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Be Faithful in Little Things

SPRING REMINDS US THERE IS MUCH TO LEARN from God's creation revelation when the lens of Scripture focuses our vision.

Proverbs 30:24-28 introduces us to four critters who are "small, yet . . . extremely wise" (v. 24). "Ants are creatures of little strength, yet they store up their food in the summer" (v. 25). Have you ever seen an ant stand still? One doesn't have to be a superhero or a big shot to thrive. Industry, plugging away at one's work a tiny bit at a time, will get the job done. Maybe we can't add much to God's kingdom, but all those little bits pile up when we faithfully keep at it.

"Hyraxes [small plant-eating mammals] are creatures of little power, yet they make their homes in the crags" (v. 26). People survive by altering their environment. Hyraxes aren't strong or clever enough to do that. Yet their ability to use what they cannot change lets them live where we cannot. They teach us to make the most of our limitations. Imagine if God's Spirit had made us all superheroes—given each of us *all* the spiritual gifts. Then we wouldn't need each other, would we? There would be no church, no Body of Christ. So instead of cursing our limitations, let's capitalize on them by building true community.

"Locusts have no king, yet they advance together in ranks" (v. 27). Locusts are stronger than any army because they do what they should without needing any teeny-tiny commanders barking out orders. Blessed is the church that has strong leaders. But more blessed the church that doesn't really need them because brothers and sisters pitch in without being told—out of love for Jesus and each other. Such a church copes with leadership changes like no other.

"A lizard can be caught with the hand, yet is found in kings' palaces" (v. 28). Because a small near-Eastern lizard has no sharp teeth or tearing claws, it is harmless. It can go where most humans can't. The guards would block the likes of us from seeing His Majesty. But the lizard can walk right past those guards and in through the front door. It demonstrates how being innocuous is a huge asset. Rather than having to bully our way to success, the vulnerability of Jesus' followers can lower the guard of others and allow us into their hearts and lives in ways that power trippers can only dream of. Our best pastoral care is not conducted by the self-important but by wounded healers who willingly share their need for Jesus.

Bottom line? If we stay faithful in the little things, we can depend on God to take care of the big ones.

So let's stop worrying so much about numbers: how we can become big, important megachurches within some humongous denomination. Such anxiety hasn't done us a lick of good. Let's just enjoy being church as we walk with our Lord and each other one tiny, faithful step at a time and call it good. Jesus does: "Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom" (Luke 12:32). ■



Bob De Moor is editor of *The Banner* and pastor of preaching and administration for West End CRC, Edmonton, Alberta.

Let's just enjoy
being church as
we walk with
our Lord and
each other one
tiny, faithful
step at a time
and call it good.

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While Life Shall Last

*O God, our help in ages past,
our hope for years to come,
be thou our **guard**-guide while troubles last
and our eternal home.*

HOW PRESUMPTUOUS of me—changing a word in the last stanza of a precious hymn of the church. The same stately hymn I sang every New Year’s Eve service, looking back over a year of God’s help. The word “guard” didn’t bother me—until real troubles came my way.

The summer before he was to begin college, our middle child was seriously injured. During a time already overloaded with moving and new jobs and schools for each of us, the paralyzing accident interrupted all our plans and dreams. We could not look ahead—the present zapped all our energy.

My husband had to take the reins of his new job; grad school for me was several months away, if ever. My own plans seemed so unimportant next to our son’s losses and the ripples that spread to his

sisters. I waited in hospital rooms, barely able to think a clear thought.

In my “O God . . .” desperation, the words of that hymn came unbidden. But each time I got to the word “guard” I paused. The time for guarding was over—we were already in the middle of this hopeless mess.

God’s guarding did not save us from troubles, nor would there be a miracle to take them away. We’d have to endure. For that, I desperately wanted a guide. Maybe God could do that.

Later I heard a fresh take on the word “guard”: a guard uses every defensive and offensive means to help his people prevail. Could it be that God guards my life while I am walking through the fire? Or that God’s Spirit equips me with something like armor so that troubles don’t crush me?

If we are honest, the stories of our lives are never free from the terror of drowning or the hopelessness that comes when we’re smothered by troubles. Hard times shake every belief once held firm. God

did not and does not shield us from bad things. But God the guard helps us prevail. In a word, salvation.

When I sing that hymn again I’ll use the word “guard.” I am not the first to quibble with Isaac Watts’s original text. His last line did not mention “troubles” at all; he used the words “while life shall last.” The *Psalter Hymnal* on which I was raised uses “troubles.” Perhaps troubles and life are one and the same.

Looking back at that summer of loss and the losses that followed, I’m able to see glimmers of “hope for years to come.” Hardly a floodlight, just slivers of light on lives rebuilt, faith renewed, and small joys reclaimed. In troubles and in life—God guards my soul forever. ■



Carol Rottman is a writer and teacher. She attends Eastern Avenue Christian Reformed Church in Grand Rapids, Mich. Her forthcoming book is called *A Memoir of Parting* (Principia).



Faith means trusting
in advance
what will only make sense
in reverse.

— PHILIP YANCEY

My Friend “Alz”

When you visit with him, don't ask, “Do you remember me?”



I MET A VISITOR in church today. They tell me that he has been coming to the second service quite regularly, but I don't remember his name. However, he didn't look out of place when he settled into the pew next to me.

When the offering plate was passed along, he reached for his wallet. He was planning to put a \$20 bill into the collection plate as a contribution to the church's mission. But the \$20 was not in his wallet. He had forgotten to pick it up from his dresser before church.

“Oh well, we'll just put it in the plate next Sunday,” his wife said. “I'm sure they will still be willing to accept it next week.”

After the morning service, the fine folks from church had spread out a whole table full of snacks for all of us. There was a huge pot of coffee and dozens of really delicious-looking cookies. The room smelled like I imagine heaven may smell!

My friend saw several familiar faces around the table. He said hi to most of the guys. Although he would have liked

to visit for a bit longer, my friend “Alz” told me he had to get out of there quickly—before he could make a fool of himself for forgetting everyone's name.

Here's what I'd like the people at my church to know.

If you see my old friend “Alz,” don't go out of your way to avoid talking to him. And when you do visit with him, don't ask, “Do you remember me?” Just start a sentence using his name. You could say something like, “Hello, Mike! That sure was a good sermon, wasn't it?” My old friend will then remember you, and he'll be glad to interact in conversation with you.

He'll know he is part of the body of Christ. And so will you. ■



Cal Los has been a member of Second Byron Center Christian Reformed Church for the past 45 years. For many years he was a Christian school teacher and principal.



Pulpit Supply

Len Vander Zee's article “Pulpit Supply” (Feb. 2015) brought to mind Paul's struggle with the church at Corinth. On the one hand, Paul cared not how they viewed him, only how they viewed Christ. On the other, Paul realized they would not value the message if they did not respect the messenger.

To come to the present day, when the “honorarium” works out to \$7 an hour, does that really honor the preacher and the message? None of us does this for the money. But all of us hope the message we bring is valued.

Some congregations do not have the financial resources to honor the pastor with a generous check. Those congregations usually find other ways to express their appreciation.

Others just don't take the visiting pastor's task seriously. Or perhaps they haven't thought about this. Perhaps this article will occasion some reconsideration.

—Thomas Niehof
Ames, Iowa

While not an ordained minister, I have been responsible for Sunday afternoon services at a local health care center for more than 25 years. I absolutely understand the amount of time ministers spend to deliver a sermon on a weekly basis (“Pulpit Supply”). But I need to respect-

TTERS

fully respond to Rev. Vander Zee's remark that, when asked to preach in another church, "It's not charity." I receive no monetary recompense from Sunday services except for the spiritual support and prayers of a former church. I also have a full-time job to attend to.

If God can use Balaam's donkey to speak for him, I guess it shouldn't be surprising that he can do the same through me. I don't get paid, nor would I care to because it is more than enough for me to be used as a tool by God to make himself known.

—*Bill Goossens*
Tinley Park, Ill.

Straight Rows

Thank you, Leighton Kolk, for drawing our attention to the legacy of Sietse Buning ("Reformed Matters: Planting Straight Rows," Dec. 2014). I call Buning's work "20th-century parables."

Time moves on and challenges us with new ideas and insights.

Farming, I used fertilizer and chemical weed control; when weeds escaped that control, I had a tendency to curse them. Our son farms the same acreage organic; when weeds escape his mechanical control he allows them to grow for their biological benefits for his crop.

Our granddaughter came across a letter from the local CRC council written 50 years ago, published in the local newspaper, taking issue with the Anglican Church on doctrinal matters. Today we organize events with the broader local Christian community and discover that our confessional unity is much greater than our doctrinal difference.

In the spirit of Buning's poetry, we recognize the historic significance of our "three forms of unity" and realize that our true unity can be found only at the foot of the cross, trusting that the Spirit

will lead the church in mirroring Christ, embracing all.

—*Evert Wassink*
Forest, Ontario

Amen!

Re Kurt Rietema's article "Preaching Peace" (Feb. 2015), Amen! Amen! Amen!

—*Marlin Hendricks*
Lynden, Wash.

Feeling Good

A common theme in two of the February articles ("Feeling Good" and "Why Is It So Hard to Talk about Homosexuality?") really got me thinking about the "plank in my own eye." I can't help but wonder if this powerful common theme was the mysterious working of our powerful God. Both articles pushed me to consider the role of contempt that we often hold in our minds and hearts as we encounter people whose lives and experiences are different from our own. I agree that in order for us to faithfully serve people who are marginalized or outcasts (Nydam and Otten's words), we need to practice empathy and imagine ourselves in their shoes. This makes us uncomfortable, but until we do, we cannot truly minister to their needs as Jesus calls us to do. Thanks for helping me to realize this.

—*Ed Starkenburg*
Orange City, Iowa

Why Is It So Hard to Talk?

I appreciated the pastoral tone of Rev. Nydam's article ("Why Is It So Hard to Talk about Homosexuality?" Feb. 2015). However, the accuracy of a statement in recommendation 4 ("It has become increasingly clear that genetic influence has much to do with homosexual gender presentation") deserves verification. The Human Genome Project of 2003 concludes that it is "not scientifically accurate to refer to a 'gay gene' as the causative

agent in homosexuality." Unless Rev. Nydam can cite chapter and verse for scientific evidence, his statement appears to lack merit.

—*Ivan Mulder*
Pella, Iowa

I appreciated Ron Nydam's thoughts and suggestions on relating to LGBT persons ("Why Is It . . ."). They need our love, support, encouragement, and relationship just like any other person in our church. Taking the time and effort to get to know them better will help us realize what a burden their sexual orientation is for them, thus making it easier for us to love, support, and encourage them.

However, it is sad that there needs to be a special ministry to LGBT persons when Jesus requires of us that we all minister to all the fellow members of our church.

—*Elly VanAlten*
Edmonton, Alberta

Professor Nydam gives good pastoral counsel in his article ("Why Is It . . ."). However, even with good pastoral guidance, such conversations are difficult for two reasons:

1. We live in a time when science and experience dictate what right thinking must be. That makes it hard to talk about the human person as the temple of the Holy Spirit being "washed and waiting" in the Christ-life.
2. We live in a culture where the sum total of our identity is caught up in our protoplasm, hormones, and passions. That makes it hard to talk about a chaste and celibate life in Jesus Christ. Such talk is judged antiquated, bigoted.

—*Marvin Beelen*
Grand Rapids, Mich.

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Joel Boot Turns Over Reins of the CRC's Administration

When Rev. Joel Boot was nearing retirement after 19 years as pastor of Ridgewood Christian Reformed Church in Jenison, Mich., the last thing he expected was a career change. And then “God called,” as Boot told delegates at Synod 2011 (the church’s annual leadership gathering). “He came to my door, kicked it off its hinges, and said, ‘I have something in mind for you that you didn’t know about.’”

That something was the call to be the executive director of the CRC. The church’s denominational administration was in chaos following the abrupt resignations of its two top leaders. The Board of Trustees turned to Boot for what was supposed to be a two-year interim appointment that turned into a four-year term of service—the first three as executive director and the last as director of ministries and administration.

Boot said the Board of Trustees asked him to do three things: accomplish the business of the church as expected of the executive director, provide wise counsel and a healing presence for staff, and analyze the culture and organization to develop a thriving ministering community.

So how did he do? “I don’t think it’s all over. But the dust is beginning to settle and the sun is beginning to shine, and the future is bright with possibility if we rise to the occasion,” he said in an interview with *The Banner*. “I think God had work that had to be done and enabled a lot of us to participate in it. And we are on the brink of a new and hope-filled future.”



Rev. Joel Boot

The journey did not come easily, but Boot said he has never seen the tracks of God so clearly in his life. “It was a massive learning curve, and when I began to sense it was mission impossible, I was cast into the arms of God because I had no alternative,” he said.

He leaves behind what he says is a denominational office that is much more collaborative, with a cooperative, friendly spirit. He said it appears something similar is happening in the wider church. “We took very seriously the call of the church to listen. We have listened, we have responded, and told [the church] what we heard.” He said the apparent disconnect between what he terms the hub, the spokes, and the wheel of the denomination was one of the most frustrating things he encountered during his four years in administration. “We haven’t made as much progress as I’d hoped,” he said.

On the other hand, the collaboration between the CRC and the Reformed Church in America, what he termed his two homes, was a highlight, along with the other ecumenical work he was a part of. “That ecumenical work is just a true gift, to see and meet

and get into the hearts of brothers and sisters in places like Egypt,” he said. “Something happened to me in Egypt. I have never failed a day since my visit there to pray for people by name who are in Egypt.”

Boot’s two-year appointment turned into three when the nominee for his job withdrew at the last minute. But in 2014, synod appointed Steven Timmermans to the top job, and Boot moved to the position of director of ministries and administration, another interim position. With the appointment of Colin Watson to that job and the appointment of Canadian ministries director Darren Roorda, Boot said he leaves the church in good hands. “I leave the denomination not only in the hands of God but also in the hands of wonderful, committed Christians,” he said. “Part of the gift God gave me was getting to know those folks and see how much God is allowing so little a denomination to accomplish.”

His best advice to those succeeding him? “Remember that the word *pastor* is a verb as well as a noun. It’s what you do, not just who you are.”

In May, Boot will walk back out the door that God kicked off its hinges, but he hopes it won’t close behind him. He said he doesn’t plan to sit home and look out the window. “I’ll take some time to get my bearings,” he said. “Then we’ll see what God and the church want me to do on a part-time basis. I love being a pastor and a preacher and an administrator in whatever ways God can use those gifts.”

—Gayla R. Postma

The More We Get Together in Rocky Mountain

To celebrate a strengthening sisterhood that blurs historical boundaries, two classes (groups of churches) in the western United States held a joint meeting in March. Both are named Rocky Mountain, but one classis belongs to the Christian Reformed Church (CRC) and the other belongs to the Reformed Church in America (RCA).

The sister classes met in March in Denver, Colo., with delegates representing about 45 churches from Colorado, Kansas, New Mexico, and Texas.

"It took a lot of pushing things together to make [the meeting] work," said Rev. Mark Hilbelink, the stated clerk for the CRC's Classis Rocky Mountain. "But both parties were very interested in making it work."

Church planting is the number one way these classes cooperate—because it is their first order of business, according to Hilbelink.

The joint worship service was the highlight of the shared meetings, Hilbelink said. The service included lament for "places where the church is still segregating itself along race, denominational, and class lines" and celebration that "we've come this far; this is a jumping-off point."

The Christian Reformed Church separated from the Reformed Church in America in 1857. In celebration of recent growing ties between the two denominations, a 2014 joint synod (denominational leadership meeting) resolved to "act together in all matters except those in which deep differences of conviction compel [us] to act separately."

—Roxanne Van Farowe



ERIC AND JANA PHOTOGRAPHY

Rocky Mountain classes from the RCA and CRC met jointly in Denver.

British Columbia Church Tithes to Youth Project

Mission Hills Community Christian Reformed Church in the town of Mission, British Columbia, is so grateful for where God has brought it that it has decided to give a portion of its building campaign to a community project for at-risk youth.

A series of small miracles unfolded to shape the church's approach. It began with church member Gary Unger reading an article in *The Banner* in early 2013 about Trinity CRC in Goderich, Ontario, which tithed from its building project to support a church in Haiti. A family connection to Trinity CRC provided the details of how the campaign was organized.

"Mission Hills CRC began as a [Christian Reformed] Home Missions church plant about 17 years ago. But the last two years have brought significant growth in the church membership, so we felt it was time to have our own building," explained Roger Hoekstra, president of the church's council.



GARY UNGER

Part of the work crew from Mission Hills Community Church.

"We also wanted a chance to serve in the community, and then God put the Mission Youth House right in our laps," Unger added.

Mission Youth House will serve as a resource for young people ages 14 to 25, providing mentorship for job interviews, cooking, parenting, and other skills the youth need to gain independence in difficult circumstances. "We are the family of God, but we realize not all young people have families to rely on, so we can step into that role in some way," explained Unger. The house will be run by a

separate nonprofit society in connection with local governments and Youth Unlimited. Local businesses and other community organizations have also come alongside the project as sponsors.

The project involved renovating an old house; about 30 church members have been busy installing the kitchen, painting, and doing electrical work.

"God has blessed us as a church, and we want to show our gratitude by sharing with others as well," Hoekstra said.

—Tracey Yan



Sarah Visser

Noteworthy

Several **Hamilton (Ontario) District Christian High students** were honored by the Ontario Council for International Cooperation as **Global Changemakers Youth Ambassadors** for their "Let Kids Be Kids" initiative to prevent human trafficking.

Sarah Visser was appointed **vice president for student life** at Calvin College.

Owen Kurvits brought home **Redeemer University College's** first-ever Canadian college championship title, winning gold in men's singles badminton national competition.

Toronto District Christian High School won the Ontario championship in **senior girls' volleyball**.

Please visit our website at thebanner.org for these stories.

—Banner correspondents

NEWS

All Ontario Youth Convention Celebrates 40th Anniversary

When teens gather at this year's All Ontario Youth Convention (AOYC) in late May, many will be following in the footsteps of their parents. The annual convention, which has grown to be the largest annual gathering in the Christian Reformed Church, will be 40 years old this year.

In 1975, more than 350 excited young people gathered that first year at Wilfred Laurier University in Waterloo, Ontario, for an event organized entirely by volunteer young adults.

"We were all young adults with a vision to provide a convention for all youth from the Christian Reformed churches in Ontario, an event where they would draw closer to God, grow in their faith, [and] be challenged to share the message of Jesus," said Wilma Hiemstra, an organizer of the first convention. "In the 40 years [since], the goals have remained relatively the same."

For over half of the convention's history, the six leagues (geographic regions) of Ontario took turns hosting the convention, which meant kids criss-crossed the province in school buses to attend conventions in Kingston, Guelph, London, Hamilton, Ottawa, and St. Catharines. "There were a few lean years where the numbers went down and where youth events in general suffered. God was faithful, and the convention went on to grow [with] up to 1,000 attending," said Hiemstra. Today attendance averages around 800.

As the convention grew, so did the caliber of the speakers and bands. Found Free, New Com-



(Above) 1977 – Wilma Hiemstra was one of the original convention organizers.



(Right) 1995 – Teens from the Trillium League at the convention in Ottawa.



mandment, and a lot of local talent provided the music for the first convention, said planning team member Nellie Hoogendoorn. Speakers were often CRC pastors with a heart for youth, and praise teams were gathered from within the host league. In the 1990s, popular speakers like Brian Bosscher, Jolene DeHeer, and Jeff Klein spoke, while singers and bands like Jacob's Trouble, Randy Stonehill, and Hokus Pick led worship. Recently, the convention has hosted speakers Shane Claiborne

and Tony Campolo, and bands Article One and Rend Collective Experiment have worshiped with youth.

The convention is still run by volunteer young adults. Many former conventioners later come back as leaders at subsequent conventions. Eleanor Kuyvenhoven is one of them. "I attended the first AOYC in 1975," she said. "It was there that I had my first real encounter with God. It was the beginning of my Christian faith journey." Kuyvenhoven

attended one more convention as a teen, and has not missed one since 1991, when, as a youth leader, she started taking her youth group each year. She is now on the leadership team, organizing the important prayer component of the convention. About a dozen volunteers pray for the convention in the weeks leading up to it and help set up prayer rooms at the event; several also serve as spiritual directors and counselors during the convention.



2000 – Brenda Janssen with members of the God Squad praise team.



2010-(l-r) Carrie Zandstra, Kim Verbeek, Melanie Rintjema, and Hannah Pilon.

Over the years, fashions have changed and speakers and musicians have come and gone. The convention is now held at Wilfred Laurier every year, allowing the planning team to put more effort into the event itself, rather than

logistics. Young people from the early years are now sending their children to the convention.

But the focus—the worship, workshops, and fellowship—has been a constant. “AOYC has spanned so many generations,” said Wilma Hiemstra. “Truly God has been faithful.”

—Anita Brinkman

Miami Church Reaches Youth with Basketball Ministry

South Kendall Community Christian Reformed Church is known around Miami, Fla., as “the basketball church” because it holds a basketball Open Court one Saturday each month as well as an annual tournament for anyone ages 8 to 18.

It started 16 years ago when Linda Jones walked out of the church building and saw a group of neighborhood boys shooting hoops in the church parking lot. “I know nothing about basketball,”

she said, “but I thought we should come up with some way to reach them.” Jones prayed, spoke to the pastor, and got in touch with a couple at church who had experience coaching basketball. In December 1999, 35 kids signed up for South Kendall’s first basketball tournament.

These days almost 90 kids from the community participate in the annual event. The tournament and Open Court events are free and include pizza and snacks with devotional time after the game.

Many will stick around after Open Court has ended. Some have even brought their families to the church as a result. “It’s a great way to interact with the kids in our neighborhood on an ongoing basis and provide them with a safe and healthy environment,” said Jones, who is known around town as “the basketball lady.”

“Basketball is a bridge,” Jones explains. “This is what our church does. We love being here for our community.”



Basketball players listen to a devotion after playing in the tournament.

—Callie Feyen

IN MEMORIAM



Rev. Aren P. Geisterfer

1930-2015

Rev. Aren P. Geisterfer, 85, was a passionate and compassionate man of generous spirit and deep convictions. He died of natural causes.

Geisterfer was born in Indonesia. When Japan invaded Indonesia in 1941, his entire family was interned in various concentration camps. Both of his parents eventually died there. After spending time in Ceylon (Sri Lanka) and the Netherlands, he emigrated to Canada, where he worked as a photojournalist before entering ministry in the Christian Reformed Church.

Geisterfer served congregations in British Columbia and Ontario and served in campus ministry for 18 years. He retired in 1998.

Geisterfer dressed with colorful flamboyance and loved to laugh. He loved to discuss what it meant to follow Jesus in a very practical way. In 1992, Geisterfer reconciled with the commander of the Japanese concentration camp where he had been interned as a child.

Geisterfer is survived by eight children and their spouses, and by 15 grandchildren.

—Janet A. Greidanus

Further information on recently deceased ministers is available each year in the front pages of the Christian Reformed Church’s annual Yearbook and on The Banner’s website.

NEWS

Highlights of 2015 Winter Classis Meetings

Two or three times each year, Christian Reformed churches send representatives to their classis, a regional grouping of churches. Delegates at those meetings review and make decisions about shared ministries and practice mutual accountability for their congregations' individual ministries. Here are the highlights of the most recent classis meetings:

Several people were **welcomed into ministry** in the Christian Reformed Church, including **seminary graduates** Richard Braaksma, Dan De Graff, Jonathan DeRuiter, Paul DeWeerd, Jun Kyung Eo, Ezra Lee, Brady Mulder, Jay Stringer, Dayna Vreeken, and Luke Wynja.

Transferred in from other denominations were the following ministers: Bokjin Kim, Wonchei Kim, Taejung Son, and Gyeongso Yoon. Rev. Jin Choi was **loaned** to another denomination.

The following ministers were **released from their congregation**: Rev. Pablo Canche

(Roosevelt Park Community CRC, Grand Rapids, Mich.); Rev. Nathan DeVries (Rolling Acres CRC, Mason City, Iowa); Rev. Peter Janssens (Faith CRC, Burlington, Ontario); Rev. Richard Vander Vaart (Living Hope CRC, Sarnia, Ontario); and Rev. Ruth Febriana Folkerts (Hillcrest CRC, Denver, Colo.).

Humberto Casanova, Bradley Close, Arturo Gomez, Tobin Gruppen, Se Jong Jang, Yichul (Lee Chul) Jeong, Kevin Jordan, Philip Landers, and Vinh Paul Le were **released from ministry in the CRC**.

An emerging church does not have its own council and is under the care of a council of a neighboring Christian Reformed Church. An organized church has its own council. The following churches were **designated as emerging**: Korean Presbyterian Galilee (Albuquerque, N.M.) and Great Vision CRC (Los Angeles, Calif.).

Evergreen CRC (Fort McMurray, Alberta); Summit Church (Farmington, Maine); By Grace Alone Frankford Fellowship; Eighth St. Community; Grace and Peace Community Fellowship; Mount Airy Community; and One Hope Community (all in Philadelphia, Pa.) were **organized**.

Harrison (S.D.) CRC and First Reformed Church of Harrison **formed a union church**. Montello Park CRC (Holland, Mich.) **closed**.

Classis Heartland **declined two requests to seat women** as delegates. Classis Quinte **apologized to Maranatha CRC** in Belleville, Ont., for actions about which Synod 2012 reprimanded the classis. Classis Illiana adopted a **new model for paying ministry shares** based on operating budgets rather than church membership. Classes Hamilton and Toronto sent communications to the Canadian ministries director about **resettlement of Syrian refugees in Canada**.

The **Synodical Committee to Provide Pastoral Guidance Regarding Same-Sex Marriage** held listening sessions in classes British Columbia South-East, Quinte, Toronto, and Zeeland.

Classis Hamilton sent a communication to Synod 2015 **expressing concern about the membership of the committee**.

SYNOD 2015

Classis Pacific Northwest requested that Synod 2015 **delay discussion of the Task Force**

Special Olympians Are Winners at Calvin College Final Four

When Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Mich., hosted the NCAA's Division III Final Four women's basketball tournament, it was local Special Olympians who were the big winners.

Tournament intern Haley Stadnikia, a Calvin senior, said the Calvin tournament committee, which included Calvin's director of athletics, James Timmer, was in charge of organizing the service component of the tournament, an NCAA requirement. She worked with Timmer to plan the event, and they also called on Calvin alumnus Nick Caudle, the sports and training manager for Special Olympics Michigan: Southwest Region.



Players from Tufts University cheer on Special Olympics athletes during a shooting drill.

The result was a basketball clinic for the Special Olympics basketball teams of Forest Hills and Sparta run by the coaches and elite players of the Final Four teams: Thomas More College, Tufts University, Montclair State University, and George Fox Uni-

versity. (Calvin's women's team made it to the Elite Eight.)

The NCAA athletes ran drills, coaching the Special Olympics athletes in dribbling and shooting. The event culminated in final scrimmages coached by the NCAA athletes. "We had an

announcer, and they did cheers and made tunnels for the Special Olympians to run through," said Stadnikia. "It was really loud and rowdy. They loved it."

"It was fun to see the camaradery start to build," said Caudle, a member of La Grave Avenue Christian Reformed Church in Grand Rapids.

The Special Olympics athletes took away much more than the signed T-shirts and basketballs they received at the end of the clinic. "It's not very often that our athletes are able to compete with some of the best teams in their sport," Caudle added. "This was something they will never forget for the rest of their lives." —Lori Dykstra

Reviewing Structure and Culture's report for one year. Classis Alberta South/Saskatchewan requested that Synod 2015 appoint **women advisors** to synod if there are fewer than 25 female delegates.

Classes Atlantic Northeast and Minnkota requested that Synod 2015 classify the CRC's relationship with the **Protestant Church in the Netherlands (PCN)** as that of a church in dialogue.

Classis Chatham requested a revision to the supplement of Church Order Article 84 regarding **definitions of sexual misconduct and sexual abuse**.

Classis Minnkota requested that synod instruct the consistories of Calvin CRC and Eastern Avenue CRC (both in Grand Rapids, Mich.) to **exercise discipline** with respect to those in their congregations who are publicly advocating homosexual practice through their membership in All One Body, and to **admonish the consistories** of those two churches for hosting meetings of a group whose purpose is to promote behavior that synod has declared to be sinful.

Classis Lake Erie requested that Synod 2015 adopt the report of the **Task Force to Study the Offices of Elder and Deacon** but not the recommended changes to the deacons' ordination form. Classis British Columbia South-East requested that Synod 2015 change some of the Task Force's proposed rewording of Church Order articles. Classes Alberta North and Atlantic Northeast sent communications supporting the adoption of the report.

—Banner Staff

For more information on winter classis meetings, please visit thebanner.org.

Classis Quinte Apologizes to Maranatha Church in Belleville

Half a decade of conflict between Maranatha Christian Reformed Church and Classis Quinte (the regional group of churches) may be drawing to a close after representatives of Classis Quinte brought a formal letter of apology to the Maranatha congregation on Sunday, March 22.

During the morning worship service, Hans Vink, a member of the classis leadership team, read the letter, which had been approved by classis at its January meeting. In the letter, classis acknowledged that "the journey of Christian reconciliation is sometimes a long and difficult road, especially when hurts go deep. We want to commend you for staying on this journey of reconciliation with classis."

The conflict initially stemmed from complaints from a group of Maranatha members regarding the healing ministry conducted by the church, including complaints that Rev. John Visser was abusing his position of authority in counseling relationships for his own personal gain. As a result, in 2010 Classis Quinte appointed a team of seven people to assess the healing ministry.

In May 2011, Quinte received the assessment and took note of concerns about the healing ministry, including excessive power imbalance between counselors and counselees, breach of confidentiality by counselors, and questionable application of Matthew 18. As a result, it voted to request the council of the Maranatha church to apply special discipline by deposing Visser. (Only a local council can apply discipline to its leaders.) It upheld that decision at another meeting a few weeks later.

Maranatha appealed the decision to Synod 2012 (the annual leadership meeting of the CRC). In June 2012, synod decided the case. It said Visser did not breach confidentiality, but it did find Visser "abused his office for inappropriate ends" for allowing a counselee and her husband to invest in companies that he and his family owned. Synod ordered that he be suspended for at least 90 days and that the healing ministry be immediately placed under outside oversight. The ministry was placed under the oversight of Phillip Hamberg of Grand Rapids, Mich. Visser was reinstated in January 2013.

Synod 2012 also reprimanded Classis Quinte for "violating the rights of Maranatha to due process" and "not directing [Maranatha's] dissenting members to refrain from publicly circulating their grievances."

It was for those actions that Quinte apologized in the worship service. "Classis is sincerely sorry for its actions and decisions which have caused you so much harm. We accept the reprimands of Synod 2012," Vink read.

Visser accepted the apology and noted how painful it was to have his colleagues in classis voting to have him removed from office. "That the process was flawed as ruled by synod made it even more painful," he said. He also acknowledged his part in the conflict. "Almost 10 years ago this month, I stood before our congregation and shared, with council's permission, a financial need that a company owned by my sons and I was facing. That this would eventually lead to a trail of confusion, heartache, and broken relationships grieves me to this day," he said. "I take full responsibility for my part and my family's part in this. . . . I extend heartfelt forgiveness to Classis Quinte and hope that it extends forgiveness to me also for my mistakes."

Maranatha elder Bryan Schaafsma formally accepted the apology on behalf of the church. "Thank you for your acknowledgment of harm caused," he said. "We accept the apology. With the Spirit's leading we can continue this journey."

Rev. Len Riemersma, the pastor assigned by classis as a church visitor, preached a sermon about reconciliation in relationships, and Rev. Bernie Bakker, stated clerk of the classis, led the congregation in prayer.

"It was good to attend the service to witness the apology from Classis Quinte," said Bill Doef, an ex-council member of Maranatha. "But the apology was not about the many complaints of abuse brought to [the classis]. There are still many hurt and broken relationships between John Visser, the council, and present and past members. . . . Only if there is true repentance and forgiveness from both sides can these issues be put to rest."

—Gayla R. Postma

NEWS

CHURCH WORLDWIDE

'I wish I could also have died': Boko Haram Haunts Children

Memories of Boko Haram's murderous spree in his Nigerian hometown haunt Tom Gowon, 9, as he sits on a patch of grass at a refugee camp, sipping steaming porridge from a plastic mug.

"I was lucky because I was not killed," said Gowon, recalling the assault on Baga, Nigeria, in early January. "But they shot and killed my father. My mother was kidnapped by the militants."

Children such as Gowon bear the brunt of Boko Haram's rampage since its fighters kidnapped more than 200 schoolgirls last year and conquered enough territory to declare a caliphate that covers one-fifth of Nigeria.

Where the militants have met resistance, they've torched villages and left piles of corpses in their wake.



TONNY ONIULO, COURTESY OF USA TODAY

Tom Gowon, 9, in a brown jacket, with his fellow refugees at Baga Sola camp, Chad.

a wave of refugees that includes 157,000 people who have fled to neighboring Cameroon, Chad, and Niger. About 17,000 people are in Chad, according to the United Nations. The vast majority of the refugees are women and children.

The journey is treacherous, but once refugees reach the Baga Sola camp they are protected by Chadian military. But their future is increasingly uncertain: the camps in Chad are bursting at the seams. Shelter, food, medicine, and other supplies such as mosquito nets and cooking equipment are running low.

Traumatized refugees such as young Gowon have settled into despair. Since Chadian officials moved him from a detention center for orphan children to the refugee camp, Gowon has been sniffing solvent to take the edge off his chilly, nightmare-filled dreams. The solvent is his only diversion from an otherwise bleak life. If Gowon can't secure space in a tent at night, he sometimes sleeps outside on the grass, huddled with other orphan children under cardboard blankets, he said.

Rick Lami wonders whether his mother and father escaped death in Baga. "I was separated from my family members when the militants attacked us," he said. "We ran for our lives, and we've never met again. I don't know if they are dead or alive, as they are not here at the displaced-people site with us."

Children like Gowon are shell shocked, their lives changed forever.

"I don't know where my future lies," he said. "I wish I could also have died during the attack."

—USA Today



KRISTA DAM-VANDERKUYT

"The only difference between stumbling stones and stepping stones is how you use them." (American proverb posted beside the bowl of stones.)

Sharing Stories through Stones

On the first Saturday of each month, women meet at Bethel Christian Reformed Church in Waterdown, Ontario, to share the stories of their own life experiences and give testimony of what God has done in their lives. After a woman has told her story, she writes her name on a stone and places it with the other stones on the pile.

This ministry, the Stories of the Stones, began after several members of Bethel's congregation toured Israel in 2012. Standing stones, or *masseboth*, are mentioned frequently throughout the Bible. The Israelites set up stones to commemorate significant events, to serve as reminders of God's power. While in Israel, tour leader Ray Vanderlaan asked the group if they were telling their stories, challenging them to testify to the amazing ways God is at work in the world. He said to make sure to tell the whole story, not just triumphant moments but the messy parts as well.

The growing pile of stones represents testimonies of God's love and provision for women who have told stories of loss, illness, anxiety, and fragile relationships. In telling the whole story, especially sharing times of fear, embarrassment, or shame, it allows others to open up and helps them cope with their own struggles. As Bethel CRC member Tess Tigchelaar points out, including the messy parts "allows others to identify and speak of their experiences."

"Every one of us has a story," said Trish Lobert. "There is a lot of laughter. Sometimes there are tears, but we learn from each other."

—Krista Dam-VandeKuyt

BY CLAYTON LIBOLT



GRAND RAPIDS DREAMING

SHOULD THE AGENCIES of the Christian Reformed Church be radically restructured so that all of them come directly under a single large board—a 60-person Council of Delegates (COD)? Should the current boards of such agencies as Home Missions, World Missions, and Back to God Ministries International be dissolved and advisory councils be created in their place as committees of the Council of Delegates with no independent authority? And should these various councils and other entities under the COD be required to come together in “ministry collaboration committees” to work on “five streams of ministry”?

These are a few of the proposals to Synod 2015 by the Task Force Reviewing Structure and Culture (TFRSC), appointed in 2011 in the aftermath of a debacle involving the executive director, the denominational director of ministry, and the Board of Trustees of the CRCNA (BOT). What it proposes is important and potentially of great consequence for the denomination. We should be paying attention.

The task force has not made it easy to do so. It is reporting to Synod 2015 via the *Agenda for Synod 2015*, which appears

in April. For many classes (regional groups of churches), this is too late. Practically speaking, that means Synod 2015 could approve a far-reaching restructuring of the denominational ministries without anyone noticing until it's too late. For a restructuring of this size and importance, we should ask for more time to consider. If what the TFRSC recommends is good, another year won't matter; if not, the price will be high.

The Plan

Let me lay out the proposal in a little more detail—or, at least, as much detail as the TFRSC has included in its report.

First, a bit of background. A long-time dream of many denominational officials has been centralization of the agencies. The idea comes back synod after synod. There are, I think, two reasons for this dream. The first is rooted in a long-ago problem—and in the solution to the problem.

The agencies, in particular World Missions and the “upstart” Christian Reformed World Relief Committee (now World Renew), were not getting along on some mission fields. This issue simmered for several years. In 1983, Classis Hudson petitioned synod for a committee to study the structure of denominational ministries. Synod appointed a committee, which led

to another committee, which led, by a series of steps, to the present structure.

The present structure is based in the idea of collaboration, although that original idea has shifted over the years toward more and more centralization in the Board of Trustees. The approach was to set up a central committee, the BOT, and a central office, the office of executive director, with a mandate to bring the agencies together in a shared vision and ministry plan. More coordination than command.

This has sometimes worked and sometimes not. The agencies and agency directors retain some direct access to synod. Their directors report to the BOT but also to their agency board. The task force calls this “dual accountability” and “dual administrative authority.” It says that this has “led to confusion, duplication, suspicion, and tension.” We should note that these are characteristics of human organizations in general, and it's unlikely that a new structure will eliminate them. But that's the hope.

For a long time people working on the BOT side of this structural issue have wanted to fix the problem by centralizing the administration and governance of the agencies. The proposals of the TFRSC are very much of this sort. The task force complains that the denominational »

ministries are, at present, “a confederacy of non-profits rather than a union of ministries” and that the various agencies are “siloeed.” It suggests that its plan will finally bring the agencies and other ministries together.

But this is not the only impulse toward centralization. Second, and perhaps just as important, the ministries of the CRC, like many congregations, have been under the influence of central planners—consultants, church growth gurus, and the like—who have sold the idea that if we just had a plan, everything would be better.

That sounds right, does it not? Hence its appeal. Wouldn't we be better off all pulling in the same direction? Wouldn't we get a lot more done if our structures were more rational, more cohesive, more visionary? The TFRSC proposals for restructuring denominational ministries have about them the lure and promise of central planning. It sounds good: together, at last. But will it deliver on what is promised?

What exactly does the report propose? First, a 60-member Council of Delegates, a mini-synod. Forty-eight delegates would come from the 48 CRC classes; 12 would be at-large, bringing various kinds of expertise to the Council. This Council,

and only this Council, would report to synod each year for all the ministries and agencies of the CRCNA, except for World Renew, Calvin College, and Calvin Theological Seminary, which would retain their separate boards.

One might ask how often this Council will meet, how it will be organized, and the like, but all that and much else the task force has left to a transition committee to be headed by the executive director.

Within the structure of the Council of Delegates (COD) will remain the remnants of former agency boards, now called “agency committees.” This and most of what follows is found on a bubble chart, with some additional information in an Appendix. For example, the Home Missions Agency Committee, according to the chart, would have eight members: three drawn from the COD and five from outside the COD.

In this structure, World Renew and the two educational institutions, Calvin College and Calvin Theological Seminary, would retain their boards, but the three mission agencies would be folded into a Global Missions group (nine members from the COD and 15+ from outside the COD). If someone on the Home Missions Agency Committee wanted to bring a proposal to synod, it would require the

approval of the agency committee, the Global Missions group, and the Council of Delegates before it got to synod.

But none of this is really clear, because the report gives no details. The details fall to the transition committee. The whole complicated apparatus is, for the moment, a picture on a page, an organizational dream: Grand Rapids (and Burlington) dreaming.

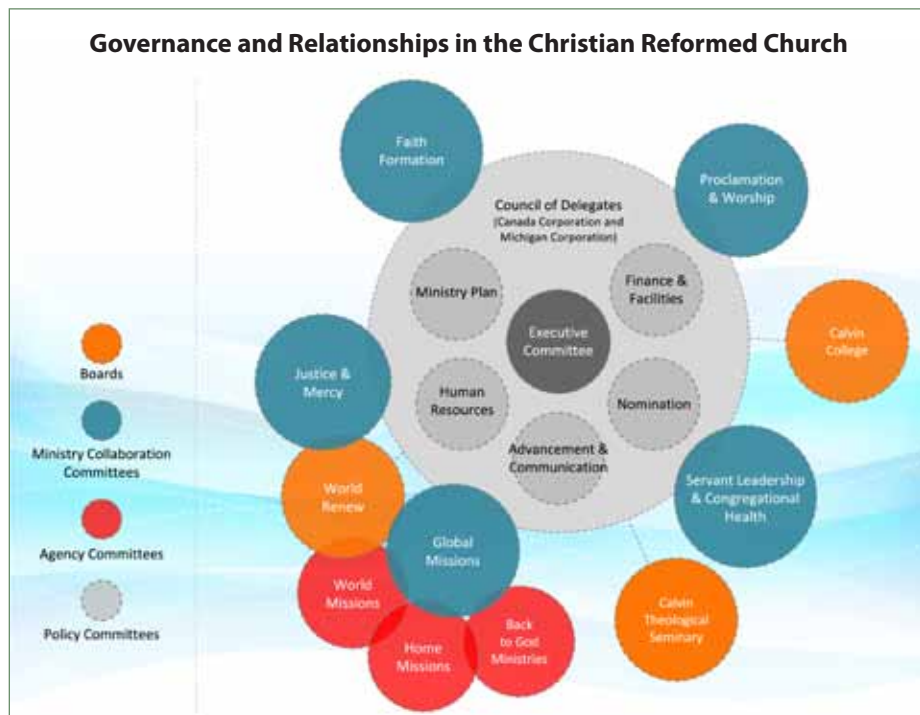
A long time ago I attended a lecture about administrative and governance structure in congregations by Patrick Kiefert, whose book *Welcoming the Stranger* is well known in church circles. He said that he started his adult life training to be an electrician. A wise master electrician gave him an important piece of advice: always look not only at what the wiring diagram says but where the juice actually flows. These are not always the same thing, and when they are different, we ignore the difference at our peril.

This is true of all power systems. What the TFRSC has given us is a wiring diagram, but where would the juice actually flow? I can't be sure, of course, because the diagram is so sketchy, but there are some things that can be seen immediately.

First, the Council of Delegates with its 60 members will tend to rubber-stamp the work and proposals of staff. A basic principle in organizations is that the larger the board, the less real power it has vis-à-vis staff. The staff will come to the meetings prepared with a deep knowledge of what has been going on, and the Council, drawn from delegates across Canada and the United States, meeting once or twice a year, will depend on what the staff tells them to make decisions.

Second, the executive committee proposed by the TFRSC will have much more power than the COD as a whole. The committee, along with the staff, will control the agenda.

Third, it is likely that the combination of agency committees and “ministry collaboration committees” will prove contentious. The ministry collaboration committees are supposed to “be attentive to ‘management and operational’ aims (or ‘ends’) monitoring programs, resource needs, and the strategic planning of the agencies and ministries within [their]



WHO ARE WE? WHAT PRECIOUS THINGS DO WE BRING TO OUR NORTH AMERICAN CULTURES THAT WITHOUT US WOULD BE LOST?

scope,” and report to the COD. The agency committees are supposed to “provide [the] agencies overview of programmatic, resource, and strategic dimensions” and report to the COD. It would seem, even allowing for some imprecise language, that the ministry collaboration committees and the agency committees would frequently run into each other.

The ministry collaboration committees are supposed to bring everything in line with the “five streams,” an idea borrowed from the Evangelical Covenant Church (along with the entire first sentence of the report), which is not well-worked out. If the denomination should be working on five things—the five streams, say—why not align the agencies to reflect these five things? It would save a lot of “collaboration committee” meetings.

I could add that in this structure the agencies will retain their corporate status, their “brands,” and their fundraising staffs, but you get the point. The structure does not seem well thought through. And the problems with the TFRSC proposals are not limited to structure.

The Ministry Arrow

The agencies of the CRC began as joint efforts of the congregations. The model was simple. There were certain things congregations could not do on their own—at least not well. Missions in other countries, for example. World missions requires in-country expertise, support, recruitment, and more. So the churches of the CRC, working through synod, formed what has become Christian Reformed World Missions. The same for church planting (Home Missions), for broadcast ministries (Back to God Ministries International), and for diaconal ministries on a national and international scale (World Renew).

These various ministries were supported by and governed by the church through boards based on classis delegation: each classis selecting a delegate. If you were unhappy with what the agency was doing, you could tell your local delegate, who would carry your message to the board and to the staff. The ministries

were, in every sense of the word, “owned” by the churches.

What was clear in this structure was that the congregations (and classes and synods) were the church; the denominational offices and agencies either extended the ministry of the congregations or provided direct services to the congregations (such as church school materials and ministerial training). But for some time—going back, really, to the time when the denomination began to tinker with structure—there has been less and less clarity about precisely this: are the congregations the church, or are denominational offices and ministries the church? Do the agencies serve the congregations? Or are the congregations outposts of a corporate CRCNA headquartered in Grand Rapids and Burlington? In which direction does the ministry arrow go?

Consider a sentence from the TFRSC report: “The Council [the COD] will speak as one voice entrusted by its congregations and synod as their *stewards* to lead the CRCNA through effective and collaborative foresight, planning and adaptive change” (italics original). Note that little word *its*: “its congregations.” Perhaps the language is not as careful as it could be, but the hint is there: it’s the COD that will lead us (its churches and its members) forward.

This comes to worrisome expression in the final two sections of the report, the first having to do with the future role of the classes, and the second with the role of synod. The last two substantive recommendations of the task force are for studies of the roles of the classis and synod, presumably along the lines of their study of the agency structure. This is not the time or place to review those proposals, but they require careful and sober scrutiny before synod approves them. There is much opportunity for mischief here.

Who We Are

That brings me to what I regard as the most important question. Read through the various TFRSC reports from 2012 to 2015 and you will see references scattered throughout to a deeper crisis in the CRC,

a loss of membership and—this is related—a loss of identity. More of this is found in a study produced by still another study group, the Strategic Planning and Adaptive Change Team. They conclude that “The direction and overall focus of the CRCNA are no longer clear, and our sense of a shared identity is no longer self-evident.”

We no longer know who we are. Consequently, our message is muted. Located as I am on the border between the Vancouver and Seattle metroplexes, I see churches struggling to hang on, wondering if they should not become more like the evangelical churches near them that are taking away their members. They die slow deaths, fading to gray (or grey) in the ecclesiastical culture.

Who are we? What do we proclaim? What precious things do we bring to our North American cultures that without us would be lost? A part of me says that discussions of this sort—foundational, deep, creative, theological examinations of our message and ministry—are no longer possible. The mildest suggestions for new ways to think old thoughts threaten to bring the house down.

But another part of me still hopes that we have something here worth saving, if only because in the past and in the present we have done and continue to do such good work together. If we can trust each other to find our identity together in Christ in a new age, neither mindlessly repeating old slogans nor equally mindlessly following the ecclesiastical crowd, we will find ways to continue and extend this work together.

If not, we face an endless series of structure reorganizations, which, as time goes on, will feel more and more like rearranging the pews when the denomination has already hit the iceberg. ■



For more than 20 years, Clay Libolt was the senior pastor of River Terrace Church in East Lansing, Mich. In 2011 he retired and now lives in the Pacific Northwest. He is presently interim pastor at Sonlight CRC in Lynden, Wash.

Happily Single

SOMETIMES when people first meet me, they ask how many kids I have. The assumption being, of course, that a woman in her 30s must be married and have started a family. I used to respond, “Kids? Me? No, I’m just single.” But “just single” didn’t capture accurately what I felt. So I’ve adopted a new phrase—I’m *happily* single.

You may wonder why this makes a difference to me. I find that by responding with “happily” instead of “just,” I make clear that I am content in my singleness and not lacking anything by being single. My singleness is simply part of the reality of where I am in life, and it is good. Saying that I am “happily single” is not saying no to being married but rather that I’m not actively seeking marriage. I’m trusting in God’s timing and plan for my life. I’ve noticed that this point of view can lend itself to some critique, as it seems that very few people actually believe one can truly be content as a single person.

Let me be clear. I don’t feel bad for myself, and you don’t need to feel bad for me either. I’m not sad about being single, though you may think I am. If you doubt me, perhaps it would be helpful for you to know what I actually desire from you, my community, as a single woman.

I need supportive friends: male and female, married and single, young and old, Christian and non-Christian. In some circles these relationships are surprisingly hard to nurture, but I believe we grow by being part of a diverse community. If two single people are having a friendly conversation, that doesn’t mean they are in a dating relationship, or are destined for a relationship, or that they want to date each other. If a single woman (or man)

is talking to a married man or woman, that doesn’t mean she is jealously wishing he was her husband (or wife). I want to participate in meaningful conversations that span a variety of demographics, but I tire very quickly of assumptions—particularly because my singleness is not the lens through which I view the world.

I need community. I’m OK being the only single person in a group, the one who makes it five instead of four. I’ve noticed that couples like doing things with other couples. But please don’t exclude single friends because you think we’ll feel awkward. Some of us idealize (or idolize) marriage, and being with our friends who are living it out daily is a good thing for us. It also helps us to foster some of those supportive friendships that we need to grow.

I need family. As a single person transplanted into a city where I don’t have family nearby, I’m looking for stand-in parents and grandparents, aunts and uncles, nieces and nephews. I want to be passed peppermints in church and to hold your children. I want to cultivate deep relationships where I know I’m loved and can offer love. I want a home away from home where I can drop by unannounced and know I’ll be welcomed.

I need a place to use my gifts and the encouragement to live into who God created me to be. Being single does not mean I’m immature or inexperienced. I am more than capable of serving the church. Please don’t discount me. My gifts extend beyond being a nursery attendant. I can contribute fully to the life of the church—allow me to!

Along with knowing what I, a single woman, desire from my community, you also should be aware of some realities that I encounter.





Being single does not mean I have more time. As a single person, I spend my time in very different ways than my friends who are married with kids. But being without a husband or child does not mean I have loads of free time. I may not be available to babysit for you. I may not be able to be on a committee. I may actually need to do my laundry. Single people who choose to be intentionally engaged in their community will not necessarily have time to burn. And even if they do, it doesn't mean they should be "guilted" into a commitment. All of us are called to steward our time; as a single person I am accountable to God for how I've used this precious resource.

I will be insulted if you say something like, "People without kids don't get it." Actually, I'll get really angry. A comment like that is unhelpful and dismissive. We all have different life experiences, and at one time or another we are all in situations where we "don't get it." As the body of Christ we are invited to sojourn together. I have ears, a heart, a mind. So share with me your experiences. Let me learn from you; help me grow in compassion and empathy as I see life through your eyes. Allow me to share my life with you too, and don't assume that you "get" singleness. Be aware that I will also be extremely irritated if you suggest that my life is "unblessed" because I don't have a husband or children, all of whom are "God's most awesome gifts." The incarnation is pretty much the most awesome gift we get, and I can point to myriad blessings that God has given me.

I am not consumed by the fact that I am single. I do not wake up or go to sleep crying about being in my bed alone. I actually sleep diagonally, hogging all the blankets for myself! I'm not con-

stantly worried about my relationship status. My singleness is just one aspect of who I am, and it doesn't define me.

I don't mind talking about my singleness, but I want that conversation to be balanced with other discussions about things like where I see God moving, how work is going, what's happening in the news, or what books I've read lately.

Being single is not a shameful thing, and as a Christian I do not want to fall into the trap of wishing away this God-given time. Singleness is a gift, and whether I am single for a time or a lifetime, I want to live fully present in the place where God has placed me. The reality is that I will not get married unless I can do more for the kingdom of God with my husband than I can on my own.

The experience of singleness is different for each person. So if you want to love a single person well, take the time to get to know her beyond her relationship status. As for me . . . you'll find me happily single, striving to live faithfully and intentionally, moment by moment, regardless of my relationship status. ■



Melissa Van Dyk is a member of First Vancouver Christian Reformed Church in British Columbia. She writes for the CRC Network as the Deacon Guide and serves on the boards of Diaconal Ministries of Canada as well as the BC Leadership Development Network.

Leaving the Baggage Behind

by Brian Clark

Fulani people in West Africa identify with Christ's message.



“Please stop trying to make me become a Christian.”

Some of the last words spoken by Aamadu stuck with Larry long after Aamadu had died. Not until years later would Larry (his last name is being withheld for security reasons) realize how these words would transform the way he saw evangelism.

Aamadu was the imam (Muslim leader) of a Fulani village on the edge of the Sahara desert. Larry and his family had moved into the village in 1986 to allow the Fulani to peer into the heart of a Christian. For many of these nomadic cattle herders, these were the first and

only Christians they might ever encounter in their lifetime.

As the family moved in, they began adjusting to culture and life in grass-roofed huts. They identified with the Fulani by learning the Fulani language and wearing Fulani clothes. Their children learned how to pound grain and milk goats. Larry and Ann had meaningful discussions with members of the village. But there was still a fundamental problem in how they viewed their work.

“We tended to see our mission as setting up a competing religion in a hostile religious territory,” said Larry. “We carried a lot of Christian baggage.”

The Bottom Line

Over time, Larry and his family noticed that the Fulani were unwittingly pushing them to leave their baggage behind. The baggage of Christian traditions, ceremonies, and churches was of no interest to people like Aamadu.

“Various experiences and encounters with the Fulani would push us to ask ourselves, ‘What is the essential thing the Fulani need to know to have salvation in Jesus?’” Larry said. “We asked ourselves this question every so often and each time we would throw away a few more ‘suitcases’.”

Finally there was only one thing left: Jesus.

“ Larry and his family moved into the village to allow the Fulani to peer into the heart of a Christian. ”

Looking back on his conversation with Aamadu, Larry realized something. Yes, the imam had asked him to stop trying to make him become a Christian. But he never asked Larry to stop sharing about Jesus.

“It may sound strange,” said Larry, “but we realized that if Muslims were going to be able to really see Jesus, we would have to extract him from Christianity.”

Friendship Evangelism

Today Larry and other missionaries who serve in similar positions with CRWM, look at their role in a different way. Increasingly they see themselves as followers of Jesus attempting to build God’s kingdom in one corner of God’s world rather than Christians attempting to plant Christianity in hostile religious territory.

“As a follower of Jesus, my identity isn’t tied up in my religion, in Christianity. It’s wrapped up in Christ. As I live

out Christ in my daily life, I am building his kingdom,” said Larry.

CRWM missionaries call this “friendship evangelism,” and their goal is to emulate Christ and his love for others rather than focusing on establishing the structures and organizations of Christian religion.

As missionaries focus on Christ as the center of their message, they see the Holy Spirit doing the rest. One by one, as Fulani identify with this message, they call themselves followers of Jesus and gather with others who do the same.

There is nothing wrong with church services, Christian traditions, or ceremonies, Larry added. “Many of these things are really good and helpful to us; they encourage us in our faith, and we are inspired. But sometimes this religious baggage can overwhelm us, and Jesus gets moved to the fringe.”

As more and more Fulani people follow Jesus, they create their own Fulani traditions around Christ.

Partners, not Superiors

Evangelism and discipleship is just one of four strategies that Christian Reformed World Missions uses. Missionaries also take part in leadership development, Christian education, and transforming communities.

Like friendship evangelism in West Africa, each of these strategies is molded to the local context and gifts of each partner.

“God has blessed fellow believers around the world with many gifts that we in North America can benefit from,” said Rev. Gary Bekker, director of CRWM. “For this reason, missionaries see themselves as partners in ministry, serving hand in hand with these believers rather than as their superiors.” »



Larry (identity withheld) submerged himself in Fulani culture while living in a small village.

Please Pray ...

- That CRWM missionaries and people in North America will be open to the Holy Spirit’s direction when sharing the Good News. Pray that we can demonstrate Christ’s love and allow the Spirit to do the rest.
- That church leaders in Romania will trust one another, despite denominational differences and historical mistrust.
- That volunteers who serve on short-term mission trips will have attitudes of humility while on the mission field. Pray that their experiences will impact how they serve at home.

For a weekly email of prayer requests, sign up for CRWM’s ePray at crwm.org/membership.

» The stories that follow illustrate a few of the different contexts in which missionaries serve. In all of these contexts, they ask the same questions that Larry asks: What is the Spirit already doing in this corner of the world? How can I emulate Christ to be a part of that?

Leaving the Baggage in Post-Communist Romania

Lucian Oniga, whom many people call Oli, grew up in Romania under communist rule. He watched as mistrust and division broke down the community of his father’s church. He still sees many of those effects today, 25 years later.

“Growing up, I could feel what the secret police and communism were doing to the church,” he remembers. “The seed of distrust grew, and even now I can see the flowers of that within the church.”

It became impossible for Oli’s church to obtain building permits, so they built a church underground instead. Still, the communist system found other ways to divide the church.

“The secret police planted seeds of anger, envy, and arguing within the body of Christ,” said Oli. “They were trying to separate us and emphasize the differences among Pentecostals, Baptists, and other believers.”

Peniel Ministries

When the Soviet Union collapsed, Oli looked at the state of many of his fellow Romanian teenagers and wanted to serve them.



Steve Michmerhuizen (left) leads discussions with Oli (right) and other church leaders in Romania.

“They were looking for significance, for meaning in life, and for a place in the church,” said Oli. “Being one of them, I felt I should do something.”

In response, Oli and some others started Peniel Ministries Romania, a ministry for youth in Romania. What began as a small conference for young people has grown into youth camps, seminars for young married couples, and national worship conferences.

“Young people are opening up to the gospel,” said Oli. “They think outside of the box, and they challenge the status quo. In doing so, they search for answers and find meaning in life.”

Still, Oli sees division when trying to break denominational and cultural barriers.

“I try to gather leaders, but even after all these years, I see the same distrust.

They ask ‘What’s your motive?’ ‘Who is behind your activity?’”

Rebuilding Trust

It is within this context and these challenges that CRWM missionaries Steve and Jan Michmerhuizen come alongside leaders like Oli to create an environment of trust where people can come together.

Steve gathers youth leaders from the Reformed Church of Romania, the Pentecostal Church, the Hungarian Baptist Church, and many other groups. He leads these groups in discussions about new ways they can work together.

“We bring faith-based youth leaders together, and we talk about work and our strategies,” said Steve. “We share our experiences, our thoughts, and we encourage one another.”

Hope for the Future

Oli looks back on his first meeting with Steve in awe of the size and power of God’s work in Romania. “I heard people from [other groups] sharing their part of God’s story and I was amazed. I remember thinking, ‘Wow, God is so big, and I have so many other brothers and sisters that I didn’t even know of.’”

Now Oli and fellow youth ministry leaders are applying each other’s strengths

Characteristic of communism	Effect on church
• Communist system provides everything	• People view the church as having little to offer
• Informants report those who speak out against government/system	• Distrust, fear of being reported, even within church communities
• Only allowed to meet in church weekly	• Youth-specific programs neglected
• Differences, outliers, are highlighted	• Further denominational division

You add.
C... ..

to their own youth ministries, whether they are working with children who are living on the street, struggling in school, or questioning their faith.

Oli adds, "I hope in the future I will see a church in Romania that will work together in unity. Let's dream together of doing something together for Romania and for God."

Baggage on the Short-Term Mission Field

What might a short-term mission trip look like if we left our baggage behind?

In many ways, the Prayer Safari in Kenya does just that. When volunteers from North America join church leaders in Kenya, they visit hospitals, police departments, schools, government buildings, and homes. While there, they simply ask the people they meet if they can pray with them.



Joseph Nzola and John Algera

"We didn't leave anyone out," said Rev. Joseph Nzola, who serves as the head pastor at Redeemed Gospel Church in Machakos, Kenya.

Sustainability and Learning

Although last year's Prayer Safari was led by Rev. Mwaya Wa Kitavi, Christian Reformed World Missions East and South Africa regional leader, this year Nzola



Members of the prayer safari rode in style.

and a few other local pastors organized the event—one of the first steps for the event to become sustainable.

"Local pastors are taking ownership of the safari," said Rev. John Algera, pastor of Madison Ave. CRC (Paterson, N.J.) and attendee of both Prayer Safaris. "This isn't just a North American team coming to do something."

Instead, Algera sees many of his experiences as a learning opportunity.

"Many churches [in North America] can learn from the fervency of prayer in African churches," said Algera, adding that African people walk for miles to their church every day at 5 a.m. before they start their work.

Prayer Opens Doors

North Americans are not the only ones who are learning to leave their baggage behind at the safari. Local pastors are discovering the value of prayer as a way to open the door for further conversations.

"We were able to talk to people who closed the door on our faces in the past," said Nzola. "This time around, you could see how grateful they were."

"I never knew you could simply pray for somebody instead of hitting their heads over with the Bible," added another local pastor.

Even after the Prayer Safari concluded, Nzola and others continue to meet with some of the people they met. They are also organizing smaller-scale prayer safaris. Back in New Jersey, Algera has

monthly prayer meetings with the mayor and state officials.

"The safari creates a whole new vision to pray," he said. "People welcome prayer."

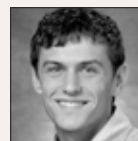
There's Always the Thief

Those who serve on the global mission field enter with a lot of baggage. It may be literal baggage of medical supplies, dusty work gloves, or donated Bibles. It could also be metaphorical baggage of cultural norms, denominational beliefs, or historical trauma.

But missionaries and local people are learning to leave their baggage behind as they work hand-in-hand to build God's kingdom.

"There's always the thief on the cross," said Larry, referencing Luke 23. "He just knew one thing. He knew Jesus. He put all his hope and his life and death on Jesus."

"As we work to build God's kingdom in any corner of the world, let's ask ourselves, 'Am I leading them to Jesus, or am I littering the path with unnecessary obstacles?' Instead of pressuring people to come to church, ask them, 'How's your walk with Jesus?'" ■



Brian Clark is a writer with Christian Reformed World Missions.

We Are the Church Together

Nearly six months ago, you received a copy of the CRC's *Annual Ministry Report* tucked into the center pages of *The Banner*.

Our annual report is a modest affair, roughly the shape of a standard church bulletin. The reports I receive from other Christian organizations are often much more extensive, usually for two reasons.

First, they're filled with photographs that seek to capture and display the essence of the organization. But there's another reason. Many times they include a list of contributors, often filling page after page.

Yes, our annual report is rather brief. We include some photographs that show our agencies and ministries at work across North America and around the world. But the names of our contributors aren't listed.

Consider, though, what we could publish.

It would require hundreds of pictures to show you all of the places that your church is at work through its denominational agencies and ministries, helping to create and sustain healthy churches and transforming lives and communities.

And if we listed everyone who financially supports those ministries, the list would include almost a quarter-million names. That's the impact of Ministry Shares, through which each of our members is able to contribute to those ministries.

But you know, what I've just described still isn't the sum total of the CRC's work. Think about another way of assembling the ministry report.

We could begin by including pages for every congregation, showing the impact it is having in its community: the exciting things its youth ministries are accomplishing; its care for its elderly members and people with disabilities; its worship services; its potlucks; its commitments to missions projects in Africa or Central America or to medical ministries in Eastern Europe.

Just for fun, if all our churches were given 10 pages to report their ministries, we'd have to begin by setting aside 11,000 pages just for Christian Reformed congregations.



Next we'd allocate space for World Renew, World Missions, Home Missions, Back to God Ministries International, Race Relations, Disability Concerns, Safe Church, Chaplaincy, Canadian Ministries—the list goes on. This would require many additional pages. Moreover, these ministries often partner with community-based groups and ministries, and we'd want to include them as well. The memberships of the Reformed denominations

we might call our descendants in Nigeria, alone, would more than double the number of pages needed.

And we're not done yet. There are a host of ministries allied with the Christian Reformed Church that are very much part of us: Friendship Ministries, GEMS, Cadets, Youth Unlimited, Timothy Leadership Training Institute, Partners Worldwide, and more. We would need to include them, as well as our affiliated colleges.

Should we also list financial contributors? If so, remember: we're talking about hundreds of thousands.

It's clear that our impact—*your* impact—can only begin to be captured in a few dozen pages.

So the next time you're in a conversation about the Christian Reformed Church, don't think too narrowly. Instead, think about how incredibly broad and engaged we, the Christian Reformed Church, truly are. It's what's going on in your congregation and your community. And it's what you're doing by extension in North America and around the globe.

One final thought: the church isn't what we are doing. It's the work of the Holy Spirit, and that's something that can't be adequately captured in any annual report. The account of Pentecost in Acts 2 gives us a splendid description of the church—the church we are supposed to be:

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. . . . they broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved. —Acts 2:42-47

To God be the glory! ■



Dr. Steven Timmermans is the executive director of the Christian Reformed Church in North America.

“Our impact can only begin to be captured in a few dozen pages.”

*You add.
God multiplies.*

New Believers Risk Their Lives

In the quiet of the Himalayan mountain region, a group gathers to witness seven new believers lie down in cold, rushing waters to be baptized.

These new Christians came to faith by listening to Back to God Ministries International's *Rewa Gitsung* (Words of Hope) radio program.

Because Christianity is banned in this region, baptism marks a significant moment for these people as they put their earthly lives at risk when giving their eternal lives to Christ.

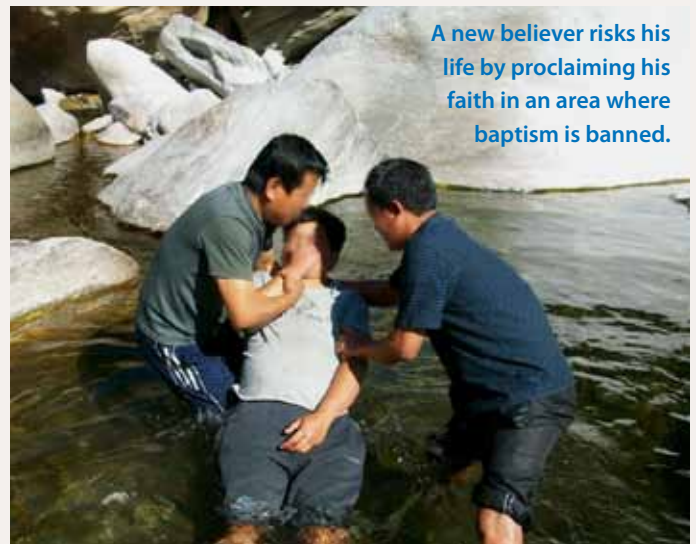
Among those witnessing this event are their mentors and the radio program producer.

"Once these listeners started following the program regularly, they had questions and needed someone to answer those questions," the BTGMI Hindi ministry leader reports.

They heard the gospel and contacted the program producer for answers. He connected them with a local support group comprised of believers who also came to know Christ through the program.

The Hindi ministry leader added, "Because there is no church in this area, these support groups visit new listeners and help them understand the message that the Bible offers through our radio program."

Not only is this program acting as a catalyst to bring



A new believer risks his life by proclaiming his faith in an area where baptism is banned.

people to know God, it is growing disciples to further God's kingdom.

"We are very thankful for the listeners who have formed prayer and support groups and who visit new listeners to

encourage them and testify before them," said Kurt Selles, BTGMI director. ■

—Kristen Fergus Van Stee,
Back to God Ministries
International



Dara helps a woman learn to read and write.

From Farmer to Teacher

Dara is a poor farmer in rural Cambodia. But he also volunteers as a pastor, acts as the vice-chair for his village kindergarten committee, and volunteers as a teacher to help adults learn to read and write.

He says that many people in his community have been taken advantage of because they were illiterate. When God opened his eyes to this reality, Dara stepped forward to do something about it.

About 70 percent of Cambodians are able to read and write, but that number is drastically lower in rural communities where access to schools and the availability of teachers who speak the local tribal language is limited.

With this in mind, World Renew has been working with Cambodian villages to build community kindergartens. The aim is to ensure that children can get a jump-start on their education and begin learning the Khmer language, which they will need for later schooling.

Kindergarten also provides a safe environment to which parents can send their children while they are working in the fields or elsewhere.

The kindergarten in Taprom village that Dara helps lead is running smoothly.

Dara also volunteers to teach one of the three adult literacy groups in the village. His group has eight members who gather for two hours twice each week.

After sharing from the Bible, Dara uses a teacher's manual to teach his students to read and write. As he helps adult learners with their reading and writing skills, he also teaches them about agriculture growing techniques, health, sanitation, hygiene, and other life skills. ■

—by Kristen deRoo Vanderberg, World Renew

Engaging the Community in Richmond, British Columbia

Antelope. Bumblebees. Penguins. Dinosaurs. Children dressed in their best animal costumes stream through the doors of The Tapestry, a 10-year-old church plant located in Richmond, British Columbia, to play carnival games and pursue endless amounts of candy.

Noah's Fest, a yearly event attracting people from across the city, is just one of The Tapestry's ministries focused on engaging and welcoming members of the community.



Tapestry members gather along the water in Garry Point Park in Richmond, British Columbia.

Lead pastor Albert Chu said, "Hospitality is by far the

number one reason why we have grown."

In a decade, the congregation has grown from one »

Desire, Dirt, and Delight: Community Gardening in Truro, Nova Scotia

Our desire to reach out is heartfelt and great. We want to share our space and enrich our community," said Dan Brown, pastor of John Calvin Christian Reformed Church, located in Truro, Nova Scotia.

The church's property includes a field—the perfect place for a community garden.

After years of prayer, partnerships, planning, and support from inside and outside the church, the Glenwood Drive Community Garden was created.

Engaging the community was key right from the start. A committee to oversee the garden included both neighbors and congregants.

Workshops on canning and organic farming techniques, a harvest dinner, and raised beds—allowing easier access



People gather to plot out the garden.

for those who have disabilities—involved community folks interacting with church folks.

To the delight of many, the desire to reach out is now being met in a place where

people can cultivate both the dirt and relationships.

Project coordinator Karla Winham said, "The garden has been a catalyst for energy and confidence in ministry for the whole congregation. [Seeing]

all the new faces blending and connecting with our community has been vitalizing and encouraging."

Almost all of 2014's gardeners will be back this year, along with some new ones. The group is committed to strengthening community through improved communication, opportunities to share gardening expertise, and social events.

"We have big dreams for further infrastructure such as improvements to our rainwater collection system, a driveway, and more raised beds for those with accessibility issues," said Winham. "One of our gardeners has donated a greenhouse into which we hope to put a heater so people can start their seeds early." ■

—by Lis Van Harten,
Sustaining Congregational Excellence

You add.
God multiplies.

» service with 10 active members to two services with over 300 members each.

Members of the congregation volunteer at residences of members with disabilities, building relationships with the staff and residents.

Across the street from The Tapestry is an affordable housing facility for seniors and a home for women suffering from addiction. Residents from these locations attend this church.

The Tapestry also gathers small groups—some multi-generational and racially diverse, others exclusively for undergraduates, women, or seniors—to study a curriculum relating to the current sermon series.

The Tapestry's ministry also reaches their local university, Kwantlen Polytechnic University in Richmond.

"We were recently approached by Kwantlen University, which asked us to partner with them in starting a Multi-Faith Centre on their campus," said Chu.

With the support of Christian Reformed Home Missions, The Tapestry agreed; it currently pays the salaries of the chaplain and coordinator positions at the university so the church can continue to reach out to college students searching for faith. ■

—by Rachel Gabrielse,
Christian Reformed
Home Missions



Jeff Weima, New Testament professor, teaches a course in Canada.

Seminary Professors Share Their Accomplishments

Every year the faculty of Calvin Theological Seminary recap their professional activities for the seminary's Board of Trustees.

Besides teaching, both residential and distance, professors are asked to recount contributions to biblical and theological scholarship such as papers presented, conferences attended, articles or reviews written, and books published.

And because Calvin Seminary "is formed by and serves the church, God's agent of hope for the world," professors also give time and talent to the church, especially local congregations. Preaching and teaching top the list.

While many ordained professors are in the pulpit once a month on average, preaching ambassadors like Rev. Scott Hoezee and Rev. Jul Medenblik, president of the seminary,

are likely to have only one Sunday a month—or fewer—when they are not delivering a sermon to a local congregation. Professor Mariano Avila has been serving local Hispanic congregations with his preaching and teaching in Spanish.

Adult education classes, some several weeks in duration, are another venue of service. Many professors teach these close to the seminary, but some professors travel further.

Such was the case recently when Jeff Weima, professor of New Testament, traveled to Cambridge, Ontario, to present a workshop on "How to Read the Bible for All It's Worth."

Over 80 adult leaders gathered for a full-day seminar. In the morning, Weima led three sessions in which he laid out five key principles of how one ought to read the Bible.

In the afternoon, Weima preached a sermon followed by a question and answer session with participants to help them uncover where and how in the sermon they heard the five hermeneutical principles taught in the morning sessions.

Sunday morning he preached in a theater where River City Church meets.

The weekend finished with an area-wide evening service at Maranatha CRC in Cambridge. Weima's sermon was entitled "A Professor's Prayer for the CRC." ■

—by Jinny De Jong,
Calvin Theological Seminary

Longer versions of
these and other
stories are online at
[thebanner.org/
together.](http://thebanner.org/together)

Five Ways to Pray

In 1 Thessalonians 5:17, the apostle Paul says, "Never stop praying." WOW! Do you know anybody who never stops praying? Probably not. But Paul knew that trying to do that helps us be more like Jesus.

Prayer is talking with God. When you talk with God, you can talk the same way you talk with your friends and family. So it's OK to start your prayers with "Hi, God!" instead of using a bunch of fancy words. And you can talk with God about any-

thing. God cares about your math test and the fight you had with your friend, just like God cares about other problems in our world.

Here are some activities that can help you get into the habit of talking more with God.

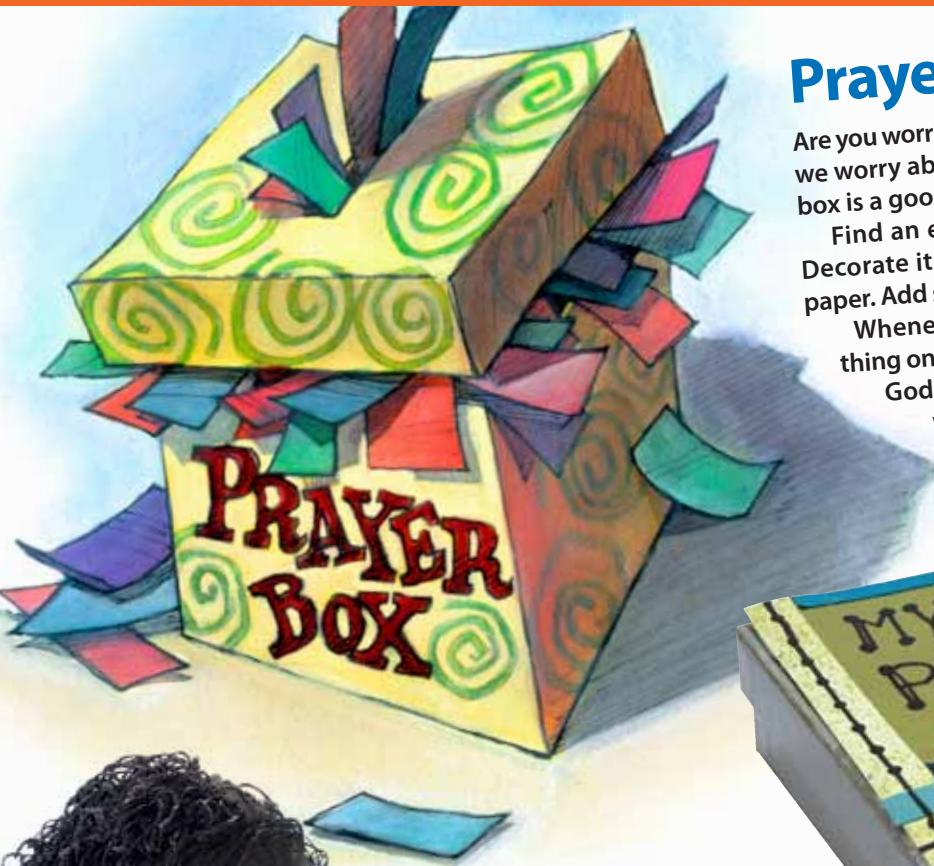
ILLUSTRATION BY SCOTT HOLLADAY

Prayer Box

Are you worried about something? Most of the time, the things we worry about are things we can't control. Making a prayer box is a good way to practice giving your worries to God.

Find an empty box like a tissue box or a small gift box. Decorate it by gluing on scrapbook paper or construction paper. Add stickers, drawings, words, or patterns to your box.

Whenever you're worried about something, write that thing on a piece of paper and put it in your prayer box. Ask God to help you stop worrying and to trust that God will take care of you. Every now and then, read the things you wrote on the papers, and think about how God has helped you with them.



Prayer Hearts

Sometimes it's hard to remember all the things you want to pray for. My friend Sara keeps a string of hearts in her kitchen. On the hearts she writes the names of people who need prayer. You can make your own prayer hearts by just cutting out heart shapes and taping them to a piece of yarn, or you can make origami hearts like the ones in this picture. You can find instructions for folding these paper hearts at tinyurl.com/origamiheart.



The Five-Finger Prayer

Did you know that looking at your hand can help you pray? It can! Hold your hand out, palm down. Each finger can remind you to pray for a different group of people. Here's how it works:

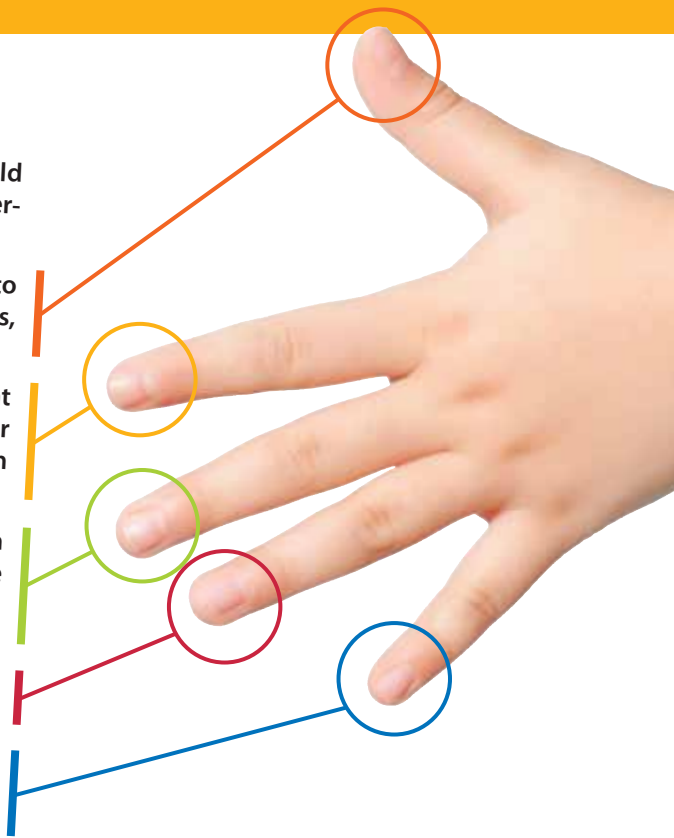
THUMB: your thumb is the closest finger to you, so it can remind you to pray for the people who are closest to you, like parents, brothers and sisters, grandparents, and friends.

POINTER FINGER: Pray for the people who help point you in the right direction: school teachers, your pastor, Sunday school leaders, and other people who teach you or give you advice. Pray that God would help them be wise and patient.

TALLEST FINGER: Your next finger is usually your tallest finger. It can help you remember to pray for people who have authority—people like government officials, police officers, and other leaders. Pray that they would make good decisions and care about the people they lead.

RING FINGER: Did you know that this finger is your weakest finger? Let it remind you to pray for people who are sick, sad, and in trouble.

LITTLE FINGER: Your last finger is your pinkie. After you've prayed for other people in your life, don't forget to pray for yourself! Ask God to forgive the wrong things you've done and help you to be more like Jesus.



Psalm Prayers

Many of the psalms in the Bible were written as prayers to God. King David and other people wrote psalms to praise God, to ask God for help, and even to tell God how angry they were. Writing your own psalm can help you tell God how you're feeling and ask God for help.

Dear God,
I know you are _____
(write words that describe God, such as loving, powerful, kind . . .)

I'm feeling _____
(write what you're feeling right now)

because _____
(describe a problem you're having or something you're thankful for)

Please help me to _____
(write words that ask God for what you need)

Thank you for _____
(write words of thanks)

NOTE to PARENTS: To dig more deeply into the psalms with your kids, check out the e-book *Psalms for Families: Devotions for All Ages* by Robert J. Keeley and Laura Keeley. You can find it for free at worship.calvin.edu (search on "psalms for families") or you can purchase a Kindle edition from amazon.com.

Walking Prayers

Sometimes it's hard to sit still while you pray. If you like to move a lot, try a walking prayer. As you walk down your school hallway, pray silently for the kids and teachers you pass. Remember that every single one of them is struggling with something—even the people who look like they have it all together. Or take a walk in a park or in the woods and pray for God's creation. Or walk around your neighborhood and pray for the people who live there. You can pray a walking prayer any time you're moving around!



Sandy Swartzentruber is a freelance writer and a school library aide. She attends Sherman Street CRC in Grand Rapids, Michigan. She often needs to pray for God's help with things she's worried about.



Growing in Unity

THERE'S PROBABLY AT LEAST ONE THING we can all agree on, and that is the lack of unity everywhere we look. Nations against nations, ethnic groups against other ethnic groups, husbands against wives, children against parents, church members against their brothers and sisters. Seems like everybody these days has a problem with some other human being. And most of us have come to accept that this is just the way it is; these are the times we live in. It's understandable.

The problem is that within the church, the body of believers, Christ-followers have yielded to this same level of acceptance. Whatever happened to "the communion of the saints"? Although we read those words aloud in our confessions, we don't seem to live them out. Rather than growing something that is near and dear to God's heart, we're diminishing it. This really makes me sad.

Jesus prayed in John 17 *three times* that we would be one like he and his Father are one. He prayed that the rest of the world would believe as a result of the unity that could be seen in his followers. I can't help but believe that Jesus knew all too

well that this would be one of the biggest challenges his followers would face. So why has this unity been such a difficult thing to achieve?

From the time Jesus prayed that prayer, the enemy of God set in motion an environment that espouses factions and divisions. These divisions are based on every imaginable line of distinction, including denominations, ethnicity and race, socioeconomics, and gender.

In addition, our North American culture is characterized by a kind of rugged individualism. We wake up in the mornings driven by the desire to achieve whatever will make *me*—and mine—content and happy. Many of us would go further and assert that it is our God-given right and responsibility to act on this. Instead of trying to discern God's will, this kind of individualistic thinking makes us think we can draft the plan for our lives and simply present it to God for his co-signature—and then barrel down the path to make it happen. And if our lives do not happen to unfold the way we have scripted our plan, we're likely to get mad at God or start accusing God of being absent or distant.

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This individualistic approach actually offers more opportunities than we care to admit for pushing others out of our way. It allows us to devalue those we don't think are worthy so that we can carry out our own will, our own plans.

It is an attitude that carries over into our relationships with our brothers and sisters at church as well. Many of us go to church on Sunday morning with a shopper's mentality—even to the point of making a mental checklist: Did I find a good parking space? Was the music to my liking? Did the pastor deliver a message that made me feel good about myself? Did my children have fun in the nursery or children's church?

We rarely go to church with the expectation that God is going to present some troubling circumstances that will force us to grow in areas that he knows we need to grow in, and then thank him and come back next week for more. Instead, if we answer "no" to several of the questions on our mental checklist, we'll probably decide it's time to start church shopping.

The truth is, as long as we believe that everything—including church—has to cater to our own individual needs and concerns, we're not likely to experience the blessing of the communion of the saints. And we'll lose sight of the fact that it takes time and intentionality to seek out Jesus' plan for our lives.

In order for us to make headway in the damage to our unity that the enemy is causing, we need to address our own relationship with God. Establishing a right relationship with God starts with having a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. God promises that when we invite him in we will possess his Spirit at that very moment: "You . . . are in the realm of the Spirit if indeed the Spirit of God lives in you . . ." (Rom. 8:9).

The next step is establishing the habit of spending daily time with Jesus: reading God's Word, listening to his voice, and coming to him in prayer. For those who cultivate this kind of relationship, the Spirit of God works in surprising ways. Unfortunately, a survey conducted in the United States indicated that only 20 percent of those who identified as Christians read or listened to the Bible four to seven days per week.

Finally, we need to continue working out our prayer life. Perhaps you can ask a trusted spiritual leader to recommend a good resource on prayer that teaches the basic essentials: praise and thanksgiving, confession, petition, intercession, and meditation. Setting out a laundry list of our wants and needs without confessing sin and a willingness to repent avails very little, no matter how long we sit there with Jesus. On the other hand, "the prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective" (James 5:16).

The Holy Spirit of God demonstrates the sweet results of the joy we can experience within the community of the saints. You may find yourself seeing how a brother or sister's differences bless you beyond measure. You may find yourself noticing the vastness of a God who is able to orchestrate harmony in all of the varying personalities and styles of the people who are members of your congregation. And you may begin to look back and reflect that staying in your own church community and growing with fellow believers—even those you disagree with—is really worth it.

That's been my own experience. I remember a time when I was in a battle with others around issues of race relations. I knew I was right, and I wanted to be vindicated. I remember writing out Scripture passages in every translation I had available to me: passages like "Vengeance is mine, I will repay"

(Rom. 12:19). I had to write these passages over and over again until I finally got to the same place in my heart as what my hand was writing. Ultimately it was God's Word and his Spirit that gave me the peace to let God do what he was doing—not what I wanted him to do.

Looking back, I marvel at how God has repaired and restored those relationships. I believe God uses difficult situations like this to prune away our self-centeredness and bitterness. If we jump up and leave our brothers and sisters at the first sign of conflict or pain, we will never grow in the ways God wants us to grow.

Growing is painful. Just watch a child learning to walk. But the more we get familiar with Scripture passages that tell us who God is and who we are, the more inclined we are to allow God to shape our lives for his purposes.

At least 40 years ago, when I was going through a major crisis, a Bible teacher told me that this life was full of class instruction by God. He said I needed to pay attention, take copious notes, and pass the class. I could fail if I chose to, but God had plenty of time for a repeat. I've decided I'd rather stay put and learn what God is teaching me within the communion of the saints. The communion of the saints, I believe, is part of God's master plan to draw the unbelieving into the fold.

It's God's gift to us. ■

[STUDY QUESTIONS ONLINE](#)



Victoria Gibbs is co-director of discipleship and relationships at Madison Square Church in Grand Rapids, Mich., and interim executive director of Tall Turf Ministries. She is actively involved in issues around race.

The Men Report!

WHEN WE ASKED FOR MORE MEN to tell us about their book clubs, they willingly obliged. Obviously neither gender has a corner on the book club market. We'd still love to hear from more book clubs. Are any kids or teens meeting to talk about books out there? ■



Westmount CRC Book Club Strathroy, Ontario

contributed by **John Koole**

Trudy Joldersma and Leny Dekker got us started in early 2003. *Windflower* by Gabrielle Roy is the first on my list in February of 2003. At present we are mostly men with only three ladies left, all Dutch born, as are the five men except for myself (I'm from New Jersey). I am the only remaining member from the early days.

Recently we read *Jesus of Nazareth* by Pope Benedict, and even our 89-year-old Roman Catholic lady plowed through it, though she found it much too heavy (her favorite was Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows*, which we did twice). In fact, only a few of us got much from the Pope's fine Bible study.

We were helped a good deal in choosing books until recently by Margaret Burdick, a member of Salvation Army background who recently retired from the club. The library provides a book bag for clubs, and in that way we were able to discuss *Wild* by Cheryl Strayed. Our last book was DuMaurier's *Rebecca*, and we take up Kidd's *The Invention of Wings* soon.

A few other titles:

- *Camera Obscura* by Nicolaas Beets
- *Now They Call Me Infidel* by Nonie Darwish
- *Still Alice* by Lisa Genova
- *A Separate Peace* by John Knowles
- *Obasan* by Joy Kogawa
- *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* by Leo Tolstoy
- *Cutting for Stone* by Abraham Verghese

Ann Arbor CRC Men's Prayer & Study Ann Arbor, Michigan

contributed by **Dave Cummins**

This line appears every Sunday in the bulletin of the Ann Arbor CRC: "Wednesday: 6:30 a.m. and 8:00 a.m. Men's Prayer & Study." Men of the AACRC have met Wednesday mornings for over 15 years. At first there was one meeting, at 7:00. To appeal to later-risers (read retirees) and accommodate guys who have to get to work, we split into the two groups.

We meet near the church kitchen and start with coffee, a bagel, and cream cheese. Prayer (by the last to sit down) is followed by 50 minutes of digging into the current chapter of the book under study.

It helps if at least one member has a few questions and nudges discussion along. The groups have studied many of Tom Wright's books opening the New Testament, plus authors Dallas Willard, Tim Keller, Tony Campolo, C.S. Lewis, Mark Noll, and others.

Not surprisingly, discussions are often wide-ranging. The small groups (10 or less) are social, open to others, and evolve over the years, but they serve beautifully to acquaint and knit the members together! Prayer at closing sends the men out aware of concerns and prepared for the day.

Athens Public Library Book Club Athens, Ontario

contributed by **John Bouwers**

I have been involved in a book club in the Athens Public Library for about 11 years. Our members have included men: a retired doctor, a soldier, a diplomat, a store owner, and a teacher, which is me. We usually are outnumbered by the women, but the men hold their own in debate about the books.

I've read many books I wouldn't have. The latest is *Conversations With a Dead Man: The Legacy of Duncan Campbell Scott* by Mark Abley. It's about the person who was in charge of a Native residential school for many years in the early 20th century. Our librarians are from the Christian Reformed Church and are influential in the community with reading events and publicizing events happening at the library.

Pickwick Proselytes Grandville, Michigan

contributed by **Scott De Young**

The Pickwick Proselytes are a small circle of Christian friends and colleagues who have a taste for drink and heaven. We started meeting in 2004 because we like one another, we like books, and we like beer. We meet three or four times per year.

All of our readings have a theological tone that extends into other areas of life—such as science, fiction, poetry, or contemporary issues. At the end of a meeting, someone usually says, “Hey, we should read this next,” and then we do.

At our first meeting of each year we read through the *Annals of the Pickwick Proselytes*. This grounds us in the past so that we have a better understanding of the present. Also, members are required to order IPA or darker beer. “Any member who orders a lighter beer it again he must have his throat cut, and then have his carcass burnt up and the ashes scattered all around, and his name blotted off of the list with blood and never mentioned again by the gang, but have a curse put on it and be forgot, forever” (Huck Finn).

Because your focus is on men in book groups, it should be noted that one of our founding members was a woman (she still is, actually), but apparently she got so sick of us that she moved to Colorado a few years ago.

- A few of the titles we have read:
- “Revelation,” a short story by Flannery O'Connor
 - *Life of the Beloved* by Henri Nouwen
 - *Trouble* by Gary Schmidt
 - *Desiring the Kingdom* by James K.A. Smith
 - *Four Quartets* by T.S. Eliot
 - *Genesis for Normal People* by Peter Enns and Jared Byas

The Canonites Tri-Cities Area, West Michigan

contributed by **Hank Ottens**

In the tri-cities region of West Michigan (Grand Haven, Spring Lake, Ferrysburg) an all-male book club has held monthly meetings at members' homes since 1981. Membership over the years has included pastors of five denominations, educators, attorneys, physicians, and artists. Four charter members still belong, three have died, and two are on leave of absence.

The club's founders compiled a nine-page list of books, “The Canon,” under the headings “Novels, Essays, Literary Criticism, Great Books,” and “History, Theology, Ethics, Apologetics, Counseling.” The selections favor the classics and the sacred.

A facilitator, usually an expert from a nearby college or seminary, leads each session. The host further facilitates by providing wine and cheese, thereby loosening the members' tongues toward fruitful discussions. Over the nearly 35 years of our existence we have worked our way through the Russian, English, and American classics, sometimes more than once. We have read Greek tragedies and poems, Shakespeare's plays, American poets, history and biography, and an occasional contemporary blockbuster.

Emeritus Calvin professor Ed Ericson has led us on several occasions in the reading and discussion of classic Russian literature. Of significance is the fact that he is a personal friend of the late Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, and has, as you may know, written an abridgement of the three-volume *Gulag Archipelago*, at the request and approval of the author.

There are many memorable evenings, not to mention the bottles of wine and cheese-laden crackers we run through by the time the two hours come to an end.

**MORE REVIEWS
ONLINE**

The Grace of Giving

SHANE CLAIBORNE WRITES ABOUT serving with Mother Teresa in the slums of Calcutta. A woman who was begging approached him one day. Shane had no money, and so he gave her what he did have in his pocket, which was a piece of gum. Who knows how long it had been since the beggar had chewed gum, or whether she ever had. But she looked at the gift and smiled with delight. The first thing she did was tear the gum into three pieces. She gave one piece back to Shane, one piece to another person who was there, and kept one for herself.

Surely this person, to use the apostle Paul's language, "excelled at the grace of giving" (2 Cor. 8:7).

What does it take to give gracefully? And the offering in our worship services: how do we really enter that act of worship?

Paul's broader discussion of these questions in 2 Corinthians 8 and 9 suggests two things to say about giving gracefully.

First, God is the one who excels at the grace of giving. The last words in these two chapters are "Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!" The gift Paul is talking about here is Jesus. Amazing that God would give us himself that way. And the reason he did so, Paul told the Corinthians, was "that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you, through his poverty, might become rich" (8:9). God impoverished himself so that we might have the riches of his life.

The second thing about giving gracefully is this: if we want to excel in giving, our giving needs to match the spiritual reality that is ours in Jesus Christ. In Christ, we have been graced, loved, forgiven, guided, blessed, comforted, sustained. We live in a story where creation is being restored, people are being forgiven, the future is good. Out of that reality, we give.

Paul is telling the Corinthians, "Jesus has already made you rich in many ways, so your money-giving should be on the basis of that

reality." Giving is not a prescription for Jesus' people; it's not "Do this." Rather, giving is a description of what happens when people follow their Lord and fall in love with each other across lines that might otherwise divide. Paul is trying to get the Corinthians to envision a world in which generous giving no longer seems awkward or peculiar but is a way of life.

Giving money isn't about money. It is fascinating to note that Paul never uses the word "money" in this passage. He uses all sorts of other words: grace, service, sharing, blessing. All sorts of other words to get at what the reality of money is for disciples of Jesus Christ. Money is for grace, sharing, service, and blessing. That's the true value of money. Paul's concern is not "the budget," but that God's grace would bear fruit in people's lives.

I have come to think over the years that of all the things that can happen in a worship service, the money offering is one of the most amazing acts of worship. That our worship of God includes us literally putting coins and dollar bills and checks into a basket. That our response to Christ's grace can be so concrete. It says a lot.

Sometimes churches say to guests who arrive at worship: "Do not feel you have to put money in the basket." I get that: we want to be hospitable; we don't want to be seen as grabbing for money. However, this approach might mean we tend to see what happens in worship as a collection, as self-serving for a particular congregation. But it isn't a collection and it's not for ourselves. Rather, giving is a response to God's grace, and our responses shouldn't be measured. We don't usually say to people who arrive, "Don't feel you have to sing. Don't feel you have to pray." No, we invite them to participate with us in these acts of worship. We say, "Sing! Pray!" And even, "Give! Yes, even money!"

Maybe we're new at this. Maybe some of us are thinking, "So how do I actually do this?"

Here are some biblical guidelines for giving that the deacons at my church have come up with from 2 Corinthians 8-9 and a few other places in the Bible:

- 1. Give regularly.** "On the first day of the week," says 1 Corinthians 16. Ask yourself, "Is the offering an act of worship I engage in every week?"
- 2. Give of your firstfruits, not your leftovers.** When you have the financial freedom to give money, give to God first.
- 3. Give proportionally.** That is, give as you've been blessed. Paul says the people "gave as much as they were able" (8:3). Some of us are able to give a few dollars for our regular giving each week. Others of us could give hundreds.
- 4. Give cheerfully.** Don't give reluctantly or under compulsion (9:7). The worst reasons to give are out of guilt, under pressure, or to get rid of someone. The best reasons are to worship God, to show compassion, and to say thanks. Think of God's grace to us, and then happily give.
- 5. Give generously.** Think of others before oneself.
- 6. Give sacrificially.** The Macedonians gave beyond expectation (8:1-4) and considered it a privilege.

The word "tithe" can be a problem if it makes us think that only a certain percentage of our stuff is the Lord's. But it can be helpful if it gets us seriously thinking about how much money we're going to give. Over the years, several people in my congregation have been audited by the federal government for their charitable donations, and the reason is because their giving is so out of whack with the national average. Ten percent, for instance, is way above the national average in Canada and the United

Of all the things that can happen in a worship service, the money offering is one of the most amazing acts of worship.

States. I'd like to think that our people would get a lot of tax audits.

Meanwhile, church buildings need repairs and renovations and renting. Budgets seem to grow every year. People are going hungry and homeless on our own streets. Countries around the world are flooded and windswept and cracked apart by earthquakes. Students emerge from college with debts and very little income. There are people with no jobs or who are looking for jobs. Young adults with new jobs or almost-jobs. Parents with kids and savings to think of. Semi-retired folk who at times are semi-tired folk with other places to be and see and spend money on. \$300 electronic toys, overseas trips for pleasure, and "donation fatigue." I don't know how to put it all together.

Even so, we are called to excel in the grace of giving. We can only do that if we excel in loving Jesus and if we excel in living the Scriptures' story. If we enjoy and wonder at the grace of God that surrounds us and involves us and infuses us. If we live open to the Spirit and if we are alive by the Spirit.

Then we can do nothing but excel in our giving. ■

[STUDY QUESTIONS ONLINE](#)



David Vroege pastors All Nations Christian Reformed Church in Halifax, Nova Scotia, a church that teaches him a lot about giving graciously.

FAQs

Outreach

Q Some of my friends say there is no truth; everything is relative. I am intimidated to talk about Christ with them because they might say, “How can you claim Jesus is the only way? You Christians are so narrow-minded and exclusionary.” I don’t know how to respond to that.

A First, I would gently challenge the notion that there is no truth and everything is relative. When someone makes this assertion, he is saying there is no absolute truth that transcends time, place, and people. Instead, any truth claims are relative in that they are contextualized in a specific time and place for particular people. That statement itself is a truth claim: he believes that everyone must accept his statement which transcends time, place, and people. Saying, “There is no absolute truth,” then, is making an absolute truth assertion.

Second, I would validate their concern that any truth claims are, by nature, exclusionary. The moment you say “2+2=4” or “The capital of France is Paris” you are excluding everything else to be true. It sounds open-minded when someone says, “We must be tolerant to all views and beliefs.” But in reality the person is being exclusionary and intolerant toward people who disagree with her. So the most pressing question is, Whose exclusionary truth claims are best for the world?

Third, we should always lead our unbelieving friends with all of their objections and doubts before Jesus. After all, he is the One who says, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” William Willimon said, “God became a Jew who lived briefly, died violently, and rose unexpectedly” so that we may encounter the Living God in all of his truths. I would invite any doubting friends to read the gospel of John with me so that they may wrestle with Jesus with their objections and questions.

Ultimately, our job is do what Philip did for Nathaniel: to say, “Come and see!”

—Victor Ko is a church planter with mosaicHouse in Edmonton, Alberta.

The most pressing question is, Whose exclusionary truth claims are best for the world?

Faith Formation

Q I find that I am often too busy. Sometimes it feels like the only way to fix the problem is to add something else to my schedule called “Sabbath practices”—which just makes me feel busier plus guilty when I don’t do it well. There must be a better way.

A I struggle with this issue as well. A harried state of the soul leads to nervous anxiety and spiritual dryness. What amazes me is that the same challenge is found in every kind of church setting, whether the congregation is urban, suburban, small-town, or rural. Many folks are too busy, and often this busyness hampers spiritual growth. A former student mentioned that he had heard Bill Hybels describe the problem this way: “I’m too busy doing God’s work for God to do his work in me.”

There is a bit of good news: because this problem is epidemic in proportion, strong resources are available. In Reformed circles, these range from Don Postema’s classic *Space for God* to Philip Reinders’s *Seeking God’s Face* to the newly published *Soul Keeping* by John Ortberg.

Resources like these are helpful for personal devotions, small group study, silent prayer retreats, and as a guide for a three- to four-week sermon series. I find the sermon series especially helpful, because it invites an entire community to address the issue together.

For some people, the practice of speaking with a spiritual director once every two months or so has become a helpful habit. Such a person can provide wise discernment for ordering one’s life in a more godly manner.

—Syd Hielema is a team leader for CRC Discipleship and Faith Formation Ministries. He is a member of Meadowlands Christian Reformed Church in Ancaster, Ontario.

Justice

Q How do you deal with disappointment and discouragement in justice work?

A A friend asked this question on a “down” day. I had just read evidence showing that a policy “win” in access to health care for aboriginal children is not being implemented as intended. First Nations children are still being denied services that non-aboriginal children receive, in spite of the advocacy work that had been done to get the Canadian Parliament to unanimously adopt a policy to end such practices. It was a common-sense principle to treat the child as needed and sort out the funding issues between federal and provincial governments later. This policy was named Jordan’s Principle in honor of a child who died in the hospital while government agencies fought about who should pay for home care. For once it seemed real progress had been achieved toward justice for aboriginal children. Reality now showed a hollow victory.

“Not well” was my answer that day. On reflection, I can list some tools to help me bounce back on bad days, such as working with allies, reminding myself that God is in control, praying, reading psalms of lament, recalling the need for persistence, and celebrating small steps along the journey. The only option *not* on the table is giving up, because the call to seek justice is an elemental part of being faithful. So it is back to work to advocate for full implementation until all children have equitable access to healthcare.

—Kathy Vandergrift is a public policy analyst living in Ottawa, Ontario. ■

ADS

Deadlines: June issue is 5/4/15; July/August issue is 6/18/15. Details online.

Prices: Most ads are \$0.33^{US} per character (min. 150 characters including punctuation and spaces). A discounted rate of \$0.26^{US} per character applies to Anniversaries, Birthdays, Obituaries, Denominational and Classical Announcements, and Congregational Announcements. Photos are \$22^{US} extra.

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

Denominational and Classical

Eligible for Call

We are pleased to announce that Tim Leferink has now completed his academic requirements and is eligible for call as a candidate for the ministry of the Word. Dr. Steven Timmermans, Executive Director

Call to Synod 2015

The council of First CRC, Sioux Center, Iowa, calls all delegates to Synod 2015, elected by their respective classes, to meet in the B. J. Haan Auditorium on the campus of Dordt College, Sioux Center, Iowa, on Friday, June 12, at 8:30 a.m.

All area CRC members are invited to join the delegates in worship at the synodical Service of Prayer and Praise on Sunday afternoon, June 14, 2015, at 4:00 p.m. at First CRC, 321 Second Street SE, Sioux Center, Iowa. Rev. Mark Verbruggen will deliver the message.

All CRC churches across the continent are requested to remember the deliberations of synod in their intercessory prayers on Sunday, June 7, and on Sunday, June 14.

Council of First CRC, Sioux Center, Iowa

Congregational

Church's 150th Anniversary

LAFAYETTE IN CRC will celebrate 150 years of God's faithfulness on Sunday June 7, 2015. Events include a celebratory worship service at church followed by dinner at Lafayette Christian School. All former members, pastors, and friends are cordially invited to attend. Please RSVP to: LCRC Secretary, 1200 Tippecanoe St, Lafayette, IN 47904; or secretary@lafayettecrrc.org; or 765-742-4292, by June 1, 2015.

Church's 100th Anniversary

DUTTON UNITED REFORMED CHURCH All friends and former members are invited to join in celebrating our 100th year anniversary. Former pastors will be conducting the services on June 21 & June 28. You are also invited to join in a celebration dinner on June 24 at 6:00 P.M. on the church property with a program to follow in the sanctuary at 7:00 P.M. An RSVP is necessary for the dinner and must be made by May 14; email—helmholdt.amanda@gmail.com, or phone (616) 813-8531. Handicap assistance will be provided.

Church's 50th Anniversary

CRC OF ST. JOSEPH On August 9, 2015 the CRC of St. Joseph, MI will celebrate their 50th year Jubilee. We warmly invite all former members and friends to join us in a 9:30 a.m. worship service, an 11:00 a.m. fellowship and a noon lunch and program. Call 269-429-5541 or email office@crsjs.org to send fond memories and to RSVP the \$12 catered luncheon by 8/1. Visit crsjs.com for more information.

Announcements

VACATIONING IN THE EASTERN U. P.? Join us for worship (10 AM) at New Hope CRC of Kincheloe. We are 20 miles south of Sault Ste Marie and 35 miles north of Mackinac Bridge - just off I-75/Kinross exit. More info: newhopekincheloe.org

Birthdays

90th Birthday

ETTA BOSSCHER VAN WINGERDEN turns 90 on April 18. Family and friends are invited to an Open House for Etta on Saturday, May 2 from 2-4

PM in the Town Square Room of Sunset Manor, 725 Baldwin St, Jenison, MI. We celebrate God's love, grace, and faithfulness in mom's life!

HARRIET (SCHOUT) GEBBEN plans to celebrate 90 years of life on May 10. Her family praises God for her faith, generosity, and Christian example for us all. Mom, you are LOVED! (19 Trillium Ct., Holland, MI, 49423

100th Birthday



MARY TEN BRINK will celebrate her 100th birthday on Saturday, June 6, 2:00-4:00 p.m. with an Open House in the Community Room at Park Village Pines, 2929 Crystal Lane, Kalamazoo, MI 49009. Her children, Harry and Sally Ten Brink, and Ken and Jane Loerop, 9 grandchildren and 35 great grandchildren invite you to join them. At Mary's request, in lieu of gifts, please support et Free Ministries; memo write :EnGedi." The family praises God for her love that is still touching so many lives in the name of Christ.

80th Birthday

ALICE (NYKAMP) STEIGENGA of, 1210 Hekman Circle, Ripon, CA 95366, celebrated her 80th on May 3 along with her 3 children, their spouses and 3 grandchildren. We thank God for His faithfulness and for you, Mom! You're the best!



DORDT COLLEGE Administrative Staff Positions

Dordt College seeks individuals to provide leadership in the following positions.

Director of Admissions
Director of Financial Aid
Director of Global Education
Director of Library Services

Qualified candidates committed to the mission of Dordt College should send a resume and letter of interest to the Director of Human Resources at the address below. A review of applications will begin immediately and continue until the position is filled.

Dordt College Ph: 712-722-6011
498 4th Ave NE Fax: 712-722-6035
Sioux Center, IA hr@dordt.edu
51250

For more information:

www.dordt.edu – Employment

Dordt College endeavors to diversify its staff within the framework of its mission. The commitment of the college to nondiscrimination on the basis of age, color, disability, gender, national or ethnic origin, or race is consistent with federal and state requirements for nondiscrimination in employment.

Anniversaries

65th Anniversary



SOPER Hal & Fran (Rop) will celebrate 65 years of marriage on May 6. They with their children are thankful for God's faithfulness and many blessings. We love you mom and dad! Linda & Bob Bosch, Barb & Dave VandeBunte, Gail & Doug Elenbaas, Sarah Drenth, Hal Soper, Sue & Paul Soper; 20

grandchildren, 13 great grandchildren. 2772 Pfeiffer Woods Dr. #4203, Grand Rapids, MI 49512

WASSENAR, Robert and Jean (Zeilstra), 11020 Raleigh, Westchester, IL 60154 will celebrate their 65th anniversary on May 13. Congratulations and much love from your family: Sharon and Jack Eriks (Lisa and Mike Dekker, Jennifer Eriks and Scott Stebbins, Elizabeth and Mark Van Holstyn); Sandra and Andrew Kranenborg (Brian and Miranda, Amy, Steven and Krysta); Ronald and Cathy (Rachel, David and Sharon); Linda and Verle Norris (Drew, Gretchen, Sarah). Great-grandchildren: Annika, Abigail, Jacob and Zachary Dekker; Maxwell and Olivia Van Holstyn; Kenna and Kate Kranenborg. We thank and praise God for your example and His faithfulness.



Seeking applicants for the bi-national position of Director of Advancement for Ministry Services and the CRCNA Foundation

Beginning August, 2015

The position will be based in either
Grand Rapids, MI or
Burlington, ON

Please submit a letter of interest
and a detailed resume of
education and work history to:

Michelle De Bie, Director of HR
mdebie@crna.org

A full job description is available
at www.crna.org under
Get Involved/Career Opportunities

Initial consideration will be given to
applications received by **May 22.**

50th Anniversary

VANDER VEEN Pastor Dale & Edith (Swierenga) 2940 Parkside Dr. Jenison, MI 49428 celebrate 50 years of marriage May 21. Children: Cindy & David Frieswyk, Tim & Marlene Vander Veen, Jen & Gregg Colburn. 6 grandchildren. Thank you, Lord!

Employment

ASSISTANT BUSINESS MANAGER Grand Rapids company needs office assistant to work 15-20 hours per week. Duties include answering phones, scheduling appointments, and all aspects of accounts payable and accounts receivable. If interested, please mail your resume and cover letter to Office Manager, PO Box 888312, Grand Rapids MI 49588

CAREGIVERS NEEDED Are you interested in working for the best living assistance services company in West Michigan? Visiting Angels is looking for people who can be excellent, not average; make a connection with our clients; be perfectly dependable; practice compassion and work with integrity. Contact Heather at 616-243-7080 or heather@vangels.com. www.vangels.com

CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER Holland Christian Homes (HCH) is a non-profit organization, incorporated in 1969 for the purpose of providing accommodation and care for seniors. Their concern is for the physical, emotional and spiritual needs of the individual. HCH serves the Christian community. It has, and will continue to have, a majority of occupants who are of Dutch descent and of the Reformed Christian faith. Over the years, the scale of the organization has grown significantly. At our campus in Brampton Ontario, HCH now accommodates over 800 tenants in 6 apartment towers, and 240 residents in two fully accredited long term care facilities. The HCH team includes over 450 full and part-time staff members. HCH has a stellar reputation as a leader in the delivery of high-quality, integrated, innovative residential and community services for seniors that address a very wide continuum of care. In collaboration with community partners, the organization has created a unique array of programs to meet the myriad needs of seniors. Reporting to the Board of Directors and working with a strong leadership team, the new Chief Executive Officer will oversee all aspects of the operation of Holland Christian Homes, at all times promoting the mission, vision and values of HCH

Church Position Announcements

PASTOR Hope CRC is looking for a Pastor to lead our congregation in Stony Plain, AB. We are looking for someone who is an effective preacher and a dynamic leader. For more information and a church profile, please contact Esther Duplisea at hopecrc.clerk@platinum.ca or 780-892-2149.

YOUTH PASTOR/DIRECTOR - Maitland River Community Church of Wingham ON Canada is seeking a Youth Pastor who would also serve as the local YFC Youth Centre Director. The candidate would oversee and work collaboratively with the church's team of volunteer youth leaders for weekly high school age youth group at the church, plus oversee and work collaboratively with three YFC staff at the YFC Youth Centre. The candidate must have administrative, organization, and supervision skills. Most of the youth are from a non-church background. Inquiries: office@mrc.ca

SENIOR PASTOR Faith Christian Reformed Church in Sioux Center, Iowa is looking for a Senior Pastor. We are searching for a candidate who is gifted in preaching, can provide motivation for outreach/discipleship, is an effective leader, and is compassionate, caring and sensitive to the needs of our congregation. For information and/or a church profile contact Search Committee Chairman, Lyle Gritters, at Lyle@dordt.edu.

FULL TIME PASTOR Third CRC of Zeeland, MI is seeking a full time pastor to keep us rooted in truth and growing in our community. For more information contact Steve Langeland at Steve.Langeland@gmail.com.

FULL TIME, DIRECTOR OF YOUTH MINISTRIES WoodyNook CRC, a multi-generational large church located outside Lacombe AB, is

to staff, tenants, residents and external audiences. The role of CEO requires an inspiring and motivated leader who is committed to operational excellence. He/she should be a facilitative leader with a collaborative leadership style as well as:

- A comfort level leading in a Christian environment.
- A progressively senior track record in operations and administration, with demonstrated achievements (exposure to the health or social services sector would be preferable, but not essential).
- Demonstrated leadership, in a large and operationally-complex environment.
- A leadership and management style that is visionary, innovative, energetic, empowering and enabling.
- An appreciation for the delivery of culturally sensitive care and residential services to seniors (while not essential that you be of Dutch heritage, it would be an added value).

This is your opportunity to significantly impact an organization that is recognized as a leader in the delivery of an integrated system of services for seniors. For additional information, please contact Penny Mirams or Sarah Adams at 416-366-1990 or submit your resume in confidence to www.odgersbermtdson.ca/en/careers/12728

MISSION CONSULTANTS HONDURAS AGC Ltd (All God's Children) has begun a search for a husband and wife team to serve as liaisons between itself and the indigenous ministries in Comayagua, Honduras. As International Mission Consultants, this couple will function in a variety of roles, including ambassador, bridge builder, servant leader, counselor, and adviser. For more info, contact info@chapter-next.com

Obituaries

DEKOSTER Ruth DeVries DeKoster was greeted by her Lord and Savior Jesus Christ on Thursday, March 12, 2015. She was preceded in death by her husband Lester and sister Dorothy Siebers; survived by her children, Leslie DeKoster Dennis, Paul and Petrina DeKoster, Mark and Julie DeKoster, and Steve and Ellen DeKoster. She was blessed with nine grandchildren and their spouses, Christopher Dennis, Alicia Dennis, Paige and Oliver Thiermann, Sara and Josh Leo, Amy and Joel Arenouts, Kate and Kai Mundwiler, Jonathan DeKoster, Elizabeth DeKoster, and Emily DeKoster, and two great granddaughters Blythe Leo and Quinn Mundwiler.

seeking someone passionate for working with youth and intergenerational ministries. A degree in youth ministry is preferable. For job description and full church profile please visit www.wncrc.ca/serving. If interested, please send your resume to ericjondoe@yahoo.com

PASTOR Neland Avenue CRC of Grand Rapids, Michigan, seeks a thoughtful Reformed preacher who can present sermons that are deeply rooted in Scripture and keenly relevant for the 21st century. This pastor should be able to work meaningfully with fellow pastors and staff in providing pastoral care for the congregation and involvement in ministries to the Neland neighborhood in the heart of Grand Rapids. A Church Profile is available at the Pastor-Church Relations Office. Interested persons should contact Search Committee Chairperson Scott Hoezee: seh6@calvinseminary.edu

PASTOR The CRC of Collingwood ON is seeking a pastor who desires to lead a small, dedicated congregation. We seek a spiritual leader who is gifted in preaching, meeting the pastoral needs of our congregation and mentoring us to reach out with love to the community around us. For more information, contact Jeff Beck at jandbeck@hotmail.com

PASTOR/CANDIDATE Bethel CRC in Saskatoon SK is offering a one year renewable term for the pastor position. If you are interested in this opportunity please contact Anthony @ 306 221 1598 or nienhuis@sasktel.net

WORSHIP PASTOR New Life Christian Reformed Church, a multi-staffed, vibrant community in Abbotsford, BC, is seeking a full or part time worship pastor experienced in leading a worship ministry, which engages the congregation into the worship of God. For further information see www.newlifecrc.ca

GESCHIERE Jacobus (Jack), age 81; surrounded by his family, passed from this earth to be with his Saviour and Lord on Sunday March 15, 2015 at St. Joseph's Hospice, Sarnia. Loving husband of Wilhelmina Geschiere (Overgaaauw) for 57 years. A much loved father to Charles Geschiere (Dawn), Jim Geschiere (Janet), Caroline Fillekes (David) and David Geschiere (Susan); beloved Opa to 17 grandchildren and one great granddaughter. A cherished brother to Lein Geschiere (Cathrien) and Mien Verhage (Lou) in the Netherlands and a special uncle to many nieces and nephews. Predeceased by his parents, brother Jos, and sisters Maatje and Corrie of the Netherlands. A faithful servant of the Lord. Psalm 63:2,3.

IWEMA Henry "Ike" Iwema, age 86, US Army Korean War Veteran, of Willowbrook, IL, passed away on March 29, 2015 in Downers Grove, IL. Beloved husband for 64 years to Jennie, nee Voss. Loving father of June (Jan) VanderLeest, John (Maria), Grace (Bill) Schaafsma, Mary (Ken) Buys, Sharon (Michael) Tafoya, Henry Jr. (Ardythe), Paul, and Christine (Jim) Buitter. Dear father-in-law of the late Paul Powers. Cherished grandfather of 22 and great-grandfather of 23. Dearest brother of Christine (Clarence) Noorlag, Ray (late Corinne) Iwema, and the late Ben (late Wilma) Iwema and the late Theresa Iwema. Dear brother-in-law and uncle of many.

MENSINK Deanetta "Deane", age 96 of Madison WI on April 1, 2015. Preceded in death by: Lawrence, her husband for 43 years; Michael Simle, son-in-law; and Melissa, granddaughter. Survivors include sons Bryce (Jan), Dave, Ron, and Jeff; daughter Carol Simle; grandchildren Jennifer, Amy, Jonathan, Krista, Leslie, Joy, Laura, Leo, Nicole, and Eric; and eight great-grandchildren.

NAVIS Kenneth, 79, of Wyoming, MI, went to be with his Lord whom he loved and served. He will be greatly missed by his wife of 59 years, Betty (Brink), his children Bethany (Ted) Vogel, Kathy (Bruce) VanOss, Patti (Jim) Hathaway, Dan (Carolyn) Navis and 9 grandchildren.

NIWIEK James Henry, 75, walked joyfully into his Savior's arms on March 18, 2015, after a 5-year battle with ALS. Jim was greeted in heaven by son, Steven Niewiek, and parents Marian and Henry Niewiek; survived by wife, Marilyn (Soodsma) Niewiek; children, Sharon & Ray Haan, Susan & Jack Doles, and David & Wendy Niewiek; grandchildren Nick, Ben and Sarah, Christopher & fiancée Liz (Nol), Zach & fiancée Stacy (Faber), Alex & Chloe Haan; Kelly, Tommy, Julie and Jimmy Doles; Jake, Sam, Ellie, Kate and Daniel Niewiek; and great-grandchildren Cameron and Natalie Haan.

RIETEMA Berniece Mae (nee Wychers), age 87, of Grand Rapids MI, went to be with her Lord and Savior on Tuesday, March 17, 2015. Preceded in death by husband, Robert Rietema, Sr. in 1992; survived by children, Randy & Elaine Rietema, Dan & Diane Rietema, Mary Van Eck, Ben & Barbara Rietema, Robert Jr. & Renee Rietema, Tim & Jan Rietema; 19 grandchildren; and 11 great grandchildren.



RINGELESTEIN Arie, 95, of 3019 330th St, Fremont, IA 52561, went to be with his Lord on Friday, March 13, 2015. Arie will be dearly missed by his wife of 72 years, Carolyn; his children: John (Judy), Nancy (Lee) Veldhuizen, Keith, Carroll (Marlene); his 8 grandchildren and 11 great grandchildren.



SANDIN Nadeen R., age 77 went to be with her Lord 2/5/15. Survived by her husband Jim Sandin, sons Kevin (Kim), Scott (Diane) and daughter Shari and eight grandchildren.

TIMMERMANS Conrad John "Bill", 88, of Grandville, MI went to be with our Lord on March 20, 2015. He is survived by his wife of 64 years, Genevieve Lois nee Reminga, his children Susan (Daryl) Vogel and Steven (Barb) Timmermans; grandchildren Katie (Ben) Brower, Paul, Stephanie Vogel, Yaineabeba, Becca, Jessica (Christopher) Colvin, Getenet and Fekadu; step-grandchildren Rachel (Brent) Cunningham and Timothy (Stacy) Vogel; brother Albert Timmermans and sister Lillian Oosterhouse and sisters-in-law Francis Timmermans and Lois Timmermans.

STOB John G., Sr., at home with Our Lord April 3, 2015. 110 Knighton Place, Elmhurst, IL 60126. Husband of Elaine, nee Tazelaar, and the late Sadie, nee Tameling; father of Beverly (Peter) Folkerts, Donna [Engelsman] (Roy) Buziecki, Gayle (Ron) Kovar, John G. Jr. (Taren) Stob, and Jan (Tim) Slager; stepfather of Lois (Dave) Otten, Diane (Dan) Van Drunen, Paul (Sharon) Sterenberg, Peter (Jennifer) Sterenberg, and Scot (Stacy) Sterenberg; grandfather of 30; great-grandfather of 20; brother of Eleanor (Ed) Jongsma, Judy Gezon, and the late Albert (the late Lee) Stob. Memorials to Lombard Christian Reformed Church Benevolence Fund.

VAN LAAR Eloise Kathryn passed away on March 28, 2015. She was preceded in death by her husband Jack. She is survived by her sister Marian, her brother Philip (Marie), sister-in-law Marge, her four children, Timothy, Ellen, Marian Lambers (Steve), and Susan Diepeveen (Leonard); eight grandchildren, Nathan, Nora, Elise, Jacob, Stephen, Joseph, Ben and Annelies; and five great-grandchildren.

VREDEVOOGD Doris J. (Dovekot), age 92, of Grand Rapids, MI and Port Charlotte, FL went home to the Lord on March 17, 2015 Preceded in death by her beloved husband Jay, mother of James J. and Doreen K. Horn. Grandmother of 4 and Great Grandmother of 6.

Real Estate: Sales and Rentals

ANNA MARIA ISLAND, FL CONDOS pool, beach access, linens, fully equipped. 1 and 2 bedrooms. \$650-750/wk. D. Redeker, 941-778-1915. redekercondos.com

KISSIMMEE HOME FOR RENT 2 Kissimmee homes for rent in gated community 3 miles from Disney. 6-bedroom, 4-bath or 3-bedroom, 3-bath, both with private pools. Clubhouse with rec. room, theater, & pool w/slide. floridaavacahome.com 708-372-2855

WEEKLY RENTAL: Douglas/Saugatuck, MI: Newly built Lake Michigan family guest house, 2br, loft w/ 2.5ba - sleeps 8. Lake Mi view & private beach. Call Ken @ 630-268-1531 or email Groenjk@aol.com

COTTAGE 4 RENT 4 bed, 3 bath, updated. Sleeps 12, Hess Lake, MI private waterfront. \$1,300/week. Call Lonnie 616-942-0048.



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HUTCHINS LK COTTAGE for rent Fennville Michigan private lake frontage w/screen in porch near Orchards winery Saugatuck South Haven \$1200/wk 630-782-5261

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For more information and to submit applications or nominations, visit www.calvinseminary.edu/jobopenings



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Punch Lines

What has made *you* smile lately? Got a joke or funny incident you'd care to share with your wider church family? Please send it to *The Banner* at 1700 28th Street SE, Grand Rapids, MI 49508-1407; or email it to editorial@thebanner.org. Thanks!

Bloopers from church bulletins: "The cost for the fasting and prayer conference includes meals."

—Alvin Bosma

I had been teaching my 3-year-old daughter the Lord's Prayer. For several evenings at bedtime, she would repeat after me the lines from the prayer. Finally she decided to go solo. I listened with pride as she carefully enunciated each word right up to the end of the prayer: "Lead us not into temptation," she prayed, "but deliver us some email."

—Bruce D. Quinn

My nephew and his wife were expecting their second child when 3-year-old big brother Bryson was asked, "Do you want a new brother or a sister?"

Bryson replied, "I want to be an only child."

—Pat Hazenberg

Asked where his grandma lived, a 5-year-old responded that she lived at the airport. "When we want her, we go and get her. And when we're done having her visit, we take her back to the airport."

—Dick Bylsma

A little boy opened the big family Bible. He was fascinated as he fingered through the old pages. Suddenly something fell out of the Bible. He picked up the object and looked at it. What he saw was an old leaf that had been pressed in between the pages.

"Mama, look what I found," he called out.

"What have you got there, dear?" his mother answered.

With astonishment in his voice, he said, "I think it's Adam's underwear!"

—Dale Vander Veen

A man in the hospital bed next to me was covered in bandages from head to toe. I said to him, "What do you do for a living?"

He said, "I'm a former window washer."

I asked, "When did you give it up?"

He replied, "Halfway down."

—Jan Veltkamp

One Sunday morning we let it be known we had become grandparents to "mixed twins." A very dear elderly lady congratulated us in the foyer after the service. "How lovely," she said. "Are they identical?"

—Norm Ross

While I waited in the reception area of my doctor's office, a woman rolled an elderly man in a wheelchair into the room. As she went to the receptionist's desk, the man sat there alone and silent, until a little boy slipped off his mother's lap and

walked over to the man. Placing his hand on the man's, he said, "I know how you feel. My mom makes me ride in the stroller too."

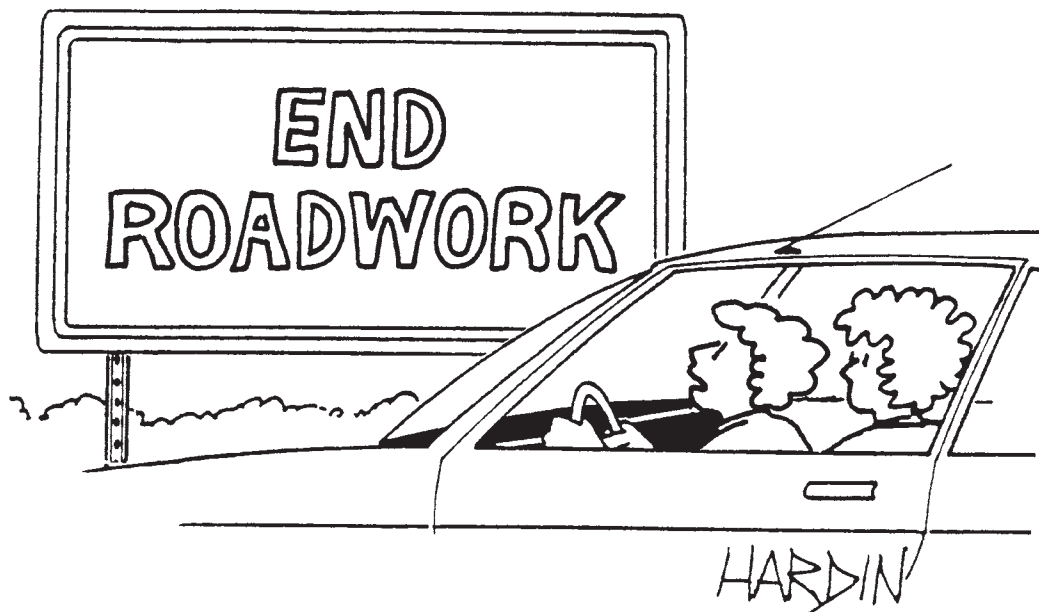
—Vivian Petrik

Our 5-year-old great-granddaughter lost her grip on a helium balloon and watched in dismay as it ascended. "In the name of Jesus," she pleaded, "please come back."

The balloon didn't.

She is learning that faith sometimes means simply hanging on to what you have.

—Bruce Nikkel



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