlightenment. Christian nationalism revolutionized the United States during the Civil War, and a variety of forms of nationalism, many of them religious, led to the formation of new nations in Latin America, Europe, Asia, and Africa

during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Given this complexity, any sweeping condemnation of nationalism is problematic.

Nevertheless, Scripture must shape the way Christians think about nationalism.

The Gospel calls us to place our highest allegiance to the kingdom of God (Matthew 6:33), whose citizens make up the church, the body of Christ. As Reformed two-kingdoms theology emphasizes, the kingdom of God must not be conflated with any earthly political entity (John 18:36). Since Christ's death, God has not given any nation special status, as Israel once had. The body of Christ is a "supranational" group, and as Christians, we ought to have deeper ties with Christians from other nations than we do with our fellow citizens who are not Christians (Galatians 3:28, 6:10).

Just as important, Jesus commands us to love all people, including our enemies (Matthew 5:44). True, we have unique responsibilities to those we are temporally closest to, which surely extends to the communities in which we live (1 Timothy 5:8; Luke 10:25-37). It is fair to say that we ought to love our nation and owe it a special allegiance (Romans 13:1-8). We might call this patriotism, which Merriam-Webster defines simply as "love for or devotion to one's country." There is nothing wrong with promoting the culture and interests of one's nation.

But when love of country is used to justify hatred for other groups, claims that one nationality is superior to another, or failure to love the people of other nations and seek their best interests, it is no longer compatible with Jesus' teaching.

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

Relationships

I am growing resentful of my spouse because I feel like I am doing everything alone, and it's not getting better. What do I do?

I see this often in my clinical work. I'll give an example using the man as the "lazy spouse," but wives can fill that role too.

A couple has difficulty negotiating their roles in maintaining the home and caring for the children. The wife calls the husband out and asks for more help. Sometimes there is change for a moment, but often things go back to how they were. The wife resumes the meal planning and preparing, schedules, cleaning, bedtimes, and emotional caregiving of the children. This is often in addition to a full-time job. Although the husband is contributing in other ways, he might further be accused of being on his phone too much, not taking initiative in caregiving, not expressing himself, and retreating to the garage or extra tee time with friends. The wife grows increasingly exhausted, loses hope, and asks for therapy or a divorce.

The breakdown can come from a couple sources.

Parents are busy: Many mothers choose to or must work to make ends meet. Some people didn't see their mother working outside the home while also meeting the needs of the home; thus many couples don't know how to negotiate roles and work together in today's world.

Technology is distracting: Phones provide us with a space to dissociate and retreat. This can become an addiction, disrupting connection and communication.

Unappreciated effort: Men and women can place value on contributions differently. Often, both spouses are doing meaningful work, but it can go unappreciated. Sometimes appreciation is just as valuable as the work.

It takes time and work to learn how to communicate and negotiate needs in marriage. Accusatory statements that start with "you never" or "you always" often lead to defensiveness, justifying actions, and explaining exceptions. Using "I" statements ("I feel ... when you ... because ...") are typically more productive.

Sometimes we must unlearn old fears, habits, and ways of communicating or relating. Learning and unlearning can happen through godly mentors, Christian therapists, reading, and finding biblical examples of God's truth, kindness, grace, and forgiveness (Eph 5:1; John 13:15).

Marriage takes work, especially during challenging seasons of life. Waiting too long to ask for or receive help makes healing harder. Pray for your spouse and see your heart soften toward him/her. God has good plans for your marriage; the work is worth it.

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.

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

Anna's Circle, a women's evangelistic training ministry developed out of the gospel-spreading Multiplication Network, is equipping participants of Global Coffee Break groups to effectively reach unchurched friends, neighbors, and family members. About 20 women at Lakeside Community Christian Reformed Church in Alto, Mich., including the congregation's Coffee Break leaders Cheryl Cooper and Pam Andrulis, have taken Anna's Circle training in the past year.

In spring 2025 Cooper and Andrulis were approached by the president of the ministry, Sandra Tolsma, who asked if they'd be willing to share the online training with their Coffee Break participants. Many were interested, and two eight-week training sessions have since taken place at Lakeside Community.

"Each Anna's Circle group becomes a supportive, encouraging, and secure base for the women as they go out to develop relationships with unbelievers," Andrulis said.

Cooper and Andrulis try to create as many opportunities as possible for women to be equipped to reach out to other women. "Anna's Circle is one 'answer' God provided to our quest," Cooper said, noting that she and Andrulis believe the training complements Global Coffee Break's inductive Bible study methods.

One participant said, "In Coffee Break, we encourage each other in our faith journeys. In Anna's Circle, we encourage and support each other to reach out to others to begin a faith journey." Another participant wrote in an evaluation that the training has increased her desire to reach out to women, especially non- and new believers, so they can experience both the love of God and of other supportive women friends. "Anna's Circle has given me more confidence and tools to learn how to reach out."



Lakeside Community CRC

Rachel Brinks of Lakeside Community CRC shares with other Anna's Circle trainees.

Tolsma has been the president of Anna's Circle for about a year, since it became its own nonprofit organization after having its start within Multiplication Network. It's named after a woman from Tanzania who put her faith in Jesus after hearing the gospel and went on to plant a church. When Tolsma met her in 2019, Anna shared how she sold everything she owned to move to a predominantly Muslim community so she could share the hope of Jesus. "Her courage, obedience, and passion to share the life-changing power of Jesus ignited a deep desire in me to encourage women in America to live out their faith with the same boldness," Tolsma said.

After starting Anna's Circle, Tolsma reached out to Sam Huizenga, former Learning Programs leader for Resonate Global Mission. "We immediately saw the beautiful synergies between Anna's Circle and Global Coffee Break as Sam wanted to ignite a passion for evangelism in Global Coffee Break leaders and participants, and I knew Anna's Circle trainees would need excellent Bible study materials for those exploring Jesus or new to Christianity. So the two organizations entered into a ministry partnership agreement," Tolsma said. The ministry agreement is effective through June 30, 2027.

—Callie Feyen

The Banner Invited to Iowa Church's 160th

As Connect Church in Pella, Iowa, (called "First Christian Reformed Church" until 2019) celebrated 160 years of ministry in August, the congregation also wanted to celebrate *The Banner's* 160 years.

"Our council thought it might be fun to have *The Banner's* editor Lora Copley come on that Sunday and join us in worship," said interim pastor Will Verhoef. Copley lives about an hour away in Ankeny, Iowa.

"It was an honor to share *The Banner's* special anniversary in the place where God does his best work—within and through the local church," Copley said.

She remarked that as Connect began with just "42 Dutch immigrants on the Iowa frontier in a town less than 20 years old" and *The Banner* started as "a 16-page newspaper, paid for out of one man's pocket," both were humble endeavors. "But we were captured by a vision bigger than our circumstance. The vision was the glory of Jesus Christ: serving him faithfully, no matter what."

Verhoef is one of six interim pastors to have served Connect CRC since the position became vacant in 2022 after pastor Brad Meinders left for a role with Resonate Global Mission. Meinders returned for the 160th celebration.

Copley said, "The worship service's litanies and hymns brought me to tears a few times, and Pastor Verhoef had a blessed message—clear-eyed about challenges, but hopeful too."

The Banner has marked its anniversary with a six-part history column (p. 40), and a Banner Builders campaign seeking new monthly supporters for the denominational magazine, which will lose ministry share support as of the coming fiscal year next June.

—Alissa Vernon



Banner editor Lora Copley, left, stands with Connect CRC interim pastor Will Verhoef and former pastor Brad Meinders.

Connect CRC

Wheelchair Ministry Helped by CRC Volunteers

Volunteer fabricators from Bethel Christian Reformed Church in Sioux Center, Iowa, are helping increase production of Hope Haven International's tiltable wheelchair, a tool developed in 2020 by engineering students at Dordt University.

According to the 2020 project summary: "Hope Haven provides low cost and low weight wheelchairs for children in developing countries. Five percent of these children require tilt adjustment not possible with the current design. Our task was to modify Hope Haven's original design to enable the chair to tilt. Our design needed to use as few new parts as possible; be safe, durable, and operable with one hand; and have modifications cost less than \$70 additional."

This past spring volunteers from Bethel CRC and those from New Life Church, another Sioux Center congregation, began staffing a workshop to build 10 tiltable chairs a week.

The Sioux Center workshop is one of 10 contributing to Hope Haven's production, which has provided 155,000 wheelchairs to be distributed in 110 countries since the organization's founding.

—Alissa Vernon



Roger Feekes | Bethel CRC

Stories of Summer Ministry

Dogs Included in Outdoor Service at Iowa Church



Wrangler and his human companion Teresa Jensen were first-time attendees at Rolling Acres CRC's first "Dog Days" service. Jensen now serves as a leader in the church's girls club.

"Dog Days of Summer" usually refers to hot, muggy, long summer days. To Rolling Acres Christian Reformed Church in Mason City, Iowa, it's a fun outdoor service with canine friends, held for the second time this July.

The congregation hosts outdoor services once a month from June to October, rotating between the church property and a local park. In this more casual setting some people even bring their dogs. The idea to have a "Dog Days" service came out of that, said Rolling Acres pastor Phil Boender.

"Dogs are loved companions in many families," Boender said. "We want to celebrate the gift of pets in God's good creation as a gift to us."

Both "Dog Days" services, the first held five or six years ago, included a dog bulletin with descriptions of each of the attending pups as well as a dog parade, announced by professional broadcaster and church member Harry O'Neal.

A livestream of the 2026 service, attended by 108 people and 15 dogs, had 755 views by early August—significantly higher than the typical 30 to 35 views for regular Sunday service streams. Boender considered this viewership "a blessing" for the church's "continuous effort in being missional."

He counts service, hospitality, and encouragement among the congregation's gifts. "We are blessed as we bless others," Boender said.

—Kyle Hoogendoorn

Prayer Service Asking For Rain

Five Christian Reformed congregations in rural western Michigan took part in a service July 27 to pray for rain.

About 200 people gathered at a local farm northwest of Zeeland, Mich., for the 30-minute service. It was the second consecutive summer the churches had organized a prayer service, asking God to send rain for crops in a season where it has been dry since early May.

"We're all praying together and crying out to God," said Tyler Wagenmaker, pastor of Beaverdam Christian Reformed Church, who organized the service.

Pastors from the participating churches read passages of Scripture from the Old and New Testaments and offered prayers of adoration, confession, thanksgiving, and supplication.

A storm system earlier in the day brought rain to the area, which Pastor Mark Neymeiyer of Rusk CRC in Allendale noted in his prayer.

"You have shown your mercy to us in advance of our even asking, with the rain we received already this day, from your grace and mercy," Neymeiyer said.

Wagenmaker, drawing from the story of the prayer meeting recorded in Acts 12 after the apostle Peter had been imprisoned, spoke of the power of prayer and of churches coming together to appeal to God.

"This is the blessing of living in a place like West Michigan, that we have so many different churches that are represented here," he said. "How good it is to be able to come together as brothers and sisters in Christ and to be drawn together, because sometimes that's what challenges do—they draw people together, and that strengthens the bonds of Christian fellowship, it strengthens the church."

Participating churches were Beaverdam, Rusk, Borculo (Mich.) CRC, Drenthe CRC in Zeeland, and North Blendon CRC in Hudsonville, Mich.

—Greg Chandler



Participants gathered on a Zeeland, Mich., farm to seek God in a time of need for rain.

50+ Years for Volunteer-run Summer Camp



Amy Toornstra

Teens in Classis Columbia have counted on Camp Calvin's volunteer teachers and other professionals for opportunities in spiritual growth, friendship, and leadership since 1975.

Preschool teacher Amy Toornstra, a member of Sunnyslope Christian Reformed Church in Salem, Ore., directed this year's camp. Her husband Rob Toornstra, Sunnyslope's pastor, was the camp speaker.

Amy Toornstra said camp archives show only four years where Camp Calvin, a weeklong experience each June, did not run—1989 (just before a venue change in 1990) and the COVID summers of 2020-2022. She said several of the 20 volunteer staff were once campers.

"All honor and glory goes to God, but also our passion for this ministry and youth ministry in general has kept this ministry alive," Toornstra said.

Involved since 2015 and directing as part of a team since 2023, Toornstra became the camp's program director in 2025. Ginger Teller, from Sunrise CRC, and Tony Koetje, from Oak Hills CRC, who with Toornstra helped revive the ministry after its COVID shutdown, now serve

Outdoor fun was part of the Camp Calvin 2026 experience for Classis Columbia youth.

as counselor and facilities manager. The camp meets at a retreat center in Molalla, Ore.

"One of the unique things is most of our team—including myself—are volunteers. We all have other jobs," Toornstra said.

This year 36 campers attended from seven congregations—Classis Columbia's Sunnyslope, Sunrise, Christ Community, Oak Hills, Parklane, and Zillah CRCs and Classis Pacific Northwest's First CRC in Mount Vernon, Wash.

—Alissa Vernon

Rural Ontario Church Thinks Local

Shoppers at the Foodland grocery store in Clinton, Ont., carried home groceries this summer in paper bags decorated by children attending the Clinton Christian Reformed Church's Vacation Bible School. This is part of the church's intent to look at each of its ministries and ask: While we carry out this ministry, how can we add value to the community?

Michelle Kaptein, Clinton CRC's ministry support coordinator, said since fall 2025 she and the Community Life Team have been looking at each of the church's ministries and "researching what is needed in our community, thinking outside the box and helping ministries to find where they'd be able to contribute that's still within their ministry's goals."

Clinton CRC's Soup and More free lunch program began partnering with the Canadian Mental Health Association for walk-in case management and counseling.

At the community's spring Crash Up Derby, the church supplied free earplugs in case families had forgotten their own, and included invitations to their July Vacation Bible School.

Craftmaking during that VBS week included the paper bag decorating. "As they drew colourful pictures and encouraging messages, I overheard one child ask another, 'What are you going to draw to make someone smile?'," wrote one mom on The Corners of Clinton Facebook page. "That question has stayed with me. Imagine if we all started our day wondering how we could make someone smile."

—Alissa Vernon

Noteworthy

In May, *The Banner* received professional recognition from the Associated Church Press and the Evangelical Press Associate for work completed in 2025:

» *The Banner's* 2025 synod coverage (July/Aug. 2025) received a **second-place award of merit from The Associated Church Press.**



» Mixed Media, *The Banner's* wide-ranging review section edited by Lorilee Craker, received **second place in the EPA's department category.**

» "Celebrating the Nicene Creed" by Tim Howerzyl (March 2025), received **fourth place in the biblical exposition category.**



» "A Church for Elijah" by Chad Thompson (July/Aug. 2025) received **fourth place in the cartoon category.**

Evidence of 'Faith Restored'?

A report titled "Faith Restored?" released in March by Canadian public think tank Cardus, in partnership with the Canadian Bible Society, is challenging widely held assumptions about the steady decline of religion in Canada, particularly among younger generations.

According to the data, drawn from three years of polling data from the Angus Reid Institute, 59% of Canadians ages 18 to 34 say they believe in God or a higher power, compared to 63% across the general population. The findings suggest that younger Canadians are not significantly more secular than older generations, a contrast to the common narrative that religiosity fades predictably with age.

Ray Pennings, executive vice-president of Cardus and co-author of the report, said the results point to a more nuanced reality than either decline or revival. "There are encouraging signs when it comes to young Canadians and religion, but we need to qualify that," Pennings said. "It's not quite the revival that some have described in the U.K. and U.S., but neither is it a simple continuation of decline."

One of the more notable findings relates to patterns of religious service attendance. While overall weekly attendance has declined from 15% in 2017 to 12% today, the rate among Canadians ages 18 to 34 has remained stable at 16% over the same period. "In the context of overall decline, (the attendance of) young people (is) not declining," Pennings said. "That suggests there is something different happening within that demographic."

The authors noted significant behavioral shifts within younger age groups, which they described along a "spectrum of spirituality," measuring not only religious

"What we are seeing among younger demographics is that those who are engaged are often more deeply engaged."

-Ray Pennings, Cardus

service attendance but also prayer, reading of sacred texts, belief in an after-life, and reported religious experiences. Respondents who engage in most or all of these practices were classified as "religiously committed." The findings suggest fewer individuals fall in the moderate or occasional religious engagement, while a growing share fall into either highly committed or largely disengaged categories. "What we are seeing among younger demographics is that those who are engaged are often more deeply engaged," Pennings said.

The Canadian findings differ from developments reported in the United Kingdom where recent studies suggest that young adults are now among the most likely to express belief in God and to pray regularly; and from reports in the United States, where long-standing declines in religious participation appear to have leveled off.

Pennings cautioned against drawing direct comparisons, noting that interpretations of international data are contested, but said the Canadian data indicates a potential turning point. "You want to be cautious about over-interpreting it," he said. "But when you see multiple indicators trending in a similar

direction, it does suggest that something is happening.”

Brian Bork, campus ministry coordinator with Resonate Global Mission, said he has seen a growing openness to faith among university students, particularly in the form of curiosity about Christian community and practice. “We are seeing students who are interested in questions of meaning, belonging, and spirituality, even if they are not coming with a clear religious background,” Bork said.

In large and often impersonal university settings, Bork said, groups offering hospitality and relational depth can be especially significant. “A lot of our ministries would tell stories of students who are not Christians but are showing up and participating because they find it to be a warm and welcoming place,” he said.

International students are a particularly important part of this trend, Bork noted. Many arrive in Canada from contexts where religious practice is more visible and are more inclined to seek out faith communities as a source of connection and stability. “They are often looking for community and a sense of belonging after being uprooted from what is familiar,” Bork said.

Both the report and those working in ministry suggest that younger Canadians’ openness to faith might be connected to broader social conditions, including rising levels of loneliness, social fragmentation, and a search for meaning in a rapidly changing cultural landscape.

For churches and faith communities, the report’s findings raise a possible alternative to the assumed inevitability of secularization, provoking questions about how best to respond to a generation that appears neither fully disengaged nor fully committed, but in many cases open and searching.

—Dan Veeneman

IN MEMORIAM



Rev. John Bylsma

1929-2026

John Bylsma was known for his strong, biblical sermons, his joyful character, and his deep desire to emulate Jesus’ love for others. John, 96, died June 8.

Born in Hallum, the Netherlands, John was a teenager when Nazi troops occupied his town. He later shared stories about those days with his children and with school children. His family immigrated to Wisconsin in 1948. Married in 1950, John and his wife Henriette moved to Grand Rapids, Mich., where he studied at Calvin College (now University) and Seminary.

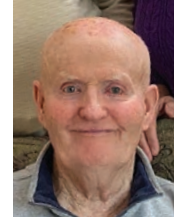
Ordained in 1955, John pastored East Paris (Mich.) Christian Reformed Church, followed by Second Roseland CRC and Third Roseland CRC, both in Chicago, Ill. He then served Kedvale CRC, Oak Lawn, Ill.; Calvary CRC, Bloomington, Minn.; and Brookfield (Wisc.) CRC. Retiring in 1996, he continued as interim pastor and guest preacher until age 95.

John was board president for both *Back to God Hour* (now ReFrame Ministries) and CRC World Missions (now Resonate Global Mission), where he was deeply moved by trips to Mexico and Nigeria. He and Henriette also led tours to Israel.

Predeceased in 2023 by Henriette, John is survived by four children and their spouses; nine grandchildren; and 12 great-grandchildren.

—Janet A. Greidanus

IN MEMORIAM



Rev. Kenneth J.

Vanderwal

1941-2026

Ken Vanderwal will be remembered for his exuberant spirit, his love of adventure, and his sense of humor. “He spent his life serving others and sharing God’s love in Honduras, Costa Rica, and wherever God called him,” said a daughter. Ken, 85, died June 8.

Born in Friesland, the Netherlands, Ken immigrated to Canada with his family in 1953, moving to California in 1963. Following his father and brothers, Ken became a mason and built a successful business.

In 1979, answering God’s call to ministry, Ken moved with his wife, Sally, to Grand Rapids where he graduated from Calvin Theological Seminary. After ordination in 1984, he served Blenheim (Ont.) Christian Reformed Church until 1992. The Vanderwals then sold their belongings, spent a year in Costa Rica studying Spanish, and moved to San Pedro Sula, Honduras, where they served as missionaries.

After retirement in 2007, Ken and Sally returned to Grand Rapids where they remained active in their church and community. Ken enjoyed golfing and reading.

Married 61 years, Ken is survived by Sally; three daughters and their spouses; 10 grandchildren; and 18 great-grandchildren. He was predeceased by one grandchild and one great-grandchild.

—Janet A. Greidanus

Classis Watch: Spring 2026

Actions of classes (regional groups of churches) this past spring include one candidate examined and approved for ministry, six retiring ministers, and six disbanded congregations.

Candidates **examined and approved for ministry in the Christian Reformed Church** (Church Order Arts. 6 and 10): David Kyo-Chan Koo.

Ministers welcomed **from other denominations** (Art. 8): Revs. Justin Njikeu and Samuel Kaha.

Ministers **loaned** (Art. 12-d): Revs. Mark Park to Choongsyn Korean Church (Reformed Church in America) in Flushing, N.Y.; and Samuel Kim to Sojourner Presbyterian Church in Paramus, N.J.

Ministers released from ministry in a congregation via Art. 17-a: Rev. Rodolfo Galindo from South Grandville (Mich.) CRC and Duane VanderLaan from Drayton (Ont.) Reformed Church.

Declared eligible for call: Duane VanderLaan and Dawei Shao.

Eligibility extended for Rev. Mark Van Druenen.

Leaving Ministry in the CRC

Classes may end a pastor's ordained ministry status guided by Church Order articles 14 and 17. 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-b: Elizabeth Guillaume-Koene; via Art. 14-c: John Moelker.

Dismissed via Art. 14-c: Jesse Eng.

Deposed via Art. 82-83: John Cleveringa.

Ministers retiring (Art. 18) (**granted emeritus status**): Revs. Tom Baird (effective Feb. 1, 2027), Steve DeVries, Frank Guter, Geok Keng Faith Lim, Rita Klein-Geltink, Bonny Mulder-Behnia, and Leslie van Milligen.

Resigned as minister emeritus (Art.18-b): Mariano Avila, Michael Bruinooge, Randall Buursma, Andrew De Jong, David Deters, William De Vries, Jack Kooreman, Sheryl Leisman, Al Mulder, Kenneth Pomykala, Jack Roeda, Sid Sybenga, James Stoel, Norman Thomasma, Bill Tuininga, William Vanden Bosch, Epke vander Berg, and Leonard Vander Zee.

Commissioned Pastors

Approved as **commissioned pastors called to specific roles within their classes** (Art. 23): Debbie DeVries and Rowan Scott (Ontario Southwest), Shawn

England (Grand Rapids East), Zachariah Johnson (Thornapple Valley), Joshua Sinnema (Yellowstone), Josh Sweetman (Huron), and Joel Trinidad (Kalamazoo).

Ending service as commissioned pastors (Art. 24-d): Fred Kim (Classis Hudson) and David LaGrand, Lorraine Rong Li, and Carrie Rodgers (Grand Rapids East).

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).

Moved from "organized" to "unorganized" status: The River Church in Allegan, Mich. Classis Zeeland's Missions Team has proposed "a 'Death-Grave-Resurrection' paradigm for a restart initiative over the next year."

Disbanded, dissolved, or closed: First CRC in Zeeland, Mich.; Good News Church in New York, N.Y.; Green Meadow Community CRC in Helena, Mont. (had been emerging); Hanley CRC in Grandville, Mich.; Joy Love Church in Oakland Gardens, N.Y. (had been emerging); New Community Church of Newaygo, Mich. (had been emerging).

Other Matters

The council of Nobleford (Alta.) CRC was appointed "to serve, temporarily, as the supervising council of High River (Alta.) CRC" at a March 13 meeting of Classis Alberta South/Saskatchewan, held in closed session. The public minutes note that classis discussed recommendations of the Classis Interim Committee and classically appointed church visitors, deciding "the supervising council will appoint a Steering Committee consisting of 5-6 members of classis ... (that) will **provide resources, direction and counsel to the High River CRC with the purpose of providing reconciliation**

and restoration among its members.

The Steering Committee will call upon the expertise of Thrive and others to **facilitate the movement back toward a healthy church status.**

Classis Hamilton, with 13 member churches, had eight active searches for ministers as of its May 26 meeting.

The agenda read: "Classis Hamilton now has 13 churches. Six are without a pastor, and two additional congregations are each short one pastor from a team. Classis Hamilton is looking for eight ministers."

—Alissa Vernon

IN MEMORIAM



*Rev. William
(Bill) A. Stroo*

1942-2026

Kind, encouraging, thoughtful, a deep thinker, and a great listener—these are all recurring words in tributes to pastor and chaplain Bill Stroo, who died June 22 at age 83.

Bill graduated from Calvin Theological Seminary and was ordained in 1969, serving Appalachian Regional Hospital, Middlesboro, Ky., and pastoring Rolling Acres Christian Reformed Church, Mason City, Iowa, and Trinity CRC, Maryland Heights, Mo. In 1988 Bill returned to school to earn a doctorate in ministry with an emphasis in pastoral counseling and worked in South Bend, Ind.; Chicago, Ill.; and the Grand Rapids, Mich., area as a licensed psychotherapist and individual and family counselor. He also served several CRC Home Missions churches, retiring in 2013.

Bill played alto saxophone in three bands: Holland American Legion, Zeeland Community, and Hope College; and participated in the annual Christmas Carol Sing-Along at LaGrave Avenue CRC. He enjoyed traveling and loved being of service to the American Red Cross, his family, and his community at Waterford Place in Jenison, Mich., where he lived.

Predeceased in 2016 by Marilyn, his wife of nearly 53 years, Bill is survived by three daughters and their spouses; eight grandchildren and their spouses; and four great-grandchildren.

—Janet A. Greidanus

IN MEMORIAM



Rev. Young Ook Kim

1939-2026

Rev. Young Ook Kim, Christian Reformed pastor and former president of Asia United Theological University, died July 16. He was 87.

Kim graduated from Chongshin Theological University in Seoul, Korea, and went on to earn post-graduate degrees from Fuller Theological Seminary and Reformed Theological Seminary. He pursued Ph.D. studies at Covenant Theological Seminary and Concordia Seminary. Ordained in 1972, he served as pastor at Garden Grove Korean Presbyterian Church beginning in 1975 and pastored Garden Grove Korean CRC in Anaheim, Calif., from 1988 to 2001.

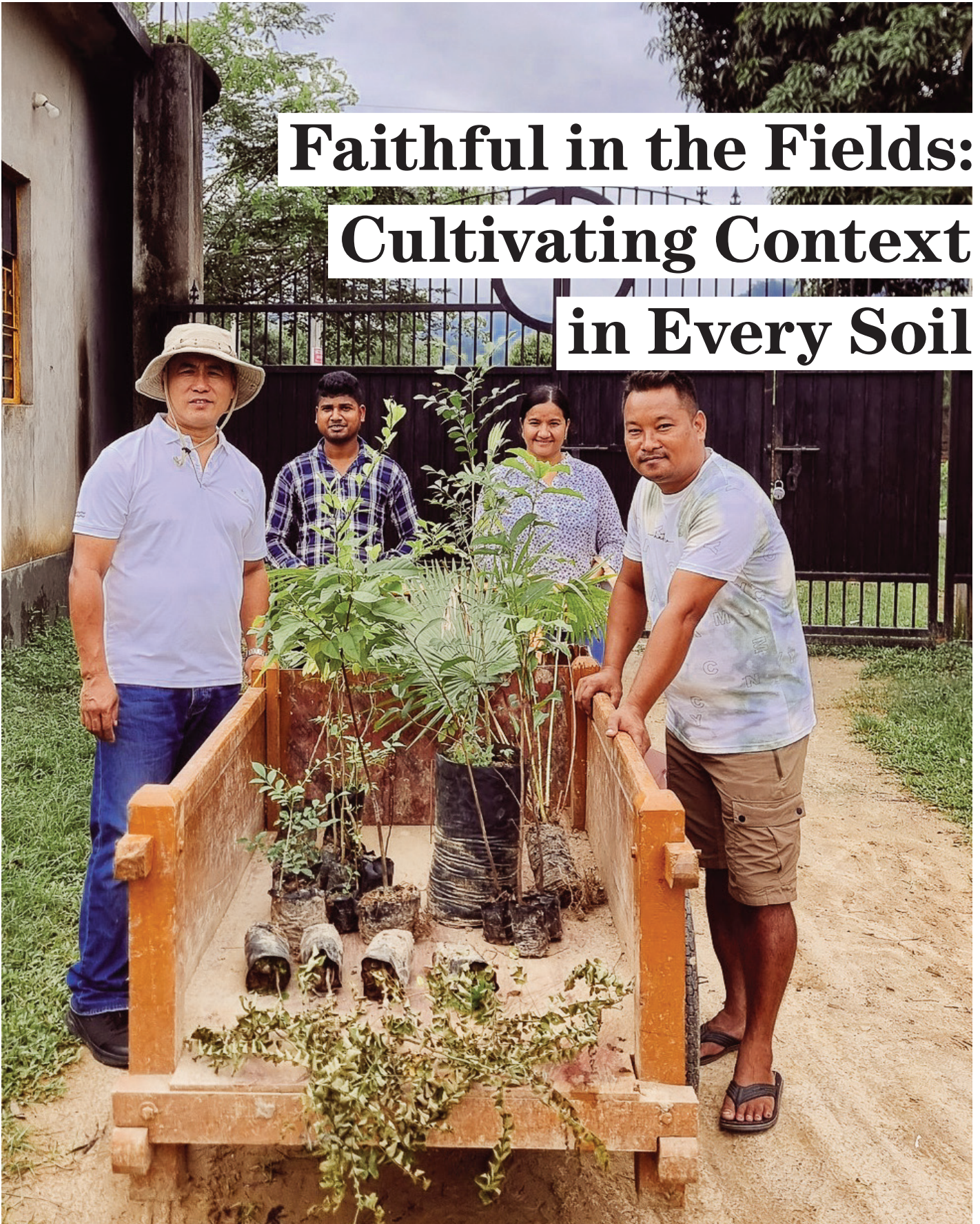
He served as the international secretary for Mission Aviation Fellowship from 1982 to 1988, and founded the Korean MAF in the U.S. Kim helped lay the foundation of the CRCNA's Korean Council (now Korean Ministry Association).

Before retiring in 2019, he served two terms as president of Asia United Theological University (ACTS) in Seoul. There, he was dedicated to mentoring theological students and to mission to North Korea. After three trips to the region, he authored *North Korea Mission from the Evangelical Point of View*, in 2012.

Kim is survived by his wife, Ok Hee Kim, and one son.

—Jonathan Kim

Faithful in the Fields: Cultivating Context in Every Soil



By Tiffany Kraker, ReFrame Ministries

Recognizing the need for deeper global impact, ReFrame's leadership moved its major language programs from North America directly into the regional fields we serve. The goal was simple yet important: to shift ReFrame's messaging away from a Western perspective and place it into the hands of local leaders who intimately understand the culture. By cultivating indigenous ministry teams, we are able to deeply disciple believers and effectively reach seekers who have not yet heard the gospel.

This localized approach allows ReFrame to meet people exactly where they are—speaking their heart language and tending to the specific spiritual, emotional, and cultural “soil” of every unique region.

Today those regional fields span the globe, representing vastly different terrain. Altogether, ReFrame operates or partners with nine distinct language ministries including Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Hindi, Indonesian, Japanese, Portuguese, and Spanish. In every one of these ministries teams are working diligently behind the scenes, creating contextualized media to grow a greater understanding of Christ's love across the world.

Some of these spiritual soils are currently hardened by social unrest; others are weary from exhaustion. Yet as we look more closely at just four of these ministries, we can see the value of faithful labor in the fields.

Hindi Ministry: India

When we look at the fields today, much of the world's spiritual soil is being tested by severe societal distress. In India, ReFrame's Hindi ministry leader (whose name is withheld for his safety) reports on a landscape rife with uncertainty and institutional breakdown.

“We are living in a time of moral crisis,” he shares. “There is a lack of trust and goodwill all around. Many have lost their trust in the system and the institutions that are comprised of people in high places.”

This systemic breakdown has blurred the lines between truth and falsehood, the civilized and uncivilized, and

ReFrame's Hindi ministry partners with a local school to plant saplings around the Belguri, Rani, area of India.



ReFrame's Hindi ministry workers use saplings they plant with local students to share ways that nature constantly teaches you how to grow.

religion and politics. The resulting cultural climate is dry and cynical. “Both young and old have become pessimistic in their expectations,” notes the ministry leader. “Their future is filled with fear and confusion.”

Yet it is precisely in this hard, cracked soil that the seed of the gospel finds an opening. This ministry leader observes that beneath the pessimism, “most people have become desperate for a divine intervention.” By offering a steady, trustworthy presence in the local communities, the Hindi ministry acts as a faithful tiller, bringing the grounding truth of Christ to a culture starved for authenticity.

Spanish Ministry: Mexico

The work of sowing requires immense endurance, especially when the harvest is slow to appear. ReFrame's Spanish-language devotional, *Cada Día*, recently reflected on this exact reality through the lens of Psalm 126:5: “Those who sow with tears will reap with songs of joy.”

“Restoration is beautiful, but it's not easy,” Rev. Huascar de la Cruz shared in the devotional. “The farmer knows that there is no harvest without sowing. But he also knows that sowing isn't always pleasant. There are days of fatigue and uncertainty. Sometimes the earth is hard, the tools are few, and the heart gets tired.”

This agricultural truth mirrors the spiritual life. Much of the vital work done for God around the world is done through seasons of exhaustion or discouragement. However, the promise of the harvest remains true.

Our lives and our ministries are fields that must be sown every single day—when we serve, when we love, and when we share God’s Word. ReFrame’s Spanish ministry meets believers in these exact moments of fatigue, offering daily devotions that remind them that no seed sown for God is ever in vain. God faithfully promises that the tears of the sower will eventually turn into the joy of the reaper.

Chinese Ministry: China

To maximize ReFrame’s kingdom impact while protecting operational security, the Chinese language ministry is based in North America. This positioning allows the ministry to pivot quickly when the landscape changes, such as when government crackdowns removed its entire social media following overnight. Rather than abandoning the field, the team shifted, pivoting heavily into print and digital theological books to ensure the Word could still be distributed.

Today, the dangers facing believers on the ground are not theoretical; at the time this article is being written, nine underground leaders from one church have been detained by authorities for over eight months—including a prominent author of several of those very books published by ReFrame’s Chinese-language ministry. All have been charged with “illegal use of information networks.”

Yet by operating from the safety of North America, ReFrame can maintain a resilient, uninterrupted lifeline for our community members in China. “In times of trial, our focus must remain on providing a clear pathway to hope and spiritual guidance,” Pastor Jerry An notes. A recent prayer distributed to thousands of believers encapsulates this gentle, root-strengthening work: “Lord Jesus, our faithful good shepherd, nourish and guide us in your ongoing care. Help us when we are weak; comfort us when we are hurt; and lead us with your gentle strength.”

French Ministry: West Africa

The vital work of nurturing the next generation and sustaining leaders is evident in West Africa. ReFrame’s French-language ministry recognizes that younger generations are wrestling with modern weeds—specifically, the gripping reality of mental illness. To address this, their Voice of Youth team recently produced a specialized video series that tackles the heavy topic of depression and offers biblical comfort to young people navigating dark valleys.

At the same time, Rev. Marc Nabie, the French ministry leader, keeps an eye on leaders working the fields. They recently held a strategic ministry retreat in Burkina Faso,

gathering evangelists and representatives from various towns to share their experiences in ministry, study Scripture, and pray together.

“Sustaining the local worker is just as critical as planting the seed,” Rev. Nabie said. “When we gather our evangelists to pray and study together, we are making sure they don’t have to face the hardships of the field alone.” By feeding the spiritual roots of these local leaders, the ministry ensures they have the strength to keep working the local soil.

From the cynical urban centers of India to the quiet spaces of West Africa, God’s field is vast, and the soils are incredibly diverse. By reframing our perspective away from a one-size-fits-all model and trusting local, indigenous leaders to plant the seeds, we continue to see lives renewed in every corner of the world.

The road is often difficult, the labor is heavy, and the sowing is sometimes done in tears. But as the crops rise in fields across the globe, we are reminded that the Lord of the harvest is always faithful. 

From Survival to Purpose:

How Elizabeth Bol Found a Way Forward

By Matt Kucinski, Calvin University

A year ago, Elizabeth Bol was surviving. She was navigating a difficult divorce while recovering from addiction and alcoholism. Though she had a job, it just covered the bills. “I was just working to survive,” recalled Bol. “I felt stuck.”

One day, sitting outside Safe Haven Ministries—where she was receiving support for domestic abuse—Bol reached a breaking point.

“I was crying out to God, asking him to literally show me the way,” said Bol.

Seeing an open door

Within moments, she received an email from an advocate at Safe Haven encouraging her to apply for the Wayfinder Program, an eight-credit college experience offered by Calvin University. It is designed for adult learners who are facing social or economic barriers to higher education and want to enter or re-enter higher education in a supportive environment with barriers removed.

So she applied and, to her surprise, she was accepted. Then she was terrified. After all, it had been 20 years since she’d been in school.

“I felt I was a little too old to go back,” said Bol.

But, having recently been baptized, she was keenly aware of the importance of her obedience to walking where God was leading. “It seemed pretty obvious what he was showing me,” Bol said.

So she took a step. And right away she discovered she would not walk this road alone.

Guided along the path

“The Calvin staff removed every single barrier there was for me,” said Bol. From tuition to childcare, laptops to books, to helping her learn how to use technology that once intimidated her, “they addressed every concern right out of the gate.”

With barriers removed, Bol began her journey, and she entered into a community that would become like family.



“We all started to find our voice, share our stories, and we really learned from a different perspective, and it was just really life-giving for me,” said Bol. “I felt like I came out of my shell.”

Building confidence, following a calling

Bol had felt a call toward ministry before she started the Wayfinder Program but had felt stuck.

“I didn’t feel I was good enough to do those things,” said Bol. “A lot of it was, ‘Who? Me?’”

But just a couple of months into the program, with her confidence building, she received two invitations to apply for a part-time administrative position at a local church.

With it being part-time and with no prior administrative experience, Bol didn’t see how this would be a viable option. But

she took a step of obedience and applied.

“Wayfinder played a huge role with that,” said Bol. “I was struggling with technology and self-doubt before, and it really made me feel like I was capable.”

Discovering a way forward

As she went through the interview process, she again saw God’s fingerprints. Not only did she get offered the job the same day of her interview, but the church also increased it to a full-time position, far exceeding the salary and compensation package she had at her current job.

“The Wayfinder program really showed me the way to move forward in life and in my faith,” said Bol. “It gave me a way to move forward.”

This past spring, Bol graduated as part of the second cohort of the Wayfinder Program. The tuition-free program serves as a crucial bridge, equipping adult learners with academic and confidence-building skills as they transition into further educational or career pathways. 

The View From Here

The Power of Mutuality

IF YOU READ 1 CORINTHIANS in a single sitting, you might notice a pivotal shift right around the half-way mark. In chapter 7, verse 1, Paul writes: “Now, about the matters you wrote about.”

From this point forward, Paul is systematically responding to a list of specific questions sent to him by the Corinthian church. You can actually follow the flow through the rest of the letter by looking for the phrase “now about” as he moves from topic to topic. (As an aside, keeping this context in mind is helpful for understanding Paul’s teaching because, for example, you’ll see that the famous “love chapter” of 1 Corinthians 13 isn’t a standalone section, but part of a larger teaching on proper participation in the Lord’s Supper).

The second half of this letter shows that Paul had a strong relationship with the church. They knew they could reach out to him as a trusted partner to get the practical support they needed.

But what about the first half of the letter?

Before Paul gets to their written questions, he writes about things they did not ask him about. He had heard rumors about challenges in the community (some they probably wish Paul had not heard), and he proactively writes to offer counsel, encouragement, and hard truth. Paul knew this

By paying close
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community intimately. He wasn’t just offering generic advice. He was speaking directly into their unique realities to support the long-term health and vibrancy of the church in Corinth.

This is the beauty of mutuality. The congregation trusted Paul enough to ask him their questions, and Paul knew them well enough to speak into their lives proactively.

I often think of this passage when it comes to our shared ministries and the various ways our denomination is structured to be a supportive community.

This dynamic shows up when a deacon builds the type of relationship with or within the congregation or larger community where they are a trusted source of wisdom—someone who is responsive to the immediate needs but also is a helpful, proactive resource for questions people have.

This shows up when a pastor is able to preach to a congregation out of deep awareness of the ways the Word of God is taking root in the community’s daily life, serving as a comforting shepherd and trusted adviser.

This same mutuality shows up when church visitors or regional pastors

know the leaders within their own classis enough that they can be trusted to be invited into difficult conversations, while maintaining enough of a relationship that they can reach out to share their own concerns or encouragements based on what they are seeing and hearing.

And it shows up with denominational ministries that are able to support the work of churches across Canada, the United States, and around the world. Our vision for these ministries is one where we are a trusted partner and resource in the many things churches experience, cultivating deep enough relationships that the resources and insights we share proactively are welcomed and received well.

These pages of “Our Shared Ministry” talk about planting seeds, and each seed planted is a relationship. A farmer knows the field, knows the livestock, and knows the unique needs of the land. By paying close attention and understanding the environment, a farmer ensures the crops get exactly what they need to flourish. As you read through these pages, we invite you to see our shared ministries through that same lens—as an ecosystem of deep roots and mutual relationships, working together so that the whole church can thrive. 



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

CRC Loan Fund Expands Lending

THE CRC LOAN FUND is an independent nonprofit subsidiary of the CRCNA whose purpose is to provide low-cost financing to CRCNA churches. It has been serving the denomination since 1983.

Over the last decade, the Loan Fund's lending volume has declined by almost half (\$18.6 million in 2016 to \$9.6 million in 2026). In 2024, the Loan Fund Board began considering how to shift the trajectory from decline to growth and ultimately determined that expanding who the Loan Fund lends to might help it remain financially viable while also supporting the mobilization and growth of the CRCNA community of faith.

Synod 2026 ratified the Loan Fund's amended articles of incorporation that now allow it to lend to CRCNA-related organizations, also known as CRC parachurches.

The Loan Fund's primary purpose of supporting Christian Reformed churches remains the same, and this expansion to support parachurch ministries is a step toward that end. First, the Loan Fund will not be able to fulfill its mission of lending to churches if it does not remain financially viable. To remain financially viable, it needs to generate a certain volume of loans to cover expenses from investment certificates and the fixed costs of operating the fund. Notably, increased loan volume means that fixed costs will be spread over more loans, allowing the Fund to decrease loan rates overall.

Next, as church membership declines, parachurch ministries can serve as an avenue to connect people to the local church. In this day and age, the gospel message is not always what initially attracts someone to Christianity. Indeed, in Western society, where people are free to practice whatever

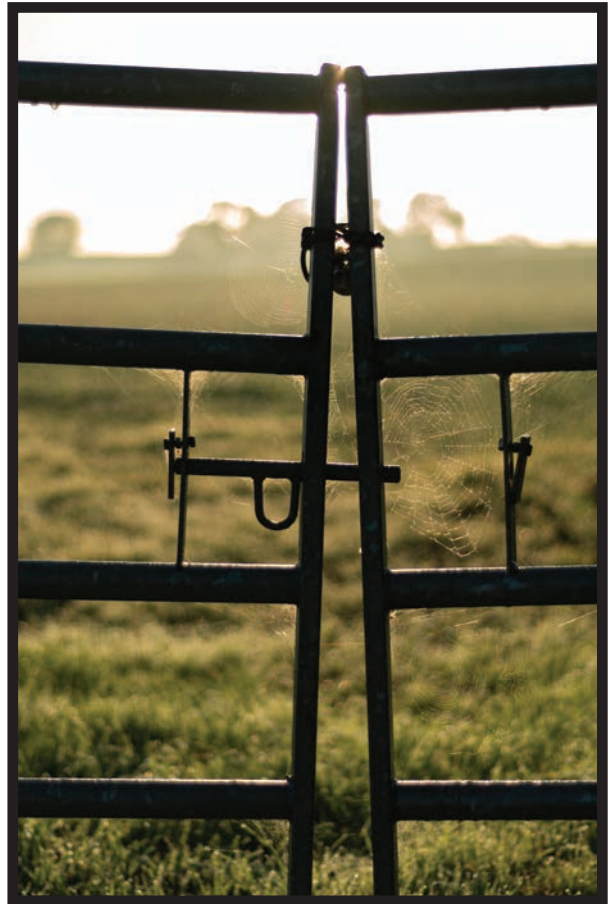
religion they like, many people are familiar with Christianity and view traditional evangelism as overly persuasive rather than welcoming.

Instead, people generally come to a Christian organization because of a need, crisis, or desire to help. They come for education, counseling, to foster children, or to volunteer medically. People then stay as they come to personally know that Christ is the ultimate provider, supporter, advocate, and reconciler of this broken world. When people encounter Christ's light through believers, there is room for the larger gospel reality.

Para means "come alongside" in Greek. Parachurch ministries ideally come alongside the local church in spreading the gospel. Many serve as someone's first touchpoint, orienting them toward the church.

The CRCNA has, in some regards, embraced the role of parachurch ministries—in spreading the gospel (Reframe and Resonate); in strengthening the local church (Thrive, CRC Loan Fund, CRC Pensions Fund, Reformed Benefits Association); in alleviating human suffering (World Renew); and in education (Calvin University and Calvin Theological Seminary). These are just a few of the almost 100 listed on the CRCNA Find a Ministry page.

Right now, the church needs parachurch ministries to serve as the wide-open gate so that those with ears can



then hear about the forgiveness of sins and a new life in Christ through God's still, small voice, which has the capacity to speak more profoundly than any loud proclamation. In this way, the Loan Fund, as a parachurch ministry itself, is taking a step to come alongside other ministries, all to serve the bigger purpose of spreading the faith and discipling believers. 

—Layla Kuhl, CRC Loan Fund

Director's Desk: Meet Darrell Delaney

The CRC has a long history of working together and pooling resources to further God's kingdom work around the world. This year we will feature a special column in each issue that includes an interview with the directors of these shared ministries: Thrive, Resonate Global Mission, ReFrame Ministries, and World Renew, as well as the presidents of Calvin University and Calvin Theological Seminary. In this issue, meet Darrell Delaney, director of ReFrame Ministries.

In what ways does ReFrame Ministries equip local CRC people and churches to do Kingdom work?

ReFrame helps churches extend their discipleship and witness beyond the walls of their buildings.

ReFrame exists to proclaim Jesus Christ, help people grow in faith, and strengthen the church through media. Through devotionals, podcasts, prayer ministries, videos, apps, radio, and multilingual media, we create biblically grounded resources that support discipleship, evangelism, prayer, and spiritual formation.

Every congregation wants to help people follow Jesus throughout the week, not only on Sunday. ReFrame comes alongside churches by meeting people where they are and helping them engage God's Word in their daily lives. ReFrame also connects with many people who are searching

for hope, answers, and spiritual direction. By God's grace, those connections often become opportunities for deeper discipleship and involvement in local Christian communities.

The Christian Reformed Church has a long tradition of doing ministry together. ReFrame is one example of how we combine our efforts and resources to reach people with the gospel in ways that individual congregations could not accomplish alone.

What are the core values that undergird ReFrame Ministries' work? How do you ensure the work aligns with those values?

Three values guide our work every day: humility, diligence, and redemption.

Humility reminds us that this ministry belongs to God and exists to serve others. Diligence calls us to pursue excellence and steward our resources faithfully. Redemption keeps our focus on the transforming power of the gospel and God's desire to restore people, communities, and creation through Jesus Christ.

ReFrame seeks alignment by regularly evaluating our programs, partnerships, and priorities against our mission. We ask whether our work is helping people encounter Christ, grow in faith, and strengthen their connection to the church. We also remain grounded in our Reformed theological heritage and our partnership with the Christian Reformed Church as we serve audiences around the world.



What's one thing about ReFrame Ministries that you wish people knew?

I wish more people knew that ReFrame Ministries is the continuation of Back to God Ministries International, a ministry the Christian Reformed Church began more than 85 years ago to proclaim the gospel through media.

While the methods have changed over the decades, the mission remains the same. Today ReFrame shares the hope of Jesus Christ through digital media, prayer ministry, devotionals, podcasts, radio, and ministry partnerships in multiple languages around the world.

Many people know one of our ministries, such as *Today* or *Groundwork*, without realizing they are part of a larger global ministry that is helping people encounter Christ and grow as disciples every day.

What has been a highlight of ReFrame Ministries in the past year?

One highlight has been the continued collaboration across our ministry teams, language ministries, and ministry partners around the world. Our staff continue to find creative

ways to share the gospel and engage people through rapidly changing media platforms while remaining faithful to our mission.

I have also been encouraged by the strengthening relationships we are building with churches, ministry partners, and supporters who care deeply about the work God is doing through ReFrame. Those relationships are essential to the ministry's effectiveness and long-term sustainability.

Where would you like to see ReFrame

Ministries in five years?

Five years from now, I hope ReFrame is more widely recognized as the Christian Reformed Church's global media ministry and as the continuation of Back to God Ministries International's long legacy of gospel proclamation.

I want to see stronger relationships with churches, deeper engagement with the people we serve, greater collaboration with ministry partners, and a sustainable financial foundation that supports long-term ministry impact.

I also want ReFrame to continue helping people move from media engagement to meaningful discipleship and connection with the church. As technology evolves, our calling remains clear: to proclaim Jesus Christ, help people grow in faith, and strengthen the church through media.

My hope is that more people around the world will know Christ, more churches will be strengthened, and more lives will be transformed through the faithful use of media for the sake of the gospel.

How can we pray for you?

Please pray for wisdom, humility, and discernment as I lead ReFrame Ministries. Pray for our staff and ministry partners around the world as they faithfully serve in diverse cultural contexts. Pray that God would continue opening doors for gospel impact and give us the wisdom to steward those opportunities well.

Please also pray for the churches ReFrame serves and the people we reach through media every day. My prayer is that God would use ReFrame to help more people know Jesus Christ, grow in faith, and find their place in the life and mission of his church. 

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



Walls Tumble Down in Zambia

To most of us, Jericho is the walled city the Israelites defeated in the book of Joshua. In Joshua 6:20, it says that on the seventh day of walking around the city of Jericho, “When the trumpets sounded, the army shouted, and at the sound of the trumpet, when the men gave a loud shout, the wall collapsed; so everyone charged straight in, and they took the city.”

The Jericho in World Renew’s story today is a smallholder farmer, married to Jane and father of six. In 2014, Jericho was farming four hectares of land (almost 10 acres) using a hand hoe. He faced barriers such as poor soil fertility, limited tools, and the high cost of synthetic fertilizers. These “walls” kept his yields to a minimum, and he averaged just 1.2 tons per hectare. For context, the average Canadian farmer doubles that with half the growing season. Providing enough food or income for his family seemed impossible.

Then Jericho joined a program supported by Growing Hope Globally and World Renew. Through the program, he gained access to conservation agriculture training that helped transform his farming practices. He also connected with a savings group: a community-based association where members pool their savings, access small loans, and share profits at the end of a cycle. This provided a safe way to save money, access affordable credit, and invest in his farm and family without relying on costly external loans.

Through conservation agriculture mentorship, Jericho learned techniques such as ripping, pot holing, mulching, manure application, and crop rotation. With access to an ox-drawn ripper, he expanded his farm to seven hectares, increasing production while reducing labor. By combining organic manure with smaller amounts of chemical



Jericho poses with his motorcycle in front of one of his fields.

fertilizer, he cut costs and improved soil health. Through his perseverance, Jericho’s faith grew with every field he prepared, every seed he planted, and every decision he made with hope for the future.

“Before this program,” Jericho said, “I struggled to feed my family. Now I cultivate more land, harvest high yields, and have enough income to meet our family needs. I can even plan for the future. God has given me strength to work hard and share knowledge with others.”

The results have been remarkable. Last season, Jericho harvested nine tons of maize and two tons of soybeans—more than double his previous yields. He invested part of his income in a motorbike, making it easier to transport produce to market and reduce household expenses. The savings group share-outs have enabled him to pay school fees, purchase farm inputs (seeds, fertilizer, crop protection), and improve his home.

“We now make decisions together,” Jane said. “Our children see the value of working as a family. Farming is

no longer a struggle; it is a shared success.”

Jericho’s success has inspired others in his community. “I now mentor five young farmers in my village,” he explained. “They are adopting conservation agriculture and joining savings groups, just like I did.”

Looking ahead, Jericho plans to expand his farm to 10 hectares, introduce drought-resilient crops, and continue growing the community savings group to facilitate more opportunities for financial independence and food security for others.

In the story of the battle of Jericho, the people had to march around that city every day for a week before God delivered the city into their hands. The Jericho in World Renew’s story has had a much longer journey, but after 12 years of work, learning, growth, and patience, the walls that stood between him and hope have tumbled down. Through patience, stewardship, hard work, and God’s faithfulness, Jericho has made a promising way forward for his family. 

—Naomi Bula, World Renew

Equipping the Church in Uganda One Page at a Time

IN THE HEART OF SOROTI, UGANDA,

a quiet yet intentional equipping is happening through turning pages and sharing breakfast. Pastor Richard Oonyu sits at a table chatting with peers as he carefully flips through the pages of a new book over breakfast.

Resonate Global Mission missionary Anthony Sytsma and local pastors like Oonyu are working together to tackle one of the greatest challenges facing the African church: the need for deep theological resources and biblical training. The church in Africa is growing at a breathtaking rate, and the hunger for knowledge is immense.

However, many pastors in Uganda face staggering obstacles to deep study. While some city pastors have a small collection of books, the average rural pastor might own only a Bible and one or two Christian books. Sytsma has even met leaders who own zero books and no Bible at all. These pastors are often bivocational volunteers, receiving as little as \$1 to \$5 a month from their churches while balancing farming, teaching, or business to survive.

As Sytsma explained, by the time they get home from a schedule filled with community pressures, weddings, and burials, they are exhausted. "Opening a book would be challenging for any of us in such a situation," he said.

That's why Sytsma founded the Soroti Pastors' Book Club to provide resources and accountability for a community of 43 pastors from a variety of denominations.

The impact of this simple model has been profound. The group reads through a series like the *Healthy Church* books donated by

Resonate Global Mission missionary Anthony Sytsma worked with locals to start the Soroti Pastors' Book Club to equip believers to better lead the quickly growing church in Uganda.



Christianbook and Crossway. Pastors read the books in advance and then discuss them together. One local church was recently "helped, convicted, and instructed" through a book on deacons, leading them to appoint deacons for the first time in their history. Beyond technical training, pastors testify that the biggest impact is the unity and new friendships formed across different church backgrounds.

This work is about multiplication and true ownership rather than creating dependency. Sytsma notes that he has been "thoroughly humbled and impressed" by the hunger for knowledge these leaders possess. One of the recent outcomes that excites him most is seeing pastors start their own reading groups in rural areas to reach even more pastors.

"Being a member of the book club has been one of the most important things in my life," said Oonyu. "My knowledge of the Word of God and relevant doctrines has greatly improved, and most of the books that we read and

discuss collectively are very vital for any Christian leader."

He said that the book club provides access to vital books that would otherwise be "practically impossible" to find.

Through Resonate, the mission agency of the Christian Reformed Church, the denomination's churches are partnering with local believers around the world to help strengthen churches and spread the gospel. Sytsma is helping leaders grow in their faith, equipping them to guard their congregations against false teachings and lead with biblical integrity. He notes it is incredibly rewarding to see the "light bulb click" as pastors gain a better grasp of the gospel. 

—Victoria Veenstra,
Resonate Global Mission

How Can We Help?

You and your church now have three options for easier access to CRC ministries and resources.



Click

Search hundreds of resources from CRC ministries and churches.

Try it out at
crcna.org/Resources



Call

Got a ministry question but not sure who to call? We can help.

Give us a shout at
800-272-5125



Chat

Oh yeah, we chat too. Type and we'll type back.

Chat from any page at
crcna.org

If you have a ministry need and wonder if your denomination can help, just click, call, or chat.

We're here to serve.



**Christian
Reformed
Church**

Maps and Perspectives

I WONDER IF YOU, LIKE ME, have wondered about airplane flight paths. When I look at a map online, the routes always appear curved.

It doesn't seem to make sense that a flight from Chicago to Japan would cross over part of Alaska. On a flat map, the most direct route looks like a straight line across the Pacific Ocean.

Here's another surprising thing: I just opened Google Maps and checked Greenland. On that map, Greenland looks bigger than the entire United States!

All of this comes down to perspective. Flat maps distort reality. It feels wrong that the shortest path from Chicago to Japan goes through Alaska, or that Greenland appears so enormous.

The issue is that we're trying to represent a ball on a flat, rectangular surface, and that creates distortions. Most online maps use the Mercator projection—a method of projecting the Earth onto a flat plane. It works well for navigation and zoomed-in views because it preserves angles (streets still meet at roughly 90 degrees, for example), and it's fairly accurate near the equator. Problems arise near the poles and when measuring large distances across the globe.

If you take a physical globe and stretch a string between Chicago and Tokyo, you'll see that the shortest route really

does arc over Alaska. On that same globe, Greenland is only about one-quarter the size of the contiguous United States.

It's our perspective that's off. We are trying to picture something in a way that doesn't work very well.

This often reminds me of God's plan—something I've spent a lot of time reflecting on in recent years given situations in my life I have faced and continue to face. I imagine most of us have these situations in our lives.

God's perspective is vastly different from mine. He sees all of time, space, and all of history at once, while I can only see my small slice of it.

That doesn't make my limited view any easier. Life can still feel incredibly difficult from where I stand. But it does give me faith that God's perspective is far broader and wiser than my own.

And that is where I place my trust.

The next time you look at a flat map, take a moment to notice Greenland. Remember that our view from this perspective is distorted. Even when we can't see the fuller picture, we can have faith that a truer perspective exists. **B**



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



To Sustain

By Meg Pheifer

Editor's note: This essay came in first place by blind judging for the 2026 Young Adults Writing Contest on the topic of "Sustaining Faith."

In the summer of 2024, I interned as a grant writer at Kingdom Causes Bellflower, a community development nonprofit in Bellflower, Calif. Grant writing is not for the faint of heart. The grant writer must navigate databases and application portals, comb through 990s for financial information, and manage reporting and accountability. All this might be more easily achieved if it were not for the brutality of constant failure. The grant writer is lucky if they hear back from the foundation at all, and even luckier if that response is "we're considering it."

I recently graduated from Calvin University and managed to secure a year-long internship with a faith-based anti-trafficking agency. Like me, many young adult believers are steeped in an environment of anxiety as new graduates desperately try to get their foot in the door of their industry. The news keeps telling us that the job market is horrible right now. Every "entry-level" position seems to require two or three years of work experience. Applying for jobs can easily become a full-time position by itself, with a low return on investment.

Over the past four years at Calvin, I have been saturated in Reformed doctrine—and confessional drama. My fellow students and I have wrestled with how to navigate difficulties in our denomination and the disaffiliation of churches just down the street. We have wondered how we can possibly build a beloved community on campus and across the CRC when divisions cut deep and nuance ceases to be a priority. We have witnessed a

breakdown of trust between students, faculty, administrators, and our Board of Trustees. And we have shuddered at the world we are inheriting.

It's scary out here, folks.

How do we sustain our faith in moments like these, when we feel embattled on every side, when our best doesn't seem to cut it, when we are simply struggling to survive, let alone thrive? How do we follow God's calling faithfully when doors slam shut? How do we release our culture's definition of success and cling tightly to the promise of our Savior that as he cares for the birds, he will care for us (Matt. 6:26-34)? How do we buy into a kingdom vision greater than our little lives? And most of all: how do we do all this with hope?

To endure, faith must be grounded in Scripture and focused on serving God's purposes, not hitting world-defined performance benchmarks. In John 11, Jesus instructs the residents of Bethany to remove the stone from the entrance of Lazarus's tomb. When

Martha protests that the stench will be too strong, Jesus replies, “Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?” A few moments later, he lifts his heart in prayer, thanking the Father for hearing him “that they may believe that you sent me.” When God shows up in our lives, it is not just for our own benefit. Indeed, I would argue that it is not primarily for our benefit. God works so that God may be glorified, and so that his people would be drawn to him. Our sustaining faith is not based on the premise that God will meet all our needs or fulfill our wishes. Instead, we trust that God’s purposes would be worked out in our lives, and we ask for the strength to release our own desires and be fully committed to the larger project of God’s kingdom.

A sustaining faith is also deeply rooted in Christ-centered communities. We desperately need each other to bolster, challenge, nurture, and deepen our faith. Sometimes, we need to give each other resources. Such is the case for Kingdom Causes Bellflower, which invites local community members to invest their time, money, and care into its housing, employment, and educational programs. More often, we need to recommit to honest dialogue, loving those we disagree with and honoring them with empathy and respect. Always, we need to pray for each other. God gives us the gift of communities in all their difficulties, diversity, and vibrancy, and God also asks us to be united in our common faith in Jesus Christ (John 17:20-23). As we contribute to the life of the community, our individual faith will be encouraged and stretched.

When the foundations of our world seem to shake, faith that sustains requires a balance between lament and courage. Faith does not mean optimism, nor incessant positivity. It does

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not give us a superpower to do whatever we want in the name of Jesus. It is possible—and even wise—to unite faith with lament for the brokenness of the world. We can wonder what God is doing even as we trust that he is moving, as the Psalmist grieves before the “and yet.” At the same time, our faith gives us courage to continue the good work. It motivates us to ask good questions, to build relationships with people who are different from us, to learn about new things and marvel at the beauty of God’s world, and to live with a joy that defies understanding.

Lastly, a sustaining faith requires consistency and commitment, even when the tasks set before us feel mundane or impossible. In her book *Liturgy of the Ordinary*, Tish Harrison Warren writes that “the kind of spiritual life and disciplines needed to

sustain the Christian life are quiet, repetitive, and ordinary” (p. 35). Faith is submitting another grant application, or applying for another job. It is welcoming another difficult conversation about sexuality. It is viewing our daily, small actions as acts of worship unto the Lord. Like the boy offering his loaves and fish, the Lord can take our sustenance and multiply it into abundance. And even when the great miracle doesn’t happen as we imagined or expected, the Lord himself gives us our daily bread, broken around a communal table and washed down with tears. Rejection, insecurity, loss, and division are no match for the tender, sustaining care of the King.



Meg Pheifer, 22, grew up in Lakewood, Calif., is a third-generation alumna of Calvin University (class of 2026), where she studied history, political science, and urban studies. She is completing a year-long internship for International Justice Mission in Bangkok, Thailand.

Sustaining Faith

By Julia Fernandez

Editor's note: This essay came in second place by blind judging for the 2026 Young Adults Writing Contest on the topic of "Sustaining Faith."

Has there been a time in your life when your faith was tested, when your heart was left broken, and the suffering seemed pointless? Many of us have been there or will be. Before I share my story, I want to encourage us with this: our stories are not ultimately about us, but about our Savior.

My story of sustaining faith started when I was 7 years old and had my first seizure. I was hospitalized for over a week, and the doctors had to put me into an induced coma to stop the seizing. This major seizure turned my life upside down because everything I thought was certain suddenly became uncertain. Knowing we are not in control is quite different from experiencing the stark reality of the unknown. But even in the dark, we still have the light of hope because we still have Jesus.

For the most part, my medication controls the seizures, but sometimes they are triggered by stress, flashing lights, overstimulation, or lack of sleep. I would love to say I always stayed strong and was never discouraged when I had a seizure, but that would not be true. Those long and painful

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seasons took such an emotional, mental, physical, and spiritual toll on me that they left my faith and my body exhausted, my heart broken, and me completely dependent on Jesus.

One time, I felt especially shattered after I had been seizure-free for two years. Then, because of stress and lack of sleep, I had a seizure at a worship music camp. I was devastated like never before. At the camp, I was learning to play the guitar so I could lead worship, and at that moment, everything seemed absolutely pointless. I could not see any reason for the suffering. I could not understand why God would allow it to happen.

This June, I was about to be seizure-free for a year. However, after attending a Christian concert, I had a seizure. I took my emergency meds, and we prayed that God would shorten it, but he didn't. I went from worshipping Christ to suddenly feeling hopeless and desperate. Have you also wrestled with the question, "Why does God allow this?" I do not doubt his all-powerful character, but I do sometimes question.

This is exactly where sustaining faith comes in. Sustaining faith helps us trust God because he is sovereign, loving, and good, even when the breakthrough does not come and when

we do not understand why he allows the hurt. God uses trials to build in us a faith that endures. My suffering causes me to stop depending on my insight and instead rest in the grace Christ purchased for me. That shift brings glory to God.

Sustaining faith also gives purpose to our suffering. In my life, God has used physical issues to bring me closer to him, deepen my relationship with him, and teach me how to be content in Christ. But I also know that we will not always understand the purpose of our suffering on this side of heaven. That is where faith plays such an important role. Faith is a gift that helps us believe that even when we do not understand, God is still good, he is still our provider, and he is faithful.

To me, sustaining faith is an ongoing journey. What does sustaining faith look like? It looks like trusting that God is working behind the scenes for our good and his glory, even in the midst of suffering.

Lastly, sustaining faith helps us find balance between asking to be healed while also believing that the greatest miracle has already been given. The miracle is Jesus, the work he accomplished on the cross, and the victory he already holds. Right now, we live in the "already and not yet." You and I will face trials, and God will use them to refine our sustaining faith. In the valleys of life, may God make Jesus enough for you and me, so we will learn to rest in him. Sustaining faith is not passive; it is active.

I want to encourage us that one day, when we see our glorious Lord and Savior Jesus Christ face to face, we will be healed from our physical illnesses, and suffering will no longer exist. Our faith will finally be turned

Faith for the Journey

By Leah Hoksbergen

Editor's note: This essay came in third place by blind judging for the 2026 Young Adults Writing Contest on the topic of "Sustaining Faith."

to sight on that beautiful day. Jesus Christ, who overcame sin, the devil, and death, will sustain our faith until then. The Apostle Peter explained this by saying, "These (trials) have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed (1 Pet. 1:7)."

Isn't that good news?

If you believe it is good news, like I do, then I challenge us to be bold in our sustaining faith and to go into this hurting world to tell people about the good news of Jesus Christ and what he has done. After all, our stories are not ultimately about us; they are about Jesus Christ. **B**



Julia Fernandez, 18, attends South Kendall Community Church in Miami, Fla. She is working toward her degree in psychology with the goal of becoming a licensed clinical mental health counselor. She loves playing guitar, pickleball, and ice skating.

As Christians, we are often familiar with the concept of "the wilderness." We easily see ourselves in the children of Israel, stumbling on our way toward the Promised Land. Knowing that we cannot sustain our faith on our own, how does God work in our lives to see us through to the other side of the desert? Our destination sure, what keeps our feet running toward our heavenly home?

Many of us can recall stories told by older generations of the trials and difficulties overcome by our forebears. In my family, there is one particular story, told at many holidays and get-togethers over the years, that has stuck with me because it beautifully displays God's providence in the wilderness.

My grandpa always begins the story from the perspective of his younger self: a deacon at a small-town Iowa church in the 1990s. On an assigned church visit, he went to the home of his mother's aunt, an elderly widow. Together they read Scripture, prayed, and chatted about extended family. He was just getting up to end the visit when the old woman stopped him, saying, "No, no, sit back down for a bit, I have a story to tell you." Always a sucker for a good story, my grandpa obeyed and sat down and listened.

As the widow told it, her parents, a young Dutch couple, sought to leave

The Lord
orchestrated all
these events in
his providence.

Europe for America in pursuit of a new start around the turn of the 20th century. At the same time, my grandfather's paternal great-grandparents, Albert and Nellie, were farmers in southern Iowa and desired to help sponsor immigrants moving to the United States. Through a long process of communication through letters, Albert and Nellie agreed to sponsor the young couple, promising them a job and a home. However, soon before their departure, the couple found that they were pregnant with their first child. In faith, they decided to proceed with their plans, traveling by ship, wagon, barge, and steamboat—all with a newborn! The journey was difficult, but they safely arrived at Albert and Nellie's farm in Tracy, Iowa. They were welcomed warmly, but with unfortunate news. The job and home Albert

and Nellie had lined up had fallen through. Regardless, Albert and Nellie did all that they could to help the couple, curtaining off a section of their own home for the young family and providing work for the young father as a farmhand.

Despite the improved situation, the travels had taken their toll. Each step of the arduous journey to America had weakened mother and child. The young woman cried, for she realized that she could no longer produce enough milk. The baby was starving! Nellie, herself a mother, familiar with hardship, spoke up. She pointed to her own child and said, "I am still nursing this little boy, and he doesn't really need it, so I am willing to nurse your baby instead."

At this point in the story, my grandpa reminds his audience of the elderly widow at the conclusion of her tale. Usually at this place in his emotional narrative, he has succumbed to a tear or two. Moreso, however, does he describe the tears on the wrinkled face, one that had seen years of hardship of its own! The venerable old lady had one last thing left to add to her account.

With glistening eyes she said, "I was that baby, and I owe my life to your great-grandparents."

Surely God was at work in the lives of these two families so that their descendants could meet one day in

God's name. The Lord orchestrated all these events in his providence, and upon reflection, we are further encouraged to look upon ways in which he upheld his children in the wilderness.

Proverbs 3:5-6 says, "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight." With a formidable journey ahead, the young Dutch couple no doubt knew that God's Word doesn't promise an easy path, only that such a path, difficult though it might be, does in fact, exist, and that it is only made possible by the sovereignty of God and the blood of Jesus. They moved forward in the confidence of God's promise, so when economic hardship and sickness came, they knew God would provide shoulders to lean on.

The Bible gives us many instances in which individuals relied on others for support, whether it be Elijah and the widow with her jar of oil, Ruth and Naomi, David and Jonathan, or the members of the early church. In the story of the young immigrants, one family was forced to depend on another for survival. But notice that even while leaning upon each other, all of these people ultimately stood upon the Lord's promise of provision. The church is a gift from God, giving us strength for the journey, but it is not our ultimate source of fortitude. People are fallible. It is Christ, the infallible, who is our fundamental source of support through the valley and mountaintop.

The Father who has our future secure also promises to provide all that we need for the journey, including the gumption to get us there, supplied through reading his Word. 1 Peter 2:2 commands, "Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, that by it you

may grow up in your salvation." Like the infant in the widow's story, we starve without proper nourishment. But when latched on to the steadfastness of God's Word, he rescues us from our thirst, providing himself as the Word made flesh. And who is the Word made flesh, the one who sustains us? He who gives manna in the wilderness and brings us into the land of milk and honey. He is the Living Water, the Bread of Life, and the sustenance of our souls. 



Leah Hoksbergen, 17, is a student at Pella Christian High School. She enjoys participating in youth group and the praise team at her church, Calvary CRC in Pella.

Just Like We All Do

When I walked over to her, the man screamed at both of us, then disappeared.

Monday. 7:15 a.m. The November air was brisk, but pleasant.

Ahead, a man and woman each carried black plastic bags.

Yelling pummeled the morning air. Spewed words I recognized as hateful, angry, demeaning—in a word, abusive.

I kept my distance—watching and praying, knowing I shouldn't, couldn't close my eyes to what was unfolding.

The man veered to the left, the woman to the right. She sat on the curb, lit a cigarette. When I walked over to her, the man screamed at both of us, then disappeared.

"How are you?" I asked.

"I'm fine," she said.

"I don't think you're fine," I answered.

Her face crumpled.

"I think you're being abused by that man," I said.

"He calls me names. He won't leave me alone," she explained.

"No woman deserves to be called names by a man. That's not love. When a man loves a woman, he wants to do what's best for her."

"I never felt like I was worth it," she said.

"People have always hurt me. My mom. My brother, even though now I'm good with him. Only my dad treated me kindly, and he died five years ago."

"You are worth it," I assured her. "God loves you."

"I had a baby," she said. Now her tears were flowing.

"Where's the baby?" I asked, recognizing the mother-love that pumped in her heart.

"With his grandmother. But then this guy—he's not the father—came and did terrible things. I don't want my son to see that. I don't know what to do."

"What's your name?" I asked.

"Callie." She paused. "Callie Belle*."

"I'm going to pray for you, Callie Belle. Right now." She nodded, open to whatever her view of God and prayer entailed. "Dear God, let Callie Belle know you love her and you have a better future for her. Take care of her and keep her safe."

"Thank you," Callie Belle said. "What's your name?"

I told her.

"Thank you, Sonya."

"You need to get help," I urged.

"I have an appointment to talk with someone at a woman's shelter," she explained.

"Until then," I said, "try to be in places where you can get help. Don't be alone. Do you have any money?"

"I don't. And my credit card is expired."

"I don't have any cash to buy you food," I said, "but why don't you go to the coffee shop over there and warm up and be around other people? I'm going to pray that someone will notice you and buy you a coffee."

"OK."

"Do you want me to walk you there?"

"No, just watch me till I get around that corner."

I kept watch as Callie Belle's form grew smaller and, in the distance, I saw her turn the corner. She was out of sight, but not out of my heart.

I looked around. The man wasn't nearby but I knew he was out there somewhere, lurking, stalking, waiting to strike Callie Belle again. He was out there—a bully who needs Jesus' love, redemption, and transformation. Just like Callie Belle does. Just like we all do. **B**

*Name has been changed



Sonya VanderVeen Feddema is a freelance writer and a member of Covenant CRC in St. Catharines, Ont.

Little House Reboot Offers Wider View of Frontier History

THE NEW ADAPTATION of *Little House on the Prairie* grapples with the hard realities of Indigenous displacement, while it also honors the grit and endurance of the pioneers. It brings back real-life characters beloved by generations—Pa and Ma, Laura and Mary—fictionalized by Laura Ingalls Wilder in the 1930s.

(Yes, real life *and* fiction! No wonder it's hard for viewers to accept any adaptation as "correct" when even Wilder herself blurred the lines between fact and fiction.)

Many of the iconic scenes hew quite closely to Wilder's pages, such as Osage men entering the cabin when Pa is gone (the show has Osage consultants to get the language, culture, history and costumes right), Mr. Scott falling in the well and almost dying of poisonous gas, and Mr. Edwards saving Christmas with presents for the girls.

Other scenes are new inventions or more loosely based on the book, such as the episode where the Ingalls family comes close to dying from malaria. In the book and in real life, Dr. George Tann, a Black frontiersman, saved the entire Ingalls family from death.

In this series, however, Dr. Tann saves some, not all, of the family, with an assist from a shopboy Mary has a crush on.

It's these deviations and others that have purists riled up, even though this series is far more on-book than the 1970s and '80s NBC show starring Michael Landon.

Michael Landon's Pa was unfailingly heroic and good, while Luke Bracey's character reveals more of a human, flawed man who brought his wife and children into several dangerous situations to follow his dreams. The real Charles Ingalls of the books and history show a more complicated story.

He was kind, charming, loving, and reckless. He also built a home on land that legally belonged to the Osage.

Faith is another aspect where the old show and this new series differ, but what was the reality of the Ingalls family and their beliefs? Some note that the old show makes it seem as if the Ingalls were devout Christians, but the books offer a much quieter version of the family's credence. This is reflected in the new series through singing hymns together, such as "In the Sweet By and By." (Pa's fiddle and the family singing together alone and with friends infuses the series with music and joy.) Alyssa Wapanatâhk as White Sun is frequently seen praying to Wah'Kon-Tah, the "great spirit," and a cross hangs on the Osage family's wall.

Alison Arngrim, who played spiteful Nellie Oleson in the old show, makes a cameo in this series, as does *Anne of Green Gables* portrayer Megan Follows, who plays Laura and Mary's grandmother in a fever dream sequence.

Filmed outside of Winnipeg, Man., the prairie itself is a character, luminous in its sunsets, waving grasses, and massive sky.

With themes of community, chosen family, and the difficult and ongoing work of reconciliation with all God's image bearers, this retelling of an American pioneer family's quest to settle the West is a loving homage to Wilder's work and an attempt to show the broader lens of history. (Netflix) **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*.



Acoustic Worship Sessions

By Clark Beckham

Reviewed by Paul Delger

Singer, songwriter, and *American Idol* alum (season 14) Clark Beckham puts his spin on six modern worship tunes with his project, *Acoustic Worship Sessions*.

"I think the elements of this record have always been in me, I just didn't know how to put it together," Beckham said. "When my love for God and my love for soul and R&B met, this is what came out."

The playlist consists of "Great Are You Lord," "Goodness of God," "I Could Sing of Your Love Forever," "Gardens into Graves," "How Great is Our God," and "Nobody Greater." The music provides an invitation to reflect on God's vast nature, and the soothing piano, blended with Beckham's vocal ability to reach the high notes, gives the record an interesting balance. (NCS Records—NRT Music)



Astronaut! A Novel

By Oana Aristide

Reviewed by Ethan Meyers

Repressive regimes always want their citizens to feel one thing: fear. It's an emotion that's present from the opening pages of *Astronaut!* In Nicolae Ceausescu's Romania, there's little respite from that feeling.

Constantin is one of the police officers assigned to investigate eight-year-old Lia's purchase of a yellow vase. He's one of a privileged few to know there's more going on than the official story tells, but nobody will tell him everything.

Oana Aristide, who was born in Romania under communist rule, masterfully weaves together the lives of these two protagonists in a story that reads like an imagined version of her own childhood.

I'm not sure if Aristide is a Christian, but the lesson of *Astronaut!* resonates with the words of 1 John 4:18, "there is no fear in love." (W. W. Norton & Company)



The Other Bennet Sister

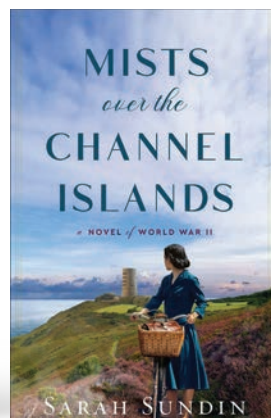
Reviewed by Lorilee Craker

Long overlooked as the least pretty and interesting of the five Bennet sisters, Mary Bennet's story takes the lead and a powerful life of its own in this new series.

When a family tragedy occurs, Mary's life gets an unexpected new start in London with her aunt and uncle, the Gardiners.

In her new setting and feeling more comfortable in her own skin, Mary begins to catch the eye of new friends and even potential suitors.

The journey to Mary owning her life and choices is filled with obstacles and foes (hello, Caroline Bingley!), like real life is. Viewers will find comfort, inspiration, and gladness as they root for Mary and themselves to become someone who lives as if they are deeply and unconditionally loved. (Britbox, Amazon Prime, The Roku Channel)



Mists Over the Channel Islands

By Sarah Sundin

Reviewed by Sonya VanderVeen Feddema

Sundin's fast-paced, emotive narrative gives readers a picture of life in the island of Jersey during the Nazi occupation.

Here Dr. Ivy Picot helps run the respected family medical practice with her father.

When Ivy meets Gerrit van der Zee, she is drawn to what seems to be his kindness, but his German army uniform repulses her. However, as Ivy is drawn into the resistance network, she begins to understand that Gerrit and Bernardus are other than they appear to be and are risking their lives for freedom.

Mists over the Channel Islands is a profoundly satisfying read that points to God's goodness and faithfulness even in times of war when all seems lost. (Revell)

The Lowdown

Written by Wayne

Coleman: In *When All Hell Breaks Loose: Trusting God When It Hurts*, CRC pastor Coleman shares a powerful and deeply personal testimony of faith in the middle of crisis. Through painful family trials, unanswered questions, and seasons of uncertainty, he discovers that God's presence is often strongest when life feels most broken. (Independent)

Starring Daisy Edgar-

Jones as Elinor: In a new *Sense and Sensibility* adaptation, two sisters experience love and heartbreak after they're forced to leave their family estate with their widowed mother and move to a humble cottage. (Oct. 16, Focus Features)

Reimagined in Brick

Form: The LEGO™ ONE PIECE animated special is a two-part retelling of the events from Seasons 1 and 2 of the pirate saga. Follow along as Usopp, the Straw Hats' most reliably unreliable narrator, spins a tall tale about the Straw Hats' journey across the East Blue into the Grand Line. (Netflix)

Written by Charles

Geschiere: *From Glory to Glory* is a study of what culture is as deed, belief, and habit, its opportunities and its risks, its possibilities and its limitations. In this book written by a CRC pastor, readers will be challenged to think about their own place in God's world in today's culture. (Xulon Press)



It's hard to
imagine now that
a spoof of *The
Banner* would
cause threats
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excommunication,
for its authors.



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

The Bananer: The Parody that Rocked the Church

ANY CELEBRATION of *The Banner's* birthday has to include a story about *The Bananer*, even though it is 56 years old and appeared when the magazine had only recently turned 100. It's hard to imagine now that a spoof of *The Banner* would cause threats of university expulsion, even excommunication, for its authors.

Looking back now, the reaction (over-reaction?) to *The Bananer* provides a window into a time in the denomination when Christian Reformed congregations were so uniform in practice that when my family went on vacation, we could find the nearest CRC and feel right at home with the identical liturgy.

I remember when Christian Reformed traditions were treated as almost biblical commands, when in many families Sunday reading was limited to the Bible and *The Banner*, and Sundays meant no riding bikes or swimming or watching TV. Attendance at evening services was mandatory, as was catechism, Sunday school, Calvinettes (or Cadets), and Christian day school. "*The Banner* effectively mirrored the cultural life of the CRC," wrote Herbert Brinks in the 1991 article, "Burning Shoes and Banana Peels: 125 Years of the Banner."

The Banner's editor was revered.

In that setting, a satire of the CRC's beloved publication created a scandal in the CRC of epic proportions. Former *Banner* interim editor Leonard Vander Zee called it a watershed moment for the church.

The Bananer

It was May 1970 when *The Bananer* surreptitiously appeared around the Calvin College (now University) campus. Calvin seniors Luke Reinsma and Stephen Sieberson duplicated *The Banner* right down to the layout, the fonts used, and lampooning the columns that appeared in the weekly magazine.

The masthead identified *The Bananer* as the dilapidated calliope of the Philistine Rewarmed Crutch, published in Bland Rapids, Mich., edited by Rev. John Vander Phlegm, with a yearly subscription fee of one pair of wooden shoes.

In that week's edition, editor Vander Phlegm wrote an open letter to all Philistine Rewarmed Crutch members who had fallen into the slothful habit of swimming on Sundays, noting that attendance at Sunday evening services suffered due to those who did not desire to attend with wet hair.

Its pages hosted a theological debate of whether two angels can dance on the head of a pin. The answer had to be no because good angels, like good Philistines, do not dance.

Perhaps most egregious was a feature article about a girl from Oostburg, Wisc., who skipped catechism to go to the movies with her boyfriend to see *101 Dalmatians*. After he kissed her on the cheek, she woke up the next morning nine months pregnant.

Though the authors did not sign their work, they surreptitiously identified themselves in the obituaries as Siebs Chuckleson, who died of a heart attack in a confrontation with Rev. Vander Phlegm, and Laurence Reinson, who died of severe burns on his entire body, presumably from being raked over the coals.

The Reaction

Banner editor Rev. John Vander Ploeg was enraged. He wrote a four-page *Banner* editorial entitled "Do We Just Laugh This Off?" Calvin president William Spoelhof wrote a letter to the editor suggesting that the editor had overreacted.

Sieberson and Reinsma faced grave consequences that they spoke about when they returned to Calvin for their



class's 40th reunion in 2010. Sieberson said they survived a proposal to expel them by one vote.

That summer, Spoelhof dragged Sieberson to his office to show him a thigh-high stack of letters. "Because of you, I'm going to have to spend my summer answering these letters," he said.

"Because of you, this will be the death of Calvin College, and you're going to drive me to an early grave." Spoelhof lived to the age of 98, and Calvin still exists.

In Seattle, Reinsma was called before the consistory and threatened with excommunication. One of the elders called *The Bananer* religious pornography. "About a year later, my dad finally spoke to me again," he said.

James Schaap wrote that *The Bananer* succeeded in doing what it attempted only because *The Banner* itself was so greatly loved. "Everyone knew *The Banner*, and everyone got the joke. Many didn't laugh." He saw it as a time

when "the late '60s crashed headlong into my parents' blessed denominational culture. Things would never be the same."

Brinks called *The Bananer* the most successful satire the CRC has ever generated. "The spoof outraged a host of readers who considered the parody an attack on venerability of every sort. Others laughed—and laughed again," he wrote. "For all its unpleasant embarrassments, *The Bananer* taught the lesson it intended."

Both Reinsma and Sieberson eventually left the CRC, Sieberson to an Episcopalian church and Reinsma to a Presbyterian church.

Sieberson became a lawyer focusing on international business law and then a law professor at Creighton University in Omaha, Neb. According to his website, he is still working part-time at age 75 and has written three books, the latest

The appearance of *The Bananer* and *The Banner* were nearly identical.

based on his childhood in Sioux Center, titled *The Fifteenth Commandment*.

Reinsma retired in 2014 after almost 30 years teaching at Seattle Pacific University. He was recognized by faculty and students as an outstanding teacher and received the Carnegie Foundation Professor of the Year award. Students lauded his passion for literature and his generosity of spirit toward his students. One wrote that "Dr. Reinsma is the wisest teacher I have ever encountered. One source of this great wisdom is his humility."

Neither ever heard from or talked to *Banner* editor John Vander Ploeg. 

Comfort in Law and Prayer

Each
commandment
is expanded and
personalized to
guide believers for
living life in right
relation with God
and neighbor.



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.

WE NOW TURN TO THE LAST SECTION of the Heidelberg Catechism: gratitude. The HC states that the way we show our thankfulness to God for his grace is by doing good works (Q&A 86). The motivation for thankfulness is generated in believers by the Holy Spirit. The outward demonstration of our thankfulness is keeping the commandments (Q&A 91) and prayer (Q&A 116).

Many 16th-century catechisms included explanations of the Law. The HC is distinct in not simply telling believers what God forbids, but also teaching believers positively what God requires of us with respect to each commandment. Each commandment is expanded and personalized to guide believers for life lived in right relation with God and neighbor (Q&A 93). For example, the exposition of the ninth commandment against giving false witness is expanded to include “twist no one’s words, not gossip or slander, nor join in condemning anyone rashly or without a hearing.”

But that is not all. The positive force exhorts believers “in court and everywhere else” to “avoid lying and deceit of every kind ... love the truth and openly confess it” and “do what I can to guard and protect my neighbor’s good name.” Even if we can avoid the “do not,” it seems very difficult to “do” all the positive actions required. You will see this basic pattern for each commandment.

Q&A 115 segues beautifully into explanation of the Lord’s Prayer. After reminding us that we can never perfectly obey these commandments, it tells us that knowledge of our sin should help us strive to obey and to “pray for the grace of the Holy Spirit to be renewed more and more after God’s image.”

Q&A 116 follows with the question, “Why do Christians need to pray?” The

answer: “Because prayer is the most important part of the thankfulness God requires of us.” The answer goes on to explain that it is through prayer that the Holy Spirit works to give grace to us for each day. The analysis of the Lord’s Prayer not only follows the basic pattern of catechisms of that era but is also one of the most beautiful sections of the HC. Each answer in this section (Q&A 120-128) can, with only a little tweaking, be used as a prayer, either personally or in public worship.

For example, if you begin with an opening like *Dear God*, answer 122 fills in the rest:

Help us to truly know you, to honor, glorify and praise you for all your works and for all that shines from them: your almighty power, wisdom, kindness, justice, mercy, and truth. And help us to direct all our living—what we think, say, and do—so that your name will never be blasphemed because of us, but always honored and praised.

Thus the exposition of the prayer not only helps us understand the meaning of each petition but gives us practical help in forming our prayers.

The HC ends as it began—with comfort. When we doubt our prayers are heard, the last Q&A reminds us “it is even more sure that God listens to my prayer, than that I really desire what I pray for.”

As we close out our thinking about the HC and move on to the Canons of Dort, I hope you have begun to see this document not just as theology, but as a helpful framework for life with the one true God who is our only comfort in life and death. 

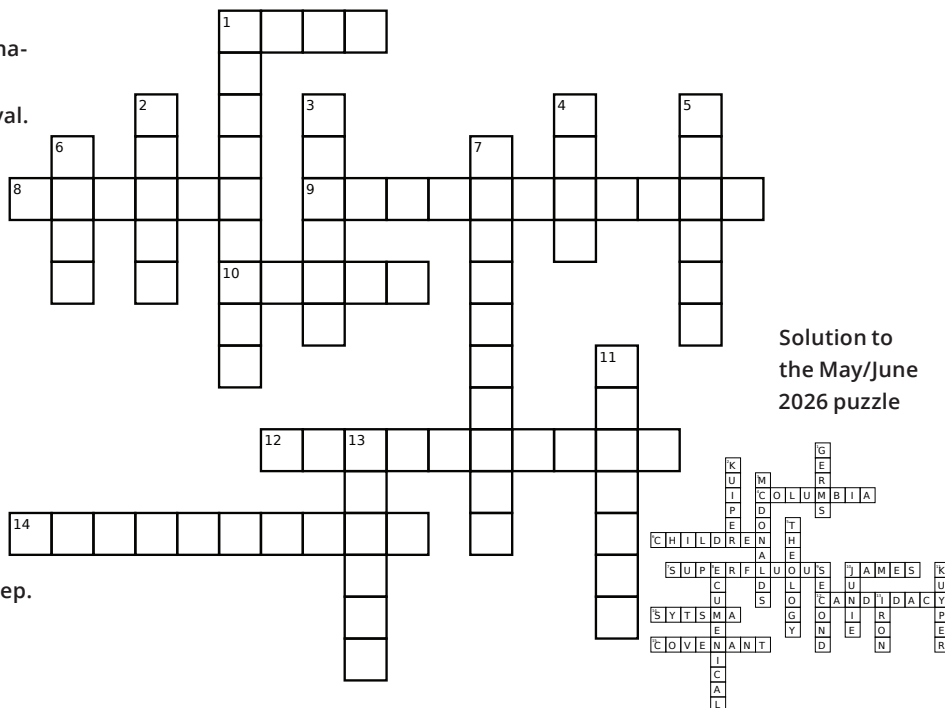
Find the answers to this crossword puzzle in this issue of *The Banner*! See the solutions next month. (Please note we do not publish Word Play in the July/August issue.)

Down

1. *Astronaut!* Author
2. Church _____, the rules that govern denominational life
3. The first step for any church project or revival.
4. The name of the "Other Bennet Sister."
5. _____-centered, most selected response to the prompt "To me, the term 'Christian Reformed' means ...".
6. Doctor who saved the Ingalls family.
7. The goal of Anna's Circle training.
11. A 1970 parody of *The Banner*.
13. _____ Pastors' Book Club.

Across

1. Spanish-language devotional: _____ *Día*.
8. Co-sponsor of "Faith Restored?" report
9. *The Banner* and Connect CRC in Pella, Iowa, shared this.
10. Church leaders must reach out to _____ sheep.
12. Contest theme: _____ Faith
14. A comforting catechism.



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The Weight of a Dollar

You have been waiting for this moment all service long.



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.

THE MUSIC CHANGES. You have already crossed off three hymns in the bulletin, counted the steps leading to the pulpit, and imagined what it would feel like to leap from each one—higher, higher. Then suddenly, there it is.

The collection plate lands in your lap.

Heavy.

On your spindly legs, it feels as enormous as Paul Bunyan's dinner plate.

You have been waiting for this moment all service long because, before church began, your father handed you something sacred: a crisp \$1 bill.

The entire morning, you have imagined what might happen to your soul if you didn't place it in the offering plate. Your father's eyes are somewhere nearby. He sees you. But you also know something else: he was the one who gave you the dollar in the first place.

And some Sundays it isn't a dollar. Sometimes it is—gasp—a \$20 bill.

You slide the bill into the waiting plate and pass it along.

When you are young, it is thrilling to be handed a dollar by your father or mother. You know your parents have money, but how often does any of it really reach your tiny fingers? For a brief moment, it becomes yours. You smooth its edges. Fold it carefully. Hold possibility in your hands. And then, somehow, you give it back to God.

So I decided to try the same thing with my own children.

One Sunday, I handed my son a dollar before church.

Everyone was watching from the pew behind us.

"He didn't put it in," someone whispered, scandalized.

The middle schoolers behind us gasped dramatically. "Can you even do that? Not put it in the plate?"

I said nothing.

At first, I was a little disappointed.

OK—I was very disappointed.

Had I failed as a parent? Was he spoiled? Too attached already?

All afternoon he carried that dollar around with him, rubbing it between his fingers, studying it as though he had discovered treasure.

That evening, we returned to church. And quietly, without anyone telling him to, the dollar slipped into the plate.

Later we asked him, "Why did you decide to give God your dollar?"

He shrugged.

"I wanted to."

Then he ran off to play.

And somewhere beneath that weight is the quiet knowledge that God's eyes are on you—not with suspicion, but with love.

You know God sees you.

You know God gave it to you.

You know God will take care of you.

So whose dollar is it, really?

It is sitting there, warm in your hands.

B



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