

BANNER

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²⁰ Help, Hope, and Healing

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Provide
Incarnational
Ministry

Synod 2015

²⁸ **Two Ministries Join
in Historic Decision**

BANNER

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Cover: Synod 2015 overwhelmingly approved the plans to unify Christian Reformed Home Missions (CRHM) and Christian Reformed World Missions (CRWM) into one global mission agency for the CRC. Moses Chung (I) and Gary Bekker are the directors of World Missions and Home Missions. Read the full story on page 28.

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Don't Walk Away!

THE FOLLOWING PAGES SHOW that Synod 2015 was generally in a good mood, merrily, openly, and trustingly going about the business of approving major changes to our denominational superstructure.

Deliberation was friendly—that is, until the question arose of whether or not to make declarations related to same sex relationships (p.**). Rather quickly a “hockey game” broke out.

With a study report on the topic headed for Synod 2016, it seems we're headed for trouble. Why? Because we can't avoid our disagreements on whether homosexual practice is always sinful. That fundamental question will dog our discussions on how we are to pastorally deal with same sex relationships in our congregations. We won't agree on what's pastoral until we agree on what's sinful. Synod 2015's discussions indicated that many no longer agree with the position of the Christian Reformed Church that homosexual practice is always wrong or that such practice always requires church discipline.

If we are unwise, we face years of conflict in which, as with the women's ordination dispute, we oscillate between two extremes from year to year, based on who has more votes at synod. That will restart the hemorrhage of membership on both “sides.”

We dealt more wisely with the issue of whether remarriage after divorce is always a sin. Until 1956, the CRC taught that those who remarry after divorce live in perpetual adultery because Jesus' words seem unambiguous. But many began to read Scripture differently. While reaffirming God's clear will that the marriage covenant is a life-long commitment and recognizing that divorce is always a result of our sinful state, Synod 1980 decided to cede to each council the responsibility of providing appropriate pastoral care in each situation where remarriage was being contemplated, without synod tying councils' hands.

That “local option” helped us to clearly affirm biblical teaching, leave room for different perspectives on what is or isn't a sin, and allows churches to exercise pastoral care and discipline in line with our understanding that the CRC confers primary authority on local councils.

Would the “local option” erode our commitment to biblical teaching? No. Scripture teaches emphatically that we must “maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph. 4:3). And it promises that the Spirit will lead us together into all the truth (John 16:13). Determining together God's will for folks with same sex attraction will take time. It took us 1,700 years to conclude that slavery is always wrong. It took us nearly 1,950 years to conclude that remarriage, though always a result of sin, may not always be a sin. And it took us nearly 2,000 years to agree to disagree on whether it's sinful to ordain women in the church.

For Jesus' sake, let's have the humility, love, and grace to affirm that we may have to reexamine our own certainties in light of what we communally discover in God's Word.

Synod 2015 demonstrated that we cannot avoid this conversation. I pray that we search Scripture together so humbly and patiently that this time around we stick together as we have once before. That takes lots of risky love—the kind that sent our Savior where we cannot (yet) follow.

God bless us all. ■

Let's have the humility,
love, and grace to
affirm that we may
have to reexamine our
own certainties in
light of what we
communally discover
in God's Word.



Bob De Moor is editor
of *The Banner* and pastor
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2015

Candidates for the Ministry

*“Whoever finds
their life will lose it,
and whoever loses
their life for my
sake will find it.”*

—Matt. 10:39

O**N THE NEXT FEW PAGES** you will find photos and information about the men and women approved by Synod 2015 as candidates for ministry of the Word. I call them “obscure servants.” They are following the model of the one described in Isaiah 53 who became truly obscure. As disciples of the suffering servant, Jesus Christ, they have prepared for the particular service of vocational ministry. They believe Jesus’ words “Whoever finds their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for my sake will find it” (Matt. 10:39). Our culture is not one that glorifies obscurity. Even the less edgy word *ordinary* feels to many like an insult. Yet in the scheme of things, pastoral service in the Christian Reformed Church in North America is a life of obscurity. In spite of our joy at seeing God at work within our churches and ministries, we need to recognize that few people in North America have even heard of this denomination. Not many of our members, if any, receive national acclaim in *Time* magazine’s list of influential people. Most of our churches are known only within their local communities.

But these candidates are eager to serve, even in obscurity. They may wrestle with the human urge for recognition. They may need some help in learning the virtue of true humility. Some may be tempted to think too highly of themselves and miss the opportunity to glorify God, as they are sometimes treated as if they are extremely significant. Yet they have been trained in the value of servant leadership and are wise if they adopt the posture of the foot washer. Such a posture makes the life of pastoral prayer very natural. Such a posture guards pastors from thinking too highly of themselves and from screaming in protest when inevitable and sometimes unkind criticism is expressed.

Our fine denominational school, Calvin Theological Seminary, has had a part in the training and preparation of each of these candidates. Many of us look upon Calvin as an outstanding institution with worldwide acclaim. Yet we recognize that in the end, it too is an obscure tool, unknown by the vast majority of the world’s population. Even so, it is still wonderfully useful in the hands of a sovereign God. Many of the candidates have earned their degree from this school, and all the rest have completed the required program for candidacy offered through Calvin Seminary on behalf of the Christian Reformed Church. We appreciate greatly the servant heart of the seminary and its faculty in helping prepare ministers for our church.

As you review these pages, offer a prayer for the seminary and its faculty, and offer a prayer for each of the candidates. Pray for their discernment and for patience as they await a call. Pray that they will find joy in the obscure service that awaits them. And be ready to meet them along the way with a word of encouragement as they take their place serving alongside you.

For more detailed information on any of these candidates, visit the Candidacy Committee website at crcna.org. ■

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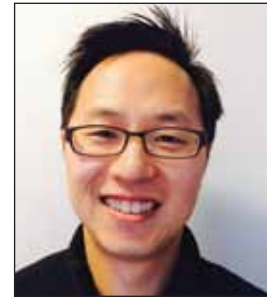
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You Are Mine

When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession—to the praise of his glory.
—Ephesians 1:13b-14



ADOPTED AT AGE 3, Sarah came to live in West Michigan from one of the Russian provinces in Central

Asia. Her mom tells stories of how challenging the transition has been for this petite child to integrate into their all-American family.

There were many days when Sarah's mom pulled her onto her lap and pulled out the scrapbook that tells the story of her adoption. They would go through it together, page by page, over and over again. Often Sarah would stop the telling of the story at the page that holds her adoption cer-

tificate, which has the official seal of the Russian government certifying her adoption. The document is almost entirely in Russian. All except the names. There on the page, she learned to recognize her name and the names of her adoptive parents.

Even as a young child, Sarah recognized that this document was important. Almost always she'd ask, "Mama, what does it say?" And always, with a mother's wisdom, Sarah's mom would simply reply, "It says you are mine. You are mine."

Just as Sarah is growing into her identity, the Ephesian believers were growing in theirs. Through Paul's letter to Ephesus, God still gathers followers of Jesus into his lap and says, "You are mine. Jesus made it possible for me to adopt you. I bought you with his blood. And the moment you believed, I secured you. I sealed you with my Holy Spirit. You are mine."

Paul's life provided for the early church an example of what it looked like to live as a child of God. Paul was once recognized for his impressive credentials. He was a Jew, born into the tribe of Benjamin. He received training from Gamaliel, one of the best and most respected teachers of the law. His morality was flawless; his standing as a devout Jew was impeccable.

But after Paul met Jesus, none of that mattered anymore. The believers in Ephesus would remember Paul saying, "Everything that came before is of no significance. It's trash compared to being an adopted child of God. I am his!" ■



Elaine (Van Til) May completed her M.Div. degree this spring and has accepted a call to serve Mayfair CRC as its pastor of ministry leadership. Elaine lives in Grand Rapids with her husband, Greg, and their four children.



Our vocation is not simply to be, but to work together with God in the creation of our own life. . . . To work out our identity in God.

— THOMAS MERTON



MOCKING GOD

Freedom of Speech in a Blasphemous World

SPEAKING OUR MINDS has become a dangerous business in today's world. Perk up your ears to the alarmingly common sirens from the world's great capitals, Paris being only one of the most recent, and you'll see that "freedom of speech" is in a fight to the death with blasphemy and apostasy laws—with what international jurists call "the defamation of religion."

The problem is as dangerous as it is vexing. What is a Christian to make of the offensive and baldly inflammatory images of the prophet Mohammed, of the outrageous cartoons that have set so much of the Islamic world on edge? Shouldn't Christians be more responsible than this, turning to more practical and

productive interfaith work whose calling card does not include dragging cherished icons through the mud?

The Responsibility of Governments and of the Church

Let's take this in two pieces: first, what is the responsibility of governments, of justice, in the face of blasphemy and apostasy charges; second, what is the responsibility of Christians and of the church to these same issues? These are, for reasons of history and theology, not the same thing.

The Christian Reformed Church has startlingly clear teaching on blasphemy and justice, partly because we shifted directions on this issue quite dramatically just after World War II. We did this by changing one of our oldest confessional standards, the Belgic Confession.

The Belgic Confession is rooted in the problem of blasphemy and apostasy. Its

author, Guido de Brès, who died as a martyr in 1567, went to great lengths to prove to his Catholic persecutors that the Reformed faithful were not rebels; in fact, they stood ready to obey the government in all lawful matters. But, sounding like they could be living in a Syrian border town in the 21st century, the signers of the confession said they would "offer their backs to stripes, their tongues to knives, their mouths to gags, and their whole bodies to the fire" rather than deny the truths of the confession.

That multiple confessional identities can somehow persist amidst a single political identity was not obvious to medieval Europe. Even the Belgic itself is a bit cagey on just how far we can take this confessional potpourri. Article 36 (in the original language) admonishes government to uphold sacred ministry and to

It is generally now recognized that a pluralist state cannot restrict free speech simply because someone might be offended.

remove and destroy all idolatry and false worship of the Antichrist, while further promoting the kingdom of Jesus Christ.

Which is why in 1958 the CRCNA did a full 180 on Article 36, judging its original content “unbiblical.” The substituted Article, while calling on government to restrain human lawlessness, punish the evildoer, and protect the good, confirms government’s task of “removing every obstacle to the preaching of the gospel and to every aspect of divine worship.” This should be done, further, “while completely refraining from every tendency toward exercising absolute authority,” so that “the Word of God may have free course.”

So before Article 36 changed, it was the government’s responsibility to restrict blasphemy and apostasy, and to promote, in its own language, the kingdom of Jesus Christ. Now? There is still a general recognition that governments have a responsibility to govern and restrict things like “hate speech” or speech producing “clear and present danger”—classically, falsely shouting “fire” in a crowded theater. But it is generally now recognized that a pluralist state cannot restrict free speech simply because someone might be offended. The freedom to give offense is intrinsic to a whole package of other freedoms, including freedom of religion or belief, freedom of speech, of the press, of association, and so forth.

The Offense of the Gospel

These fundamental freedoms of a just society also safeguard the proclamation of the gospel and the witness of Christians. In these times where “niceness” can be the measuring rod by which people will “know we are Christians,” we sometimes forget that the Word of God describes itself as an offensive message. There is nothing especially lovely about being told we are damned sinners; that this damnation is so utter, so cosmic, that we are wholly unable, of our own power, to find reconciliation with God, with each other, and with creation. The wrath and judgment of Good Friday are brutal, powerful facts that must stand, by any accounting, as offensive.

Evangelically, this might not be the best lead-in to faith conversations over coffee. But the point is to say that the Christian gospel is an offensive message, and plenty of countries around the world—including Saudi Arabia, Iran, North Korea, and Afghanistan—have lined up to agree. In these countries, preaching salvation and reconciliation in the name of Jesus Christ is a crime, as is conversion from Islam to Christianity, punishable in some cases by death or exile, all under the title of “blasphemy and apostasy.”

Freedom and Responsibility, Truth and Love

But the truth, we say, is full of love. Or, in another old favorite attributed to St. Francis of Assisi: “Preach the gospel; if necessary, use words.” Good deeds violate no blasphemy laws, so why should we? The apostle Paul says something similar in Galatians after naming fruits of the Spirit, that “against such things there is no law” (Gal. 5:23). So shouldn’t Christian responsibility avoid, at all costs, offending or blaspheming other traditions and faiths? Shouldn’t a responsible witness be a witness characterized by action, not brash sermonizing?

In my opinion, no. Insofar as it is possible, I believe it is responsible for Christians to avoid giving offense, but this is at best a secondary, not a primary, consideration. Offending, even the act of blasphemy, is intrinsic in any candid expression of the gospel of Jesus Christ. This is a kind of “blasphemy” that deserves passionate Christian support.

It has passed so beyond the public consciousness in North America that it is nearly banal to mention that Christians here have their most sacred beliefs blasphemed with casual regularity (perhaps most famously in “Piss Christ,” a depiction of the crucifix submerged in a glass of the artist’s urine).

It seems to me that Christians should object to this sort of thing—not with lawyers and litigants, since a Reformed Christian perspective on justice includes the right to offend in a pluralist society—but with social witness and debate. The “substitutionary argument” can often be especially effective: substitute the offending Christian image/idea with a Muslim or Jewish one, and does it suddenly violate the rules of decorous public debate? Beyond that, it is a prize of Christian theology that we need not suffer any special anxiety when the true God is mocked. The God who makes and unmakes a cosmos stretching far beyond our meager imaginations will sovereignly have his own justice. There are no stockades in the good society for blasphemers, either of Christian or other faiths.

So what about those prophet cartoons, or the plight of those like *Satanic Verses* author Salman Rushdie, trying to name frankly, if satirically, social and religious repression? If you follow the argument, you’ll read a Christian defense of the justice that includes the freedom to offend and blaspheme in a pluralist society.

But you’ll also read a genuine effort to argue that the Christian exercise of that freedom should be responsible. It is truth, but it is filled with love. That’s not always inoffensive; in fact, it may necessarily be offensive, but it should always bring the light and life of Jesus Christ. That is the essence of Christian responsibility in a blasphemous world. ■



Robert Joustra is co-author with Kevin den Dulk of *Silenced? The Church and Religious Persecution* (Calvin College Press, 2015) and

director of the Centre for Christian Scholarship at Redeemer University College, where he teaches politics and international studies.

Drama in a Tomato Patch

Do plants talk? Yep! They talk to each other, they talk to animals, and they even talk to bugs. Even though plants don't use words like we do, they give messages loud and clear.

Sometimes you can see what a plant is saying. What is your withered tomato plant saying? "I'm thirsty." What is a prickly rose saying? "Don't pick me" or maybe "Don't eat me."

Sometimes you can *smell* a plant's message. That lovely scent coming

from an orange tree or a rose in bloom? That's their way of calling bugs to help pollinate them. How about the whiff you get from the leaves of a tomato plant—not so lovely. Those leaves are saying, "Don't eat me."

Sometimes you can see only the *effects* of plants "talking." Maybe you've noticed that milkweed grows in patches. You hardly ever see just one milkweed plant. That's because

milkweed spreads chemicals through its roots. The chemicals say, "This space is reserved for milkweed."

Bottom line: God created plants to "talk" to each other and to bugs. That's how the creation keeps on living and growing. See for yourself! Read this, then head outside, sit down in your yard or at the park, and watch plants talk. Got a tomato patch? Go there to watch a real drama.

Call 911

Lots of people love the smell of newly mown grass. We think of it as a relaxing, got-my-chore-done type of smell.

Yet the grass making that odor is not relaxed. It's calling for help because something is damaging it. The grass "bleeds" a juice which quickly becomes a gas and floats away from the plant. It's calling for something to come and stop whatever is eating it.

Different grasses give different calls. And different bugs respond!



ILLUSTRATION BY SCOTT HOLLADAY

Wild Purple Party

Have you seen any fields, meadows, or roadsides absolutely packed with small purple flowers? Those flowers are called knapweed, and they're blooming wildly right now.

They love to crowd their heads together to form a carpet of purple . . . purple only. They don't want yellow, blue, or white flowers at their party. They much prefer to stick with their own kind.

So, long before they have their purple party, the roots of knapweed send out chemical messages saying, "Don't grow here unless you're knapweed." Other plants can't grow near them. Only more knapweed can.

In certain fields and roadsides, the purple party expands every year. Nothing can stop it. Except, probably, a certain kind of bug.

These flowers came to North America from England. Their "companion" bugs did not. That's why we have so many knapweed flowers!

The Real Drama

If your family has ever grown tomatoes, you probably know what a tomato hornworm looks like. It's a big, fat, green caterpillar with a "horn" on one end. This critter eats tomato leaves.

You don't want a hornworm on your tomato plant. Neither does a tomato plant. So when a tomato hornworm chews on a tomato plant, that plant calls for help.

When the hornworm chews a tomato leaf, the caterpillar's saliva mixes with leaf juice. The leaf juice and the saliva combine to form a gas. That gas drifts into the air, away from the plant.

Humans can't smell that gas, but a certain type of tiny wasp can. This wasp flies directly to the chewed-on plant, finds the caterpillar, and attacks it—stopping the caterpillar in its tracks and saving the tomato plant.

If there's only one hornworm, the plant sends a weak signal. Only nearby wasps may answer the call. If there are more hornworms, the plant sends stronger signals and more wasps come. The right amount of juice calls the right amount of wasps.

This system works perfectly for both plant and bug. Of course that's the way God made them!



Bossy Bushes

Creosote bushes grow in dry desert areas. Their roots spread way out from the plant and right up near the surface of the soil. That way they can get any drop of precious rainfall before it evaporates.

In addition to water, creosote bushes need certain minerals that are found in desert soil. If two creosote bushes grow closely together, they can't get enough of the minerals they need. So the first creosote to grow in an area sends chemical messages through its roots: "This is my space. No more creosote allowed nearby." Even its own seeds can't take root and grow nearby.

If you live near or travel through deserts in North America, you can find creosote bushes growing—all very evenly spaced. They've obviously been talking to each other. They're spreading themselves out so that they all will survive.



Say It with Flowers

Look closely at the wildflower we call Queen Anne's lace, or close your eyes and imagine one. That blossom is not just one flower, is it? It's lots of tiny white flowers bunched together.

Then look closely at a dandelion. It too is a bunch of flowers—yellow—all on one stem.

Would a bug ever notice just one tiny white Queen Anne's Lace or one tiny yellow dandelion floret? Probably not.

That's why God bunched most tiny flowers—including goldenrod, daisies, milkweed, and asters—together on a single stalk. Bugs will notice a bouquet sooner than they notice one tiny flower. After the bug comes to investigate, it usually visits all the tiny flowers.



Joanne De Jonge is a freelance writer and a former U.S. National Park ranger. She attends West Valley Christian Fellowship in Phoenix, Ariz.

HELP, HOPE, AND HEALING

WHEN A FAMILY MEMBER HAS ADDICTIONS



A S A CHILD, Rev. Tim Spykstra did not look forward to Christmas time. Instead, the gently falling snow and tinsel decorations were always accompanied by feelings of dread. This uneasiness stemmed from the fact that Spykstra's father abused alcohol, inciting chaos whenever he was on a binge. Sometimes—often during the holidays—the family was forced to escape to a hotel room for safety.

When asked about how the church cared for his family during those painful childhood years, Spykstra remembers that support was virtually nonexistent. “It was a pretty lonely world,” he says.

Where Was the Church?

Over the last few decades, the church has made strides to better help people struggling with addictions. However, as stories like Rev. Spykstra's suggest, the collateral damage of addiction—namely, the affected family—still rarely receives the appropriate level of attention.

As a pastor I have counseled many people with various types of addictions, and I am now providing addiction recovery resources to thousands of people in prison. While I have learned a lot about people's families in counseling sessions, I've also seen how the well-being of family members often becomes ancillary to the more immediate problem of an individual's addiction.

So how can the church do a better job of ministering to families of people with addictions?

To answer this question, I gathered a panel of pastors, professors, and psychologists for a roundtable discussion in the Hendrik de Cock Conference Room at Crossroad Bible Institute.

I wanted to hear from people who are in the trenches and on the cutting edge of this vital ministry; each participant (see sidebar on p. 21) brought valuable expertise to the discussion.

We started our discussion by defining the term *addiction*, since addiction is not limited to substance abuse. Rev. Carlinda Peoples noted that she prefers to use the more encompassing term “spiritual bondage” when referring to addictions, since people can become addicted to almost anything. However, generally speaking, addictions occur when any behavior becomes a habit that negatively affects a person and the people around him or her.

Whether that person's addiction is to alcohol, drugs, porn, gambling, romance, or even shopping, it will isolate his or her immediate family in a living hell, often unbeknownst to the church. However, although such families have long been off the church's radar, each roundtable participant inspired great hope that it's not too late for the church to change.

Landmines

For most churches, the stumbling block to helping families is rarely a lack of willingness. Most churches simply don't know what to do, or what not to do, when they become aware of a family that needs help. To address this need, our roundtable discussion identified six major “landmines” that churches should avoid stepping on if they want to cultivate holistic healing for families in their communities.

1. Ignoring cries for help. Like any dysfunctional family, the church can also go into modes of denial, shame, and image management when it becomes aware of one of its

families in crisis. The congregation may even hope the family just goes away. Like Rev. Spykstra said, his family was a member of the church on paper, but it was a lonely world.

2. Over-outsourcing help. Over-outsourcing help for families runs the risk of relegating the problem of addiction away from the church body. In other words, relying on professional help or even internal “niche” programming as crutches instead of using them wisely as appropriate solutions can leave a church bereft of honest, vulnerable conversations that open doors for more people to get the help they need.

3. Fueling cultures of shame. Similarly, churches that are overly reliant on shuttling people “away” to Alcoholics Anonymous or external therapy groups can exacerbate feelings of shame and of being an outsider. Moreover, sending this kind of message makes it all the more difficult to identify dysfunctional families caught in cycles of denial (“This is not happening”), shame (“We hope no one finds out”), and, consequently, image management (“We need to appear as perfect as everyone else”). Preaching openly from the pulpit about addiction recovery or featuring testimonials from recovering addicts and their families in a service are some practical ways a church can resist fueling cultures of shame.

4. Misidentifying the needs of the person with the addiction and the needs of the whole family. Dr. Mary Vander Goot, a professional addictions psychologist, said that one major pitfall she sees is that churches often can’t delineate between the needs of the person with the addiction and the needs of the whole family unit. The individual with the addiction initially needs professional, one-on-one intervention because his or her sense of community has “deteriorated.” However, the family generally recovers best within a community of people, which offers some sense of normalcy and support.

5. Reinforcing institutional biases. Rev. Peoples believes that perhaps one of the most difficult quandaries to navigate is the institutional bias within a church structure that prioritizes helping certain families over others. While no church has bottomless funds or resources to help every family, Rev. Peoples noted that this should not be an excuse to unfairly dish out resources to an “in-group.” She suggested Dr. Harold Trulear’s Healing Communities Model as one resource to help congregations avoid funneling resources to privileged demographics.

FORMER ADDICTS AND FAMILIES IN RECOVERY CAN BECOME SOME OF A CHURCH’S MOST VALUABLE ASSETS.

6. Failing to recognize cultural barriers. Dr. Danjuma Gibson of Calvin Seminary noted that the inability to recognize a family’s “God-talk” can be a huge communication stumbling block for churches, since basic understandings of addiction vary across cultures and economic brackets. Some people, for instance, view an addiction as a sign that a person is not “born again.” Others will see overcoming addiction as a normal part of the sanctification process. Sometimes a person’s God-talk can be a hindrance to healing as opposed to a help, so churches cannot underestimate the value of astutely listening to the God-talk that families in addiction recovery are speaking.

Roundtable Participants

Pastor Jennifer Ellison

Outreach associate pastor, All Shores Wesleyan Church, Spring Lake, Mich.

Dr. Danjuma Gibson

Lecturer in pastoral care, Calvin Theological Seminary, Grand Rapids, Mich.

Rev. Carlinda Peoples

CRC/RCA pastor of community outreach, Bethany CRC, Muskegon, Mich.

Rev. Dr. H. David Schuringa

President of Crossroad Bible Institute, Grand Rapids, Mich.

Rev. Dr. Tim Spykstra

Founder of Oceans Ministries, Denver, Col.

Dr. Mary Vander Goot

Professional addictions psychologist, Grand Rapids, Mich.

Rev. Dr. Mark Vander Meer

Founder of Community Recovery International, New Community Church, Grand Rapids, Mich.

Ways the Church Can Help

Apart from avoiding these landmines, what can the church do to restore *shalom* to families in need? The roundtable participants suggested eight action steps the church can take to make a difference, all of which embody two key words: *intentionality* and *relationship*.

1. Eliminate “us vs. them” mentalities. A church body must realize that no family functions as perfectly as God intended it. A family struggling in the throes of addiction is not that different from a family that isn’t. If that’s the case, then no church member should ostracize, fear, or patronize any family member in need. Church members should treat families of people with addictions as they would anyone else—as equal imagebearers of God who have gifts the church desperately needs (1 Cor.12:12-31). Rev. Mark Vander Meer intentionally eliminates “us vs. them” mentalities by addressing them head-on. “Every Friday when our church’s support groups meet, I begin by saying, ‘Hi, my name is Pastor Mark. I’m messed up, how about you?’” Rev. Vander Meer noted that acknowledging our brokenness with »

transparency is not celebrating sin. Rather, it's accepting the reality that we are all broken, but through the power of Jesus Christ we can change.

2. Create and empower a recovery task force. Churches should empower congregants who already have a passion for ministering to families of people with addictions to start a recovery task force. Ideally, these congregants would have personal experience with addiction. In this role, they would take responsibility for helping the church destigmatize addictions, improve transparency, and educate congregants on addiction's impact within a family unit using knowledge of Family Systems Theory.

3. Start a recovery program. Programs like Celebrate Recovery provide a methodology to create consistent weekly gathering spaces for families, which in turn fosters trust, safety, and accountability. This program can involve the whole church across all demographics. Rev. Vander Meer started such a program at his church. "On a given Friday you'll see lawyers and homeless people sitting down in a group together and learning from each other," he said.

4. Invest in relationships. All congregants—no matter what personal experience they have—can invest in relationships with other church members. As pastor Jennifer Ellison explained, sometimes the best care for struggling families is providing practical things like rides, dinners, a safe place to stay, or child care while parents go to counseling.

5. Organize church projects for laypeople. Intentionally organizing projects—such as a church clean-up day or a community service project—is a great way to bring together people from different backgrounds to "rub shoulders." While these activities may not directly assist a family in crisis, they provide opportunities to include families who feel like outliers and foster a spirit of openness among congregants. Encouraging more informal gatherings can also build emotional support and create sustainable relationships that go a long way toward replacing specialized programming, which is especially helpful for churches with limited financial resources.

6. Minister to the surrounding community. Improving addiction recovery outreach to people outside the church can help congregants become more accepting of families inside the church and vice versa. Rev. Peoples believes internal and external ministries to families in bondage are inextricably linked. "If people don't want to come here on Sundays, that's OK," she said of the outreach program at Muskegon's Bethany CRC. "We'll be obedient to Christ and come to you with the help you need." This kind of outreach inadvertently fosters a culture of acceptance at a church.

7. Remember families in the post-recovery phase. It's easy to think that once the person with addiction is in recovery, the family will automatically get better too. But this assumption is rarely true. In fact, many spouses divorce *after* the alcoholic gets sober, which often mystifies church congregants who are eager to see the family "move on." But as Pastor Ellison said frankly, "It's a lot easier to forgive someone you just see on

Sundays than it is to forgive someone who has ruined the last 22 Christmases for you." Moreover, according to Dr. Vander Goot, "There are often several stages people go through when a family member is in recovery: (1) fear; (2) eggshell-walking; (3) anger; and (4) peace, but with lingering post-traumatic stress disorder. Thus, even after a family member is in recovery, churches need to continue creating formal or informal spaces for families to share experiences, receive pastoral care, and move toward restoration and forgiveness on their own timelines.

8. Include families in church functions throughout all stages of recovery. Perhaps the best thing for families, according to Dr. Vander Goot, is refusing to "over-victimize" them and intentionally including them in church activities. Doing so reminds families that one person's addiction does not define their lives. Whether through volunteer work, kids' events, service projects, or Bible studies, inclusiveness emphasizes that these families need not feel shame or be reduced to a single problem, and, more important, it sends the message that they are needed in the community too.

Help, Hope, and Healing

As the roundtable discussion disbanded, I was flooded with hope. Many families in our congregations are struggling mightily, but the insights of the panelists reminded me that we serve a God who is mightier than the power of addictions, who forgives all our sins and heals all our diseases (Ps. 103:3).

Moreover, I felt great comfort in knowing that Christ's church is the key to unlocking the healing power of his love. Through the intentional pursuit of transparent relationships, the Holy Spirit will work wonders as we become increasingly aware of hurting families in our churches.

The problems of families affected by addiction can appear baffling and hopeless at first, but they are not. In fact, former addicts and families in recovery can become some of a church's most valuable assets.

"People who have overcome their addictions alongside their families often have this amazing ability to empathize with others and speak transparently and humbly about their brokenness and the hope of restoration," said Rev. Spykstra, a pastor dedicated to transforming churches and helping hurting families recover. "If I could plant a church with such Christians, there's no limit to the kind of difference they would make in their community."

While Rev. Spykstra's parents did eventually divorce, he now has a healthy relationship with his recovering dad, his mom and her new husband, and his own family. And these days, everyone looks forward to Christmas. ■

STUDY QUESTIONS ONLINE



H. David Schuringa is the former president of Crossroad Bible Institute in Grand Rapids, Michigan. He's the author of *Seven Secrets for Kicking the Habit* (CBI Publishing, 2014).

The Elder as Shepherd

JEFFREY JACOBS was still in his thirties when he was elected by his congregation to serve as an elder in the church. Attending his very first elders' meeting, he wondered what he had gotten himself into. Looking back, he realized that it had been a fearsome experience for him. But then Jeffrey decided to seek help. He approached an older, experienced elder who agreed to discuss with him the many facets of the elder's task—especially how Jeffrey might relate to the members of his district. When they parted company, the elder added, “Jeffrey, care for your members! Love them, try to understand their worries and pain, pray for them often, be a shepherd to them.”

Key Responsibility

That older elder was on target. The Christian Reformed Church's “Form for the Installation of Elders” puts it succinctly: “Elders are thus responsible for the spiritual well-being of God's people.” The Form mentions other duties too, but this role as shepherd is the heart of it.

So what does that entail?

“Spiritual well-being” means foremost that members are redeemed, that they have faith, that they know themselves to be God's children. Romans 10:17 talks about the origin of faith: “. . . faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word about Christ.” Believers have accepted the Word of God.

Churches bring the Word to the members in many forms. Foremost are the worship services in which the preaching of the Word is central. The Bible is also read and studied by the members personally. And that's also where the elders assume their responsibility: helping individual members to thrive in their faith and in assurance of their salvation.

From among the body of believers, Christ ordained that some people be

specifically appointed to accompany church members in their faith walk. That's how the church received the office of elder. Elders affirm believers in their salvation and in their Christian walk of life; they encourage their fellow believers.

Elders do much of their work by talking to believers. Article 65 of the Church Order stipulates that elders of the church

“shall extend pastoral care to all members of the congregation.” They do this by calling on the members. Elders know that believers sometimes have problems, struggles, setbacks, failures, and disappointments. They urge their flock to go back to the Word and be strengthened in their faith. That's what the Form means when it says that elders are responsible for the spiritual well-being of God's people. Elders are shepherds.

Relating to Members

Newly elected elders soon find out that they can do this work best when they get to know their people. So they introduce themselves; they cultivate relationships. One-on-one discussions are always easier when the participants have a relationship of trust. Wise elders, as soon as they are installed, send a letter of introduction to the members of the district. They don't overlook the young people. They assure the members in their care that they are available to them at all times. They find out what these members do for a living. After church services, they approach their members, shake hands, and ask about their well-being.

And since the Form also mentions that elders shall “promote fellowship,” they serve as a link between the members of their district, helping them to become a community. They encourage their district to help each other by such things as forming prayer chains among the members and encouraging them to bring meals or help out during times of need.

Elders affirm believers in their salvation and in their Christian walk.

When visiting families or individuals in their district, elders should avoid making small talk. They are there to talk about these members' well-being. So they ask about their life, how they are doing, and how their experiences have affected their faith. They ask about their prayer life and encourage them to bring their trials to the Lord in prayer and give thanks for the blessings they experience. Above all, they assure people of the love of Christ.

To be an elder: what a blessed calling! ■

For Further Reading

The Elder's Handbook by Louis M. Tamminga (Faith Alive) offers much more wisdom for helping elders carry out their ministry effectively. See especially chapter 20 (pp. 54-61) for more suggestions on visiting and caring for the members of the elder's district.



Louis M. Tamminga is a retired CRC minister and the author of *The Elder's Handbook*.

Balm for the Busy Times



EVER SINCE I BROUGHT MY SON HOME from the hospital almost two years ago, I've constantly felt like I'm just waiting to sit down. The needs of each moment—one more story, another diaper change—are both gifts and challenges. I often feel so absorbed in the immediate that the world around me is invisible, its beauty a haze around me.

As a writer, my work in shaping stories is an extension of what St. Irenaeus has been quoted as saying: “The glory of God is man fully alive.” Being fully alive—living with astonished trust in Christ’s resurrection—should bring us to be awed by the world around us. But parental struggles go beyond the daily needs of food and sleep; just this past week, I heard of a family whose son, born with heart defects, died in his mother’s arms. He was less than two years old. How hard is it to lift up our hearts when we are also so fragile and fearful?

One of my friends recently posted a favorite Wendell Berry poem of mine,

How to read novels when my son won't sleep?

“The Peace of Wild Things,” which ends with these comforting words: “I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.” Poetry, novels, photographs—all these things are balms for those wearied by the demands of raising and loving children. But how to read novels when my son won't sleep?

I have not been able to spend an afternoon reading since before my son was born. But I do play classical music while my son runs around our apartment; I get updates from Toni Morrison in my Facebook feed. I don't have time for joining a book club, but I do have time to turn on an audiobook (my latest was Ann Patchett's *Bel Canto*) while I clean the kitchen.

Simply making lists of who and what I want to read (Claudia Rankine, Ross Gay, Sally Mann) keeps me going too. And sometimes I just repeat lines from poems I remember while I vacuum. In this season of mothering, these small habits help reveal beauty in my life and in the busy, busy world around me. ■



Allison Backous Troy is a writer and educator who resides in Boston, Mass., with her husband and son.



Searching for Sunday: Loving, Leaving, and Finding the Church

by Rachel Held Evans
reviewed by Jenny deGroot

Evans has again spoken for her generation with a compassionate yet firm voice. The evangelical churches of her youth were formational in faith and practice, but as she explores her own journey, Evans uncovers the best and the worst of how faith and practice became enmeshed, leaving her disillusioned. Like many, she found it easier to stay in bed or go for a hike on a Sunday morning. But leaving only led to searching, and searching to finding again. This book is for you if anyone in your life has loved, left, and is still searching for church. (Thomas Nelson)





The Matheny Manifesto

by **Mike Matheny & Jerry B. Jenkins**
reviewed by **Paul Delger**

St. Louis Cardinals manager Mike Matheny created a little storm when he was asked to coach a youth baseball team. He would only do it if parents and players adhered to his principles and goals for the program, which stated that “the

biggest problem in youth sports is the parents.” In his book, Matheny candidly talks about the problems with youth sports today and how to make the experience better for the players. He also teaches life principles beyond the playing field. Overall, it’s a good read for anybody involved in youth sports or any other youth-related activity. (Crown)



ReFrame

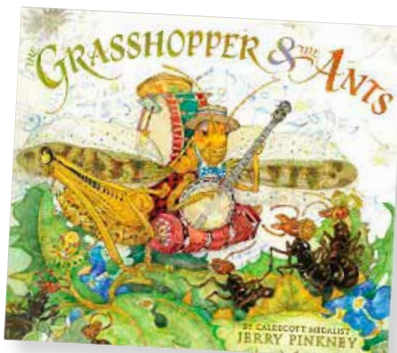
reviewed by **Jenny deGroot**

ReFrame is a 10-week, film-based study launched this past year by Regent College. Each 40-minute episode is a blend of commentary, a lecture by a Regent professor, and on-site conversations with Christians working in a variety of callings. Interviewees include J.I. Packer, Sally Lloyd-Jones, and Andy Crouch. This series is ideal for small groups or church education classes desiring to explore how God is present in this world and how the biblical story can reframe one’s own story. The series is rich in text and offers much for thought and conversation. (reframecourse.com)

The Grasshopper & the Ants

by **Jerry Pinkney**
reviewed by **Sonya VanderVeen Feddema**

Grasshopper doesn’t understand why the Ants work so hard, even while summer days beckon all creatures to go fishing, have a picnic, and make music. The Ants see things differently, knowing that winter is coming and they must store up food. In this retelling of one of Aesop’s fables, Jerry Pinkney celebrates nature, the necessity and joy of hard work, and a gracious, undeserved act of kindness. His intricately detailed illustrations are a visual feast. Ages 3 and up. (Little, Brown)



Psalms

by **Sandra McCracken**
reviewed by **Robert J. Keeley**

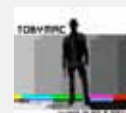
After going through a difficult time in her personal life, Sandra McCracken did what Christians have done for centuries; she turned to the psalms. In the process, she gathered a new band around her—a bunch of Brooklyn-based musicians who gave her a new sound. The result is what may be McCracken’s best album yet, a gentle but powerful collection of songs that speak of brokenness and grace, of pain and healing, and of trust and hope.

THE LOWDOWN



School’s Out: But it will start again before you know it! Teachers might find *Beyond Control:*

Heart-Centered Classroom Climate and Discipline, by Alan Bandstra, a helpful summer read. (Dordt Press)



Testing, Testing: Christian music superstar tobyMac’s new album,

****This is Not a Test****, comes out August 7. (Gotee Records)



On Watch: Harper Lee’s much-discussed lost-and-found manuscript, *Go Set a Watchman*,

will be arriving at bookstores on July 14. (HarperCollins)



Film Frenzy: A bevy of blockbusters will be released in July and August; will *Ant-Man*, *Fantastic Four*, *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.*, or even *Minions* be worth watching? Check thebanner.org for reviews this summer.

MORE REVIEWS ONLINE

Synod 2015: Moving Forward with Hope and Optimism



Ethnic advisor Caleb Dickson, Synod 2015's sergeant-at-arms.

Sergeant-at-Arms Herds Delegates Back to Work

Ethnic advisor Caleb Dickson was Synod 2015's sergeant-at-arms. Appointed by synod, the sergeant-at-arms is charged with herding delegates back to the floor at the end of every break. His task may seem simple—but with over 200 people to herd, Dickson's breaks were busy.

To grab everyone's attention, Dickson said, "I don't have a shepherd's crook, so I borrow a whistler. I can't do the two-finger whistle, but I always find someone who can."

During breaks, Dickson wore his Indiana Jones hat so people could identify him easily. "It's been quite an experience," Dickson said.

This was Dickson's second synod: "I've been amazed at the respect people have . . . and how everyone's been handling everything with such grace. Our denomination is connecting in important ways."

—Julie Jansen

From executive director Steven Timmermans's declaration that the Christian Reformed Church is growing and that ministry shares income is stable, to delegates who were willing to launch a new board governance structure with very little detail; from approving the joining of two historic mission agencies, to changing the face of synod by delegating deacons starting next year, Synod 2015 wanted to look forward, not back.

For the last few years, synods have shown a church moving forward in small steps. This year, synod boldly leapt. (Synod is the

annual leadership meeting of the Christian Reformed Church. In 2015, it was held in Sioux Center, Iowa.)

Synod 2015 made two particularly historic decisions. It agreed to join together Christian Reformed Home Missions and Christian Reformed World Missions, two of the main mission agencies of the CRC (p. 28), and it decided that deacons will be delegated to both synod and classis meetings starting in 2016 (p. 30).

The latter decision was years in the making, with reports and recommendations that date back at least five years. The former came

much more suddenly. Although the two agencies have worked together more and more closely in recent years, a concrete proposal for unification emerged only six months ago. For a church that



Rev. Scott Greenway: "We know God's hand will provide. I've witnessed it. I'm grateful for it."

generally takes years, even decades, to make such a major decision, this one came at lightning speed. It is an indication that church leaders recognize that every context, whether in Nigeria or New Jersey, is a mission field.

After decades of taking half-measures to change the board governance structure for the denomination, this year's delegates took the leap toward a major overhaul despite having few details about what that will look like (p. 38). Those details will be worked out by the executive director and a transition team. With the proposed Council of Delegates (CoD), classes (regional groups of churches) will get full representation rather than regional representation on the Board of Trustees, the CRC's broadest governance body outside of synod. And the Board of Trustees (soon to be the



(L-r): Rev. Bonny Mulder-Behnia, Rev. Bill Veenstra, Rev. Bruce Persenaire, and Rev. Stanley Jim.

Synod 2015 Officers Represent the Diversity of the Church

The officers of Synod 2015 represent some of the diversity in the Christian Reformed Church. Delegates elected Rev. Bruce Persenaire as president, Rev. William Veenstra as vice president, Rev. Bonny Mulder-Behnia as first clerk, and Rev. Stanley Jim as second clerk.

Persenaire is from Escalon, Calif. This was his 12th synod, and he had served on the executive once. Veenstra is from Chilliwack, B.C. This was his eighth synod and his second time serving on the executive. By contrast, Mulder-Behnia, from Bellflower, Calif., was serving at her second synod, and Jim, from Wingate, N.M., was a third-time delegate. It was their first time serving as officers.

Partway through the week, vice president Bill Veenstra had to leave for a funeral. The officers decided to move ahead with an executive of three people rather than elect a new vice president.

—Gayla R. Postma



Rev. Heidi De Jonge brought the Word of the Lord in morning worship.

CoD) will get what had been sought by denominational leaders for decades: the ability to make decisions and move ahead with ministry initiatives without push-back from boards of individual mission agencies. Instead those boards (World Missions, Home Missions, and Back to God Ministries International) will be dissolved into one global missions subcommittee of the new CoD. To manage what will become a massive agenda, the Council will follow a policy governance model rather than an operational oversight model.

One major reason for that level of trust comes with the appointment of Colin Watson as the director of ministries and administration (p. 43). With him aboard, and the appointment last year of Steven Timmermans and Darren Roorda, the church finally has a full complement of staff on the senior executive team after years of people serving in transition positions. As Rev. Paul Vander Klay, Classis California South, said, "We've got a plan, we've got the people; we should empower them and set them loose."

Interviews with two new seminary professors (pp. 32, 33), following on the heels of appointees approved at the previous two synods, show that we can have confidence in a new generation of professors teaching a new generation of our ministry leaders. The appointment of Carol Bremer-

Bennett as the new director of World Renew-U.S. also brings hope for continued good leadership (p. 29).

Through its deliberations and its worship, Synod 2015 showed a church that seeks to be ever more welcoming of those who have long been on the margins: women and people from ethnic minorities. Whether through delegation or through advisors, synod wants to hear their voices (p. 36). Two of this year's finest worship moments were led by a woman and an African American man (p. 27).

But there is a thundercloud on the horizon, one that has caused storms in many denominations already. This year's discussion about All One Body (p. 34) and those that support it shows that our discussion about homosexuality will be far from easy. All One Body supports full inclusion in the



Rev. Richard Bodini: "This is a watershed moment. The description of the work of deacons has not changed in over 50 years. You have changed things for the better for diaconal work."

church of practicing homosexuals. Classis Minnkota wanted synod to admonish churches in Classis Grand Rapids East that are being hospitable to that group. Synod declined to do so. This year's debate is a harbinger of what will

happen next year when the Committee to Provide Pastoral Guidance re Same Sex Marriage makes its report. The coming years will not be easy as the church tries to bridge the gap between classes like Minnkota and Grand Rapids East.

At the beginning of synod, Steve Timmermans noted that we "tend to be a dour bunch" (p. 29).

But for this year, there was a remarkably good spirit marked by moments of great grace. At Synod 2015, delegates preferred to see the glass half full rather than half empty, knowing full well that God holds the glass.

—Gayla R. Postma
Gayla Postma is news editor for The Banner. This was her 19th synod.

Synod Prays and Weeps After South Carolina Shooting

Synod 2015 opened its last day on a somber note. Rev. Stedford Sims, Classis Grand Rapids East, wept as he led delegates through a prayer of lament and hope after synod received the news of a mass shooting in South Carolina. A Caucasian man had entered Emanuel AME Church in Charleston during a Bible study and then shot and killed nine African American people.

Sims cried out to God for comfort for those in pain, for the families of those slain, and for the leaders of the church who will have to navigate the tragedy in the congregation. He thanked God for raising up the church "for such a time as this," as our society is riven by racism, division, hate, misunderstandings, and ignorance. "What a time to be an example of the love of God, to show America hope for our nation," he prayed.

Synod president Rev. Bruce Persenaire thanked him and thanked God for raising Stedford up "for such a time as this."

"We thank you for your prayer, the man you are, and what you represent to us in the CRC," he said, "and that you still pointed out that 'this is the day the Lord has made and we will rejoice and be glad in it.'"

Synod 2015 adopted a resolution declaring its abhorrence of the tragic killings in the Emanuel AME Church, declaring its solidarity with the families, the church, and others affected by this event, and its hope that even in tragedy, the power of the gospel of grace in Jesus Christ can be displayed.

Elder Fronse Smith, Classis Holland, thanked synod for making that resolution. "I can't put into words how much that means," he told delegates.

—Gayla R. Postma



Rev. Stedford Sims leads synod in a prayer of lament and hope.

NEWS SYNOD 2015

Synod 2015 Approves Unifying Home Missions and World Missions

Synod 2015 overwhelmingly approved the plan to unify Christian Reformed Home Missions (CRHM) and Christian Reformed World Missions (CRWM) into one global mission agency for the CRC with the mandate to “give leadership to the denomination in its task of bringing the gospel holistically to the people of North America and the world, and drawing them into fellowship with Christ and his church.”

While there has been encouragement for the two agencies to work together for many years, the leaders of the agencies believe that actual unification now is timely, strategic, and stewardly.

Colin Watson, the CRC’s director of ministries and administration who also previously served as president of the board of World Missions, noted, “Most people

Rev. Paul Im, Classis Hanmi (right, with translator): “What would happen to the support now given to the Korean churches?”



Gary Bekker (left) and Moses Chung

groups are no longer bound by geographies. The proposal before you is all about increasing/becoming more stewardly and able to do more ministry.”

Rev. Moses Chung, Home Missions director, added, “We live in a changing, shrinking world. Domestic boundaries are less relevant or helpful. Facing challenges in a diverse world, we believe that as one agency we can come alongside local congrega-

tions to face the mission challenge.” He said that the previous agency structures have served the church well but that the time has come to break down the barriers. The past is important, as is the present, but “as servants in the agencies, we need to be thinking and preparing for the future. It’s here!”

Rev. Josiah Chung, Classis Grand Rapids East, expressed his support of the unification and sees it helping as he pastors international students near Calvin College’s campus. He noted its effectiveness as people go quickly from home to overseas today. Rev. Gerald Koning, Classis Georgetown, a former missionary in El Salvador, said that by joining, “We fill the need for missional pastors working in a local context.” Rev. Stanley Jim, Classis Red Mesa, observed, “This allows us to be missionaries in our own backyard.”

Rev. Paul Im, Classis Hanmi, wondered what would happen to the support now given to the Korean churches. Committee reporter Rev. Jose Rayas assured him that in his ministry in Texas,

he had both Home Missions and World Missions support, and this support would continue. Rev. Merle Den Bleyker, Classis Arizona, also said that in his experience as a pastor in Berwyn, Ill., the distinction between the two agencies quickly blurred.

Some delegates wondered about how the transition would proceed. They were assured that while there will be learning to be done along the way, the agencies have a detailed plan anticipating many of the concerns.

After approving the unification, delegates surrounded the two directors as executive director



Rev. Stanley Jim, Classis Red Mesa: “This allows us to be missionaries in our own backyard.”

Steven Timmermans prayed, thanking God for visionary leaders who dreamed and worked very hard, and asking God to give them a calm spirit as the work of unification moves forward.

—George Vink



God Holds the Glass, Half Full or Half Empty

"Let me clear up a misconception [about the denomination]," Executive Director Steven Timmermans told delegates to Synod 2015. "I hear over and over 'we're shrinking, ministry shares are declining.' Don't tell me we're shrinking!"

"We have a wonderful way of seeing the glass half empty," he noted. "We are a dour bunch. . . . The news around us can make us discouraged."

But membership statistics show that the church has turned a corner, he said. The CRC has more total members in 2015 than it did the year before that, and the year before. "God is blessing us with growth."

He also noted that although the income from Ministry Shares is less than requested, the amount has been relatively stable.

"I'm not minimizing those situations where numbers are declining. That pain is real," he said. "But we must not avoid seeing that God is doing amazing things."

Timmermans also touched on the many ways the CRC is cooperating organizationally and in ministry with the Reformed Church in America, and how our Korean brothers and sisters are helping the CRC assume a posture of prayer.

But, he said, he doesn't want delegates to look at graphs and charts and be excited. "It's not about the numbers," he said. "We have to avoid hoping in ourselves, our accomplishments. Our hope is grounded in the Word of God."

He said that the church is facing issues that will pull at us and challenge us. "Despite this, we should remain patiently hopeful,"



Steven Timmermans, executive director of the Christian Reformed Church.

he said. "Whether the glass is half empty or half full, it is God who holds the glass, and us, in his hands."

—Gayla R. Postma

Committee reporter: "It is difficult to find ministers willing to submit manuscript sermons that meet the requirements of the Sermons for Reading Services Committee."

Synod president Bruce Persenaire: "They never asked me for my manuscripts!"

Delegate: "So where can we get sermons for reading?"

Persenaire: "At brucepersenaire@ . . ."

Synod 2015 Approves Timmermans as Commissioned Pastor for the Denomination

To recognize the executive director's ministry to the whole denomination, Synod 2015 made an exception to its rules regarding commissioned pastors. Steven Timmermans, executive director of the Christian Reformed Church, was recently examined and approved by Classis Grand Rapids East (a regional group of churches) as a commissioned pastor.

Ordinarily commissioned pastors serve only in the classis in which they are approved. However, Synod 2015 declared Timmermans to be a commissioned pastor throughout the denomination.

Timmermans is the first executive director who is not an ordained minister of the Word, an exception granted by Synod 2013 with the caveat that the new director become an officebearer. Timmermans's classis asked synod to extend his local ordination. Synod agreed, noting that "it is important for the executive director to be seen as serving the whole denomination and not only in those classes that choose to recognize him as a commissioned pastor."

—Roxanne VanFarowe



Carol Bremer-Bennett

Synod 2015 Meets New World Renew-U.S. Director

Synod 2015 welcomed Carol Bremer-Bennett as the new director of World Renew-U.S.

Bremer-Bennett comes to World Renew after serving as a teacher and administrator for Rehoboth Christian School near Gallup, N.M. As a woman who identifies herself as "Navajo, Dutch, and, most importantly, a child of God," Bremer-Bennett works well with people of many different backgrounds and says she has "learned to live in a lot of different worlds at once."

Bremer-Bennett was adopted at the age of three months and raised in the Christian Reformed Church. She and her husband have six children, three Navajo and three Ethiopian, five of whom are adopted. She says her family motto is, "the African bus is never full." Bremer-Bennett says that she and her family "always have room in our house and hearts for others who need love and support."

Bremer-Bennett draws a connection between her family motto and her view of the denomination. "The CRC bus is also never full," she said. "Creation is groaning, and we are called to answer it."

—Julie Jansen

Synod 2015 Expands the Role of Deacons

In a historic move, Synod 2015 voted to make deacons full participants in the broader decision-making bodies of the Christian Reformed Church.

Throughout CRC history, only elders and ministers have been delegated to synod from classes (regional groups of churches), but now delegations will consist of a minister, an elder, a deacon, and one other officebearer who may be either a minister, an elder, or a deacon.

At the classis level, some classes have already included deacons in their deliberations. But with the Church Order changes adopted by this synod, each church will send an elder, a deacon, and a minister to classis meetings unless "great distance or other weighty reasons" prevent them from doing so.



Deacon advisors (l-r): Herm Kloosterman, Tamara Haveman, Trena Boonstra, Cora Hoekstra

Deacon Advisors Bring Their Perspective to Synod

Four deacon advisors brought their perspective to the deliberations at Synod 2015.

Herm Kloosterman said, "We're witnessing the exposure of causes we contribute to, and we get to encourage and support people who are part of this, which is amazing."

Regarding the appointment of two new seminary faculty, Cora Hoekstra said, "It's great to see how intentional everyone is in the hiring and training of not only pastors, but professors as well."

This is the last year synod will have deacon advisors. Starting next year, each classis will have at least one deacon in its delegation.

—Julie Jansen



Andy Ryskamp, World Renew: "We really want to see the diaconate be the agent of transformation in the community and a nurturing agent of the people in the church."

The original impetus for the change was a request in 2010 that synod redefine the role of deacons by making changes to the Church Order. Since then, subsequent synods have heard from two task forces that studied the issue. The changes adopted by this synod were proposed by Synod 2013.

"We really want to see the diaconate be the agent of transformation in the community and a nurturing agent of the people in the church," said Andrew Ryskamp, director of



Deacon Advisor Trena Boonstra: "In our classis, deacons have been invited and welcomed for some time."

World Renew-U.S., who advised both task forces. "The diaconate as it exists now in many churches is not functioning in that way."

"In our classis, deacons have been invited and welcomed for some time," said Deacon Advisor Trena Boonstra. "My experience is that this has been a helpful and enriching thing. [We had some] deacons [who] were new to the CRC. . . . They came back from classis know-

ing more about our denomination and the possibility of working with others."

Rev. Joel Zuidema, Classis Illiana, warned that having deacons serve as delegates would severely blur the lines between church offices. "What we have has been working for 150 years,"



Rev. John Hoekwater, Classis Northern Illinois: "We can't segregate Word from deed."

he said. "We don't want deacons making decisions in our church boardrooms."

Elder Herb Schreur, Classis Northcentral Iowa, was won over to the idea of deacon delegates through discussion at synod. "I don't believe this does blur the lines," Schreur said. "It does call everyone to help with everything, but it also calls certain people to help with certain things. One of the hard things I've learned in my life is that at some point I have to decide whether God's speaking to me in my head or through the other 20 people in the room."

Rev. John Hoekwater, Classis Northern Illinois, believes that the role of deacon must be expanded to fit the modern context. "We are looking at our communities and realizing that the ways we structured ourselves served our purposes in the past," he said. "Deacons served primarily in their own congregations. Now people . . . want to hear what this church is doing in our community. The diaconal work is as important and deserving of energy as the elder work. We can't segregate Word from deed."

An emotional Rev. Richard Bodini, Classis Toronto, told delegates, "This is a watershed moment. The description of the work of deacons has not changed in over 50 years. You have changed things for the better for diaconal work."

—Roxanne Van Farowe

Synod 2015 Dismisses Sermons for Reading Services Committee with Thanks

Synod 2015 formally disbanded the Sermons for Reading Services committee of the Christian Reformed Church and expressed its thanks to those who served on it. The committee's task was to "solicit sermons and worship liturgies from CRC pastors primarily for use by churches who do not have a pastor to lead a Sunday service." Those services are often led by a local elder.

The decision was based on the difficulty in finding ministers willing to submit sermons that meet the committee's qualifications, lack of usage among churches without pastors, and availability of other resources.

The CRC's Ministry Support Services will maintain the Sermons for Reading Services website for the foreseeable future. In the words of Rev. Bruce Persenaire, synod president, this decision was "very, very historic," as the Sermons for Reading Services committee has been in existence for decades.

—Julie Jansen

Synod 2015 Ratifies Interim *Banner* Editor Appointment, Approves New *Banner* Mandate

Synod 2015 was introduced to Rev. Leonard Vander Zee, appointed to be the interim editor of *The Banner*. A pastor in the CRC for more than 40 years and former theological editor for Faith Alive, Vander Zee admitted, "I'm nervous about it." However, recognizing the vital place *The Banner* has in the life of an increasingly diverse church and world, he's grateful for a "dedicated and competent staff." He indicated his commitment to serve, and promised, "I'll do my best to shepherd *The Banner* in this year of transition."

Vander Zee will assume his new role at the end of the summer when current editor Rev. Bob De Moor will retire from the job to return from half-time to full-time parish ministry. During Vander Zee's interim year, a synodically-appointed committee will search for a permanent editor.

Synod also approved slight changes to *The Banner's* mandate. At last year's synod, there was heated discussion about some of the articles that had been printed. The mandate was changed to



Rev. Leonard Vander Zee was appointed interim editor of *The Banner*.

more clearly specify the parameters of how *The Banner's* editor exercises editorial judgment. Last year, editor Rev. Bob De Moor apologized to synod for errors in editorial judgment.

In other matters related to *The Banner*, synod approved the process by which a search for a new editor will take place. Synod 2015 also reaffirmed the right of *The Banner's* editor to appeal to synod if a dispute arises between the editor and the CRC's executive director over editorial content.

—George Vink and Gayla R. Postma

Synod 2015 Receives Interim Report on Religious Persecution and Liberty

Synod 2015 received the preliminary report from the committee appointed to study religious persecution and liberty.

Rev. Joel Zuidema, Class Illiana, commended the report for its depth of analysis and for its rootedness in the Bible, but suggested that the report's language "was over many of our heads." He said that "it needs to be readable and to inspire us to action." He added, "We would like a report that could go viral." He urged the writers of the report to tell more stories.

These remarks appeared to resonate with some of the delegates. Rev. Paul Vander Klay, Classis Central California, said that the questions about religious persecution and liberty are "at the nexus of a lot of hot-button issues."

In the end, synod observed that "this report will shape Christian and non-Christian thought on perhaps one of the most



Rev. Joel Zuidema, Class Illiana: "This needs to be readable and to inspire us to action."

important topics of our time. Much more than an academic work, this report will need to influence with heart, passion, practicality, and clarity to motivate the church."

The full report will come to Synod 2016.

—Clayton Libolt

Synod 2015 Hears about Ministry in Canada

Rev. Darren Roorda, Canadian ministries director, shared with delegates his excitement about the Christian Reformed Church's recent change of focus regarding Canada's various CRC ministries. Now, instead of focusing primarily on four of Canada's individual ministries, the CRC focuses on ministry in Canada as part of a binational church with a "shared purpose and mission" in different contexts.

Roorda said he wants to showcase the uniqueness of ministry in Canada as an integral part of the CRC denomination. "Our goal is to develop mutual learning relationships," Roorda said.

—Julie Jansen



Rev. Darren Roorda, Canadian ministries director.

Synod 2015 Appoints Cory Willson to Seminary Faculty

Synod 2015 appointed Cory Willson as assistant professor of missiology and missional ministry following a successful interview with delegates.

Willson grew up in a family that was active in a nondenominational church. As a young adult he studied and taught business administration and became a leader in college-age ministry. After he studied under Richard Mouw at Fuller Theological Seminary, he became immersed in Reformed theology. “The Reformed tradition has the best resources for being a faithful witness in Word and deed,” he said.

Willson showed his relational side when he unabashedly shared his despair at finding himself single in his mid-30s and his joy

at recently marrying the “love of [his] life.” He wept as he told a story about his father being willing to ask his forgiveness after speaking harshly.

Willson’s doctoral thesis—which he will defend this summer—is based on the theology of work espoused by Dutch Reformed theologian Herman Bavinck. “Intimacy with God can only come through doing what he created you to do,” Willson said. “Your humanity comes through what you receive. This keeps us from a gospel that tells us how to be a Christian and brings us to a gospel that tells us how to be fully human.”

Willson stressed the importance of learning from other cultural contexts. “Sometimes that



Cory B. Willson was appointed assistant professor of missiology and missional ministry at Calvin Theological Seminary.

involves receiving hospitality. One of the best things we do is receive hospitality from others,” he said.

What does Willson want students to gain from his classes? “The best student evaluation would be ‘I came with questions

but I ended with a more resolute commitment to Jesus and to his Word.’ I want students to think biblically and theologically but also to have a passion for Jesus.”

—Roxanne Van Farowe

Synod 2015 Approves 44 Candidates for Minister of the Word

Synod 2015 approved 44 new candidates for Minister of the Word to serve the Christian Reformed Church. This year’s group included 33 men and 11 women. Ten of the 44 came from Canada and six from overseas. Nine candidates were present in Sioux Center at synod, while others were watching live online streaming of the event.

President of Calvin Theological Seminary Rev. Jul Medenblik addressed the candidates. He urged them to “think about the people and the places that have formed you. We know that you’re grateful for them, and we’re grateful for them.” He thanked them for responding to God’s call and concluded by saying, “We desire God’s blessing on you—you have the opportunity to be a blessing in the



Synod 2015 approved 44 new candidates for ministry.

lives of others—even those you may not know.”

Following a commissioning litany, synod president Rev. Bruce Persenaire also gave a charge to the candidates. “Each of you has a story of how you got here and why you are here. You will go into fields of labor in churches where you will

also hear stories, stories that will touch your heart, stories you will cherish. That is the special privilege you get as minister of the Word, to hear stories, God’s stories, stories of grace. Keep your ears and your hearts open to hearing those stories.”

—Julie Jansen

Lisa Vander Wal, a fraternal delegate from of the Reformed Church in America:

“As a childhood member of the Christian Reformed Church in Lynden, Wash., we used to park in the parking lot of the RCA across the street. I think my ecumenical roots were planted then.”

President Bruce Persenaire: “Save your applause for speeches until you’ve heard mine.”

Synod Appoints Matthew Tuininga to Seminary Faculty

Synod 2015 ratified the appointment of Dr. Matthew J. Tuininga as assistant professor of moral theology at Calvin Theological Seminary (CTS).

A pastor's son of a pastor's son, Tuininga demonstrated in his synod interview his qualifications for teaching seminary students.

Tuininga believes that theology must always stay related to the church. "Serving the church is where it's at in doing moral theology," he said. His intent is to emphasize following Christ and teaching students to do so. Noting that "church history is marked with division," he indicated that more emphasis needs to be placed on the teaching of Galatians 3:28 as well as sharing the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper.

Tuininga stated emphatically that "change is needed with the ethos of being a reconciling body of Christ. We need to ask why things are the way they are."

Discussing what challenges he saw facing the young with the culture's emphasis on technology, he acknowledged that we have not done enough thinking about it. "We may solve problems, but we need to know we're made to be in unity with people," he said. "People are allured by technology. Preachers need contact with real people."

Rev. Frank de Boer, Classis Alberta South/Saskatchewan, asked how Tuininga would prepare students who'll serve as pastors in churches where teaching about homosexuality varies. Tuininga indicated he'd begin his



Matthew Tuininga is a new appointee to the faculty of Calvin Theological Seminary.

teaching at CTS with a course on American sexuality. He sees the temptation to reject folks right away or accept what political, liberal impulse tells us to do. We need to "teach what Scripture teaches us, relating it to creation order, communicate the gospel to all that Scripture teaches, come alongside, and show what fellowship can be in relationship," he said. He suggests we do lots of hard thinking and wrestling with the issue.

Rev. Tom Bomhof, Classis British Columbia Southeast, asked him about his kingdom theology. Tuininga expressed appreciation for the teachings at Westminster West Seminary and that of Michael Horton, but stood behind "[John] Calvin's two-kingdom theology being more eschatological" as it deals with the reality of "here and not yet."

Aren Plante, young adult representative, wondered, "Having grown up in the [United Reformed Church], you'll be helping CRC pastors. A challenge?" Tuininga responded, "It'll be a learning curve. I want to be out there involved. My URC wasn't too different from CRC. There's more commonality than we like to imagine."

Rev. Sid Sybenga, Classis Greater Los Angeles, wondered about Tuininga's perspective on women in ministry. Tuininga

answered by referring to Calvin's position that puts women's roles in an area where we can differ.

On abortion and pro-life, Tuininga suggested, "We need to be as crafty as serpents to get the best laws." However, he said, much more might be accomplished by other means, by reaching out and being involved with those in distress.

What Rev. Scott Elgersma, Classis California South, wanted to know was, "What did you do with the FBI?" Tuininga's curt answer: "I was a counter-terrorist analyst after 9/11," elicited relieved laughter.

Tuininga said that he's excited and challenged with what the gospel means and considers it a great privilege to be engaged to think about such things.

Synod 2015 decided they want that engagement at the CRC's seminary.

—George Vink

Synod 2015 Makes Space for RCA Candidates

Synod 2015 approved a way for candidates from the Reformed Church in America to receive a first call in the CRC.

Under a 2005 decision by synod between the RCA and the CRC, candidates were restricted from serving a first call outside their home denomination. However, some congregations have had an intern from the RCA and want to continue the relationship after the candidate graduates.

This new option allows RCA candidates, in exceptional cases, to accept a call in a CRC congregation. RCA candidates must complete the requirements in place for CRC candidates.

—Clayton Libolt

Synod 2015 Says Candidates for Minister of the Word to Get More Mentoring

Synod 2015 decided that candidates for minister of the Word in the Christian Reformed Church will have more involvement with their local church as part of their preparation for ministry.

Beginning with Synod 2018, "each candidate presented to synod (will) be required to have had three interviews with a classis or classis committee—an initial interview and then an annual interview over the next two years."

In addition, each candidate will be required to be in a mentoring relationship with a trained leader in the CRC for at least 24 months in partnership with a local church's mentoring committee.

The mentor will meet with the student at least three times during the years of preparation. The Candidacy Committee will implement this plan by orienting students early in their seminary training. Synod said the increased involvement of the local church will mean a "respectful partnership" between the churches and the Mentored Ministries Office of Calvin Theological Seminary.

—George Vink

All One Body Controversy Discussed by Synod

Synod 2015 decided not to “instruct and admonish” the consistories of two Grand Rapids, Mich., churches to discipline their members who are part of All One Body, an organization advocating change in the stance of the denomination in regard to same sex couples in committed and monogamous relationships.

The request for synod to do that was brought by Classis Minnkota (a regional body of churches). In a lengthy communication to synod, Minnkota cited a 1973 decision of the Christian Reformed Church, reiterated by several other synods, that condemned homosexual practice as sinful. Since All One Body advocates full inclusion in the church of people who are practicing homosexuals in committed, monogamous relationships, Minnkota claimed its members should be subject to church discipline and urged synod to instruct the churches to whom the members of All One Body belong to bring such discipline.

This synod refused to do so for two reasons: first, because the Church Order does not permit synods to instruct local congregations in matters of discipline and, second, because Classis Minnkota had failed to consult with the churches in question before bringing their request to synod.

Far more controversial was a proposal to synod from one of its advisory committees to add to their decision language partially borrowed from the Minnkota communication condemning the “public advocacy . . . of sinful behavior.”

In a long debate, synod deliberated whether this language was harmful or helpful.

Several delegates argued that once synod had decided not to accept Minnkota’s request, any other action of synod on the matter was out of order. Rev. Meg Jenista, Classis Hackensack, compared the decision of synod not to accept the Minnkota request to a quarreling couple deciding not to pursue an argument for a certain time. She asked, “Didn’t we decide not to have this argument right now?” Rev. Wilhelmina



Rev. C. James den Dulk, Classis Minnkota: “Scriptures do not allow us to live in unrepentant sin.”

Zwart, Classis Chatham, added, “What I keep scratching my head about is that we didn’t [accept Minnkota’s request]. I don’t know why this is in here.”

Others argued that the statement was simply a general statement, applicable to any sin. Rev. Paul de Vries, Classis Thornapple Valley, said that it was simply a statement of the gospel. Rev. C. James den Dulk, Classis Minnkota, after citing several Bible texts, said that the Scriptures say no to ungodliness. They do “not allow us to live in unrepentant sin.”

But Rev. Neil De Koning, Classis Alberta North/Saskatchewan, challenged the claim that the statement was only a general principle, applicable to any sin: “Something we can all assent to is that there is a context. The context suggests that this statement is directed against [the churches] hospitable to All One Body.” He added, “You can’t stop this conversation. This [proposal] wants to silence this conversation. We need this conversation. By trying to put a fence around the conversation we are not helping the CRC.”



Rev. Neil De Koning, Classis Alberta North/Saskatchewan: “You can’t stop this conversation. We need this conversation. By trying to put a fence around the conversation we are not helping the CRC.”

Elder Gerrit DenHartog, Classis Grandville, said, “It is superfluous. We already have a doctrine of sin. Given our Reformed doctrine, is this statement necessary?”

Elder Judy Jongsma, Classis Grand Rapids East, argued that advocacy in itself is not sin. She mentioned prominent evangelical and Reformed theologians “who do not read Paul’s passages as applicable to gay Christian couples

who seek to serve the Lord.” She mentioned, among others, Lewis Smedes, Amy Plantinga Pauw, and Tony Campolo. She added, “This is a matter of a synodical decision. Synod [has] declared that such decisions do not demand unswerving subscription by office holders. Everyone is free to speak against them without fear of recrimination.”

In a dramatic conclusion to the debate, the proposed statement about “public advocacy . . . of sinful behavior” was withdrawn by the advisory committee. The only



Elder Judy Jongsma, Classis Grand Rapids East: “Synod [has] declared that [synodical decisions] do not demand unswerving subscription by office holders.”

action of synod was not to accept Minnkota’s request for discipline.

Several delegates expressed concern for Synod 2016, when the committee charged with providing pastoral guidance re same sex marriage will report. Rev. Tim Hoekstra, Classis Chicago South, prayed for that synod, and for all those in the churches who feel isolated and estranged.

—Clayton Libolt



Rev. Rolf Bouma is chair of the Committee to Provide Pastoral Guidance re Same Sex Marriage.

Synod 2015 Discusses Same Sex Marriage

Synod 2015 held a listening session in order to gather the opinions of the delegates about how to respond pastorally in a variety of situations involving same sex marriage.

Rev. Rolf Bouma is the chair of the synodically appointed Committee to Provide Pastoral Guidance re Same Sex Marriage. He introduced the listening session by noting how dramatically and rapidly the cultural and legal situation is changing with regard to same sex marriage. What are the legal and pastoral implications of these shifts?

The committee's mandate instructs it to "give guidance and clarification" to churches and clergy for how to deal legally and pastorally with same sex marriage. Bouma emphasized that the committee was specifically instructed not to revisit the denominational stance on homosexuality itself, but to "address the cultural and legal aspects of same sex marriage as they impact the church and its ministry."

The committee will not report its findings until Synod 2016, but it is committed to a "shepherding model," which engages the church in conversation while the committee completes its work.

For this purpose, the delegates were divided into small groups and presented with three topics for discussion. The first two were potential pastoral situations: the baptism of a child of a same sex couple and the same sex marriage of a child of a church leader. The third topic presented four views of the relationship between civil marriage and religious marriage, for the purpose of considering a Reformed perspective on such a relationship.

—Clayton Libolt

Ethnic Advisors Share Reactions to Synod 2015

Ethnic advisor John Saa Lendein was "overwhelmed and happy" to be participating in Synod 2015. "I get to see how the church works from the ground level, and at any time we [ethnic advisors] can get up and talk," he said. He took the opportunity to speak on the floor of synod and was happy that he had.

Early in the week, advisor Lee Khang said that "[delegates] don't really ask for our opinions. We have to offer them. It shouldn't be that way." Carlinda Peoples agreed: "As an advisor, I haven't done any advising. I thought someone might ask me 'What do you think?'" Later, Peoples did speak on the floor of synod.

Janelia Smiley said that she was asked for her opinions during advisory committee meetings. Still, she added, "at times I just sat there."

At the end of synod, advisor Caleb Dixon told delegates, "Our continued prayer is that more [ethnically diverse] delegates will be selected in the future and that ethnic advisors won't be needed."

—Roxanne Van Farowe

Delegate Michael Jackson, after making his way to the podium using a cane: "For those of you expecting moon walking. . ." He didn't need to finish.

President Bruce Persenaire: "As officers, we are making the assumption that all of you are smart; that all of you are humble; however, we could come to no conclusion on whether all of you are wise. That conclusion will be made as you speak."



Ethnic advisors (l-r): Janelia Smiley, Lee Khang, John Saa Lendein, Carlinda Peoples, and Caleb Dickson.

Synod 2015 Seeks Clarification for the Office of Commissioned Pastor

Synod 2015 asked the Board of Trustees and the Office of Candidacy to provide clarification for a variety of issues related to the office of commissioned pastor, and to report back to Synod 2016 with recommendations. These include establishing proper procedures for approval, supervision, termination, transfer, and movement of credentials from one calling church to another. Commissioned pastors are approved for a specific role within their own classis (a regional group of churches).

The request for clarification came from Classis Hamilton, which observed that "there is a long and complicated history" behind the office and that the office is being used more and more in the denomination for people in a variety of pastoral roles. In view of this, clarification of these issues is necessary and timely.

—Clayton Libolt

Delegate: "I'd like to offer that as a friendly amendment."

Committee reporter:
"That's not very friendly!"

Synod 2015 Clarifies Questions for Multi-affiliated Churches

When a church is affiliated with two or more denominations, the logistics can get confusing. For example, to which denomination is the pastor responsible? Which denomination owns the building if the church closes?

Seeking to allow for multi-affiliated churches and clarify such questions, Synod 2015 added a new provision and a new supplementary subsection to the Church Order of the Christian Reformed Church.

The supplementary information was submitted by Classis Holland, which includes Pillar Church in Holland, Mich., a dual-affiliated church since 2012 with both the CRC and the Reformed Church in America (RCA). Because the two denominations are working together on church planting, many new dual- or multi-affiliated churches are anticipated.

The Church Order will now specify matters affecting churches that affiliate with one or more denominations with which the CRC is in ecclesiastical fellowship—including church giving decisions, appeals against councils' actions, pastoral discipline, pension plans, and procedures for closing churches.

—Roxanne Van Farowe

Synod to Bring Back Women Advisors

Synod 2015 reinstated the practice of including women advisors, paralleling the guidelines established for ethnic advisors. Doing so will mean that women advisors will attend synod whenever there are fewer than 25 women delegates.

From 2001 to 2007, women advisors were part of synod, but the practice was discontinued once women were allowed to be delegates. However, the number of women delegated to synod has been 10 percent or lower in most of the years since.

Many delegates expressed joy at seeing women participating in synod and gratitude to those who pushed to make it happen. It was noted that in light of the decision to have deacons attend synod, there will likely be more women in attendance next year.

Classes (regional groups of churches) will again be encouraged to select delegates who are gender and ethnically diverse in order to represent the denomination's increasing diversity. Elder Judy Jongsma, Classis Grand Rapids East, said that when she arrived at synod, she felt like she was in "a good old boys club." But, she added, other women embraced her and made her feel part of the body. "We must increase the number of women participating in synod," she said.

Rev. Richard Bodini, Classis Toronto, spoke of the need to have synod be a picture of heaven here on earth, a blessed, diverse body of Christ. Deacon advisor Trena Boonstra affirmed the desire with words of appreciation. "I have felt very welcomed and encouraged.



Rev. Meg Jenista, Classis Hackensack: "There are delegates who sit here under protest [because of women's ordination]. Their voice is not being heard."



Ethnic advisor John Saa Lendein: "[The church] needs to see the vital role of its female members."

Thank you for that. It's been a good learning experience, and I would encourage churches to send their women."

Rev. Meg Jenista, Classis Hackensack, offered another perspective. She said, "I hear my story in all this. But also there are delegates who sit here under protest [because they believe the Bible does not permit women's ordination]. Their voice is not being heard."

Elder John VanderBilt, Classis Minnkota, said, "I want to remind

you that this is a prayed-for synod. The Holy Spirit will guide our classis in terms of the delegates. We are elected to be here by God's choice."

Ethnic advisor John Saa Lendein told delegates that his mother in Liberia, who sacrificed again and again and had three churches burn down, was such a blessing to him. He wanted synod to see the vital role of its female members.

Synod affirmed the need to enhance and encourage diversity at its meetings by voting to ensure the presence of women.

—George Vink

Synod Continues to Move Around

Synod is generally convened at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Mich., but it has been moving around quite a bit in recent years. After convening in Pella, Iowa, last year, and Sioux Center, Iowa, this year, it will be held in Grand Rapids in 2016. The convening church will be North Hills Christian Reformed Church in Troy, Mich. In 2017, synod will move to Trinity Christian College in Palos Heights, Ill. Synods 2018-2020 are tentatively scheduled to be held on Calvin's campus.

—Julie Jansen



Rev. Mark Verbruggen

Hundreds Gather for Service of Prayer, Word, and Sacrament for Synod 2015

More than 600 people gathered at First Christian Reformed Church in Sioux Center, Iowa, for a Service of Prayer, Word, and Sacrament for Synod 2015. The service was led by Rev. Mark Verbruggen, pastor at First CRC.

The service included a string orchestra, organist, pianist, other instrumentalists, and psalm-singers, all of which reflect First CRC's culture, according to Verbruggen. "That way we can draw on our own strengths," Verbruggen said. Although the service was mostly classical in style, the music was a mix of older hymns and contemporary songs. Later in the service, communion was served by male elders, which Verbruggen said is also typical in most churches in Northwest Iowa. Members of a local Friendship Group also assisted in serving communion.

Synodical participation included prayers offered by synod president Rev. Bruce Persehaire and the CRC's director of ministries and administration, Colin Watson.

Following Scripture readings from Isaiah 6:1-7 and Luke 18:9-14, Verbruggen delivered a sermon entitled "Where Do We Stand?" With a light-hearted start relating Jesus' ministries of "solid, CRC, three-point sermons," Verbruggen spoke about Jesus' parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector and explained how "God's kingdom is not like this world; in a world of empires that seek to control us and own us, the kingdom of God is counter-cultural."

Verbruggen challenged delegates, saying, "We can't rely on our history, the great things we as a church have done in the past. We can't rely on those who think like us and act like us." Instead, he said, Christians must, through grace, find their identity in Jesus Christ.

—Julie Jansen

Young Adult Representatives at Synod 2015: 'People are thanking us for speaking'



Aren Plante, 19, of Hamilton, Ont., enjoyed "being able to network and meet the denominational leaders" at Synod 2015. "It's an honor to be chosen as the youth voice, especially on issues that I feel very passionate about."

Plante was one of seven young adults, aged 18 to 26, who served as young adult representatives at the annual

Young adult representatives, from left: Justin Ver Woerd, Ashley Bootsma, Adam Heynen, Derick Xayasane, Corey Van Dyk, Aren Plante, and Youri Lee.

leadership meeting of the Christian Reformed Church.

"We feel encouraged by everyone here," said Ashley Bootsma, 24, from St. Catharines, Ont. "In the presentation of candidates and the interviews of new [seminary] faculty members, we are both

comforted and excited by the training taking place for those called to shepherd us."

Youri Lee, 25, is a master's of divinity student at Calvin Theological Seminary in Grand Rapids, Mich. "I thought that coming to synod would be a good opportunity to learn about the denomination," she said. "I am impressed by how in-depth the conversation is."

"We are learning about just how many resources are available for us and our churches," said Justin Ver Woerd, 24, of Abbotsford, B.C., who enjoyed his second synod as a young adult representative. "As a group we've had the chance to see the passions of others, their gifts and talents, and encourage each other in where we are headed in life."

—Roxanne Van Farowe



18
Number of female delegates at synod

NEWS SYNOD 2015

Synod 2015 Launches Denominational Structure Overhaul

After more than 30 years of discussing denominational structure and adopting half-measures at various synods over those decades, the delegates of Synod 2015 took the plunge and approved sweeping changes to current Christian Reformed Church board governance structure. This despite the fact that there were very few details about what the new structure would actually look like.

The proposal came to synod from a task force that was appointed in 2011 following the resignation of the CRC's top two administrative leaders; the task force has reported to each annual synod since then.

The plan will see the denomination's 30-member Board of Trustees, which conducts the work of synod when synod is not in session, become a council of delegates of perhaps 60 members by 2018 or sooner. Instead of delegates representing regions, each classis (regional group of churches) will have a delegate on the council. There may also be several at-large members of the proposed council. Moving to a model of classical representation, rather than regional, will result in the council resembling synod in that the U.S. delegation will outnumber Canadians by a ratio of three to one. How often the council will meet is yet to be determined. A smaller executive committee, with perhaps 12 members, will meet more frequently to make decisions that would then be ratified by the full council.

Another major change to the structure will be the combining of the boards of the CRC's mission agencies (Back to God Ministries International, Christian Reformed World Missions, and Christian Reformed Home Missions) into a missions committee that would be a subcommittee of the council.

Rev. Nick Overduin, Classis Toronto, said this is the perfect time to make such a change, with three new leaders in place as the administrative executive team. Executive director Steven Timmermans, director of ministries and administration Colin Watson, and Canadian ministries director Rev. Darren Roorda have all been appointed in the past 15 months.

Rev. Paul Vander Klay, Classis Central California, agreed. "I think it's time to no longer take half-measures. We've got a plan, we've got the people; we should empower them and set them loose."

Not all delegates were in favor of the proposal. Elder Bruce McMurry, Classis Wisconsin, wasn't convinced a change is needed. While the work started out when the church was in turmoil, "conditions are different than they were four years ago," he said. "By God's grace we are at a very different time than we were four years ago."

Rev. Frank de Boer, Classis Alberta South/Saskatchewan, said the fact that the boards of all three mission agencies sent communications to synod expressing concerns about the proposal "set off an alarm bell inside of me."

Some delegates were concerned about the lack of detail in the proposal. Rev. Henry Kranenburg, Classis Hamilton, said, "I find this a fairly open-ended recommendation." Rev. Timothy Toeset, Classis Yellowstone, agreed. "There are far too many unanswered questions. I don't think it is wise to proceed."

Synod tasked a transition committee to work out all those details, including the size and composition of the council, how often it will meet, and more. That transition committee is expected to work in a three-year time frame, reporting to synod on its progress each year.

Elder Lenore Maine, Classis Hackensack, didn't want synod held up by lack of detail. Referring to decisions synod had made earlier in the week, she said, "We've been going forward, voting forward all week. We've built a brand new car and now you want to put a beat-up engine in it. You need a new engine to make it go further!"

Synod delegates agreed. After they overwhelmingly approved moving ahead with overhauling the denominational board structure, they also instructed the executive director to appoint a working group to examine the nature and purpose of classis, with the objective of proposing revisions that "will enable classes to flourish." And it instructed the Board of Trustees to recommend to Synod 2016 a mandate, composition, and timeline for a task force to review the practices and functions of synod itself.

—Gayla R. Postma



Rev. Nick Overduin, Classis Toronto: "This is the perfect time to make such a change."



Rev. Paul Vander Klay, Classis Central California: "I think it's time to no longer take half-measures. We've got a plan, we've got the people; we should empower them and set them loose."



Rev. Timothy Toeset, Classis Yellowstone: "There are far too many unanswered questions."



Elder Lenore Maine, Classis Hackensack: "You need a new engine to make [the new car] go further!"

Synod 2015 Approves 1 Percent Ministry Shares Increase

Synod 2015 received the unified budget of the Christian Reformed Church's agencies and institutions as information and approved ministry shares of \$339.48 for calendar year 2016. It did so after noting that ministry shares comprise only part of the budget.

Synod also took note of the need for congregations to understand and appreciate "the blessings and faithfulness of our congregations." Over the past 15 years, the CRC has consistently received close to \$24-25 million annually through ministry shares giving.

Despite that, synod noted a need to recognize the challenges local congregations face regarding ministry shares giving and understanding it. With that need in mind, Synod 2015 requested that the executive director send a letter to congregations that communicates the encouraging information synod learned and that "challenges them to be thoughtful and prayerful about their ministry shares gifts."

Synod also learned that while churches of various sizes contribute more than asked, many churches do not pay 100 percent of their ministry shares.

—George Vink



Ministry Shares Allocation:

Back to God Ministries International	\$44.41
Calvin College	\$31.92
Calvin Theological Seminary	\$36.27
Christian Reformed Home Missions	\$47.35
Christian Reformed World Missions	\$61.17
Synodical Administrative Services ¹	\$35.68
Faith Formation Ministries and Congregational Services ²	\$78.95
Special Assistance Fund ³	\$3.73
TOTAL Per Member Share⁴	\$339.48

Ministry Share Breakdown for Fiscal 2016

¹Synod Assembly, Board of Trustees, and General Administration

²Includes Chaplaincy and Care Ministries, Disability Concerns, Ministries in Canada (Aboriginal Ministries, Christian Reformed Centre for Public Dialogue), Pastor-Church Relations, Race Relations, Office of Social Justice, Restorative Justice, Safe Church Ministry, Faith Alive/Banner, Worship Ministries.

³A fund that provides assistance to cover the cost of a pastor's final move at retirement, as well as special needs of retired pastors or their surviving spouses.

⁴These amounts represent allocation of \$339.48 ministry shares for the 2016 calendar year.

Synod 2015 Seeks to Change How CRC Addresses Sexual Abuse by Officebearers

Synod 2015 identified an urgent need to change the way the Church Order of the Christian Reformed Church addresses sexual misconduct and sexual abuse by officebearers.

Synod agreed that Church Order Articles 83 and 84, which deal with special discipline for officebearers, should highlight issues of the power differential between officebearers and those they serve. It acknowledged that those hurt by such abuse have not been adequately served and supported by the current process. So synod instructed the Board of Trustees to ask the CRC's Safe Church Ministry, in concert with other denominational agencies, to review the rules and to recommend revisions to Synod 2016.

The instructions include: "Differentiat[ing] sexual misconduct from sexual abuse" and "provid[ing] guidelines for how graduations in severity and victim impact would affect decisions regarding reinstatement." Instructions also include addressing the matter of resignation of officebearers in situations of abuse. Rev. Daniel Mouw, Classis Grandville, explained that the change is meant to speak to a concern that resignations don't apply only to pastors but also to elders and deacons who may possibly move elsewhere.

—George Vink

Delegate Scott Elgersma (following decision to join World Missions and Home Missions): "I'm saving all my Home Missions and World Missions T-shirts. They might be worth something some day."

Synod poet laureate Rod Hugen:

"I'd hoped to see the cannons, right here at good old Dordt. But apparently they're missing. I can't even find a fort."

Delegate David Vroege: "I'm not opposing anything! I'm just explaining what the word 'with' means!"

Ecumenical Matters: Synod 2015 Hears from Sister Churches

The Christian Reformed Church has ecumenical relationships with many denominations around the world. Synod 2015 heard from representatives of four of those.

Rev. Arie Jan Plaisier is general secretary of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands (PCN), a denomination formed 11 years ago by the union of two large historic Reformed churches in the Netherlands and one smaller

Lutheran church. The more recent relationship of the CRC with the PCN has been controversial within the denomination because of some of the doctrinal and moral stances of the PCN.

Plaisier spoke of the value of unity. He said that the CRC was “a special partner” for the PCN on this continent. He noted the difficulty of being faithful to the mission of Christ in the face of an increasingly secularized society.



Lisa Vander Wal, fraternal delegate from the Reformed Church in America.



Rev. Arie Jan Plaisier, general secretary of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands.

Synod Encourages Churches to Use Blanket Exercise



Rev. Charles Kooger: “The reconciling work of Christ is never done.”

Synod 2015 strongly encouraged classes (regional groups of churches) and congregations to engage in the Blanket Exercise some time in the coming year. The delegates were introduced to the exercise with a brief video.

In the exercise, derived from the traditions of Native peoples, blankets of various colors and types are laid on a large floor. Participants walk over, bunch up, otherwise use, and claim the blankets as directed by the coordinators, illustrating the relationships of indigenous and

non-indigenous peoples in the histories of Canada and the United States. It is said to be a “practical, powerful, [and] experiential way to understand . . . the dynamics of power without a voice.”

Several delegates spoke passionately in favor of the proposal. Rev. Russell Boersma, Classis Northcentral Iowa, mentioned the CRC’s own history, “where the attempt to take the Indian out of the Indian was done.” The CRC ran schools for the Navajo for many years.

Caleb Dickson, ethnic advisor from Classis Red Mesa, called attention to the place names in the area where synod was meeting: Sioux Center, Sioux Falls, and Sioux City. “The Sioux,” he said, “is a tribe of Indians. We were devalued as people. Stripped of our humanity. That was [considered] part of our heathenness. We were punished for being Indian. Let’s not whitewash over the pain.”

Rev. Charles Kooger, Alberta South/Saskatchewan, pointed out, “The reconciling work of Christ is never done.”

—Clayton Libolt

“All kinds of luxury are taken from us,” he said. “It is a time of purification, back to the basics.”

Rev. Nelus Niemandt, the moderator of the Dutch Reformed Church of South Africa, observed that his denomination is struggling with the same issues as the CRC. He mentioned same sex marriage, persecution and liberty, denominational structure and culture, and the roles of elders and deacons.

He said that a breakthrough had been reached in discussions to unify four large Reformed denominations in South Africa. He thanked the CRC for its partnership and leadership among Reformed churches.

Rev. Perline Cooper, pastor at-large for the Church of Jesus Christ in Madagascar, brought news of her church to Synod 2015. The church she represents is stunningly large and important in the African nation of Madagascar. It has more than six million members and six thousand churches. About 40 percent of the population of Madagascar is affiliated with the church.

The relationship of the Madagascar church with the CRC has been fostered by the extensive work in that country by World Renew. In addition, the president of the denomination studied at Calvin Theological Seminary. Cooper mentioned that the president is presently working toward reconciliation for the deep divisions in Madagascar that led to the violence of 2007-2008.

Fraternal delegate Lisa Vander Wal brought greetings from the Reformed Church in America (RCA). She mentioned with appreciation her own deep roots in the CRC and talked about the many ways that the RCA and CRC work together. These include such ventures as World Renew, Kingdom Enterprise Zones, and church insurance programs. Vander Wal said she hoped that these initiatives would grow deeper and more numerous. She also spoke of her work with the World Communion of Reformed Churches, a worldwide council of Reformed churches “called to communion and committed to justice.” Both



Rev. Nelus Niemandt, moderator of the Dutch Reformed Church of South Africa.

the CRC and the RCA are members of that body.

In other ecumenical matters, Synod 2015 designated the United Reformed Church in the Congo and the Sudanese Reformed Churches as churches in dialogue with the CRC. The CRC will also join World Reformed Fellowship, a group of more conservative



Rev. Perline Cooper, pastor-at-large of the Church of Jesus Christ in Madagascar.

Reformed and Presbyterian denominations around the world.

Synod decided as well that the interfaith component of the mandate of the denomination's Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations Committee (EIRC) should be handled by a separate subcommittee of the EIRC.

—Clayton Libolt

CRC's Relationship with Protestant Church in the Netherlands Will Remain Close

Requests from Classis Minnkota and Classis Atlantic Northeast (regional groups of churches) were ruled out of order by the officers of Synod 2015.

The two groups had asked that the CRC return to a more arm's length relationship with the Protestant Church in the Netherlands after last year's synod chose to move into full ecclesiastical fellowship with that denomination. For years the CRC had distanced itself from the Dutch church because of serious doctrinal differences, including the fact that some PCN churches ordain people who are practicing homosexuals. Full ecclesiastical fellowship is the closest level of ecumenical relationships between denominations.

The officers said there were no new, compelling grounds presented to warrant having a new discussion this year.

—Gayla R. Postma

Synod 2015 Urges Churches to Engage with the Belhar Confession

After a contentious discussion, Synod 2015 encouraged CRC congregations "to study and incorporate [the Belhar Confession's] themes into their discipling and liturgical ministries."

Rev. Steve Bussis, Classis Zeeland, opposed the move, saying that Synod 2012 already said what needed to be said. In 2012, synod discussed the Belhar Confession and decided not to adopt it as a confessional standard but rather as an ecumenical faith declaration.

Rev. Jose Rayas, Classis Arizona, said, "If I recall, the reason we put this document in a different category was because it was not to become a fourth confessional standard. It's up to the churches to use it or not."

Elder Karen Walker, Classis Hackensack, said she was saddened by those comments. "I'm hurt that there seems to be a lack of sensitivity to how the lack of adoption [of the Belhar] has impacted our African American brothers and sisters," she said. "Members in our church seriously talked about 'is this where I belong?' I think it does need to be brought up again and again."

Rev. John Hoekwater, Classis Northern Illinois, also spoke in favor. "We're aware of news across the nation of racial profiling. We have not yet learned how to live together, and we'd do well to lead the way as the CRC to understand how to live together."

In a vote of 96 to 79, synod decided to encourage the churches to continue to engage with the Belhar.



Rev. Jose Rayas, Classis Arizona: "It's up to the churches to use the [Belhar] or not."



Elder Karen Walker, Classis Hackensack: "I'm hurt that there seems to be a lack of sensitivity to how the lack of adoption [of the Belhar] has impacted our African American brothers and sisters."

Synod also noted that the CRC's Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations Committee has learned through feedback from ecumenical partners that the category Ecumenical Faith Declaration is problematic.

—Gayla R. Postma

Synod 2015 Hears about New Faith Formation and Worship Ministries

At a workshop Sunday evening, almost 100 delegates and visitors to Synod 2015 learned how their churches could participate in a pilot program on faith formation.

Syd Hielema, team leader of the CRC's new Faith Formation Ministries said they are testing a model for understanding how people come to faith. The "Building Blocks of Faith" model includes four blocks: belonging, knowing, hoping, and calling/equipping. The team is looking for 20 churches to join its pilot program

Rev. Joyce Borger,
CRC Worship
Ministries director.



"to aid in a congregation's self-reflection and ministry planning ... while still leaving room for the messiness and unpredictability [of following] the Holy Spirit."

"This is our way of 'trial and erroring' into developing tools to walk alongside congregations," said Hielema.

Synod 2015 also received a presentation from the CRC's new Worship Ministries team. Leaders



Syd Hielema, Faith Formation
Ministries team leader.

of that team reported to synod on progress toward their goal of "networking, strengthening, and resourcing." Delegates heard that Worship Ministries invited 12 churches to a networking event where they discussed the joys and struggles of worship. Later, the team hosted a training session on sound and visual technology for 10 churches. The team is providing recordings of the training sessions online so other congregations can benefit from them.

—Roxanne Van Farowe
and Julie Jansen

Recycling at Dordt College a Work in Progress

When it was time to toss an empty water bottle at Synod 2015, finding a blue recycling bin was a challenge. The building where synod met did not offer recycling services, nor did the dining hall or the outdoor trash receptacles. Blue bins were available, however, in the apartments and common areas of the dorms where delegates slept.

"[The lack of recycling bins] has bothered me," said Elder Karen Walker, Classis Atlantic Northeast, who carried empty water bottles to her dorm's recycling bins. "If we're going to be good stewards, recycling is a pretty simple way to do it."

"Often I would ask 'Where can I put this?' and there wasn't a place," said Rev. David Vroege, Classis Eastern Canada. Vroege would also like synod to reduce its use of disposable products.

The college's Student Forum is working on a sustainability plan, Dordt College leaders said.

"[Environmental sustainability] is an area we're working to improve in collaboration with the students," said Howard Wilson, chief administrative officer of Dordt College. "There is a desire for an increased level of consciousness in the community."

—Roxanne Van Farowe



Often trash cans were the only place to put empty water bottles.

Synod 2015 Welcomes Colin Watson to Executive Staff

Synod 2015 welcomed Colin Watson, Sr., recently appointed director of ministries and administration for the Christian Reformed Church.

"This has been quite a journey for me," said Watson. "I'm an immigrant from the former British Guiana [now Guyana]. I was born in a place smaller than Sioux Center, and the town was called New Amsterdam. God has a sense of humor."

Since 1985, Watson and his family have worshiped at Madison Avenue CRC in Paterson, N.J., where he led the men's ministry and his wife led the women's ministry. Watson was executive minister at the church for five years. Previously he worked in senior leadership at several large companies; he became a senior vice president at Keyspan, a major natural gas distributor.



Colin Watson, Sr., is the director of ministries and administration for the CRC.

Since retiring in 2005, he has given his leadership to many corporate and nonprofit boards and committees, including as head of the CRC's Diversity and Leadership Inclusion Working Group and president of the Christian Reformed World Missions board.

Watson said his new task will be "ensuring that [staff] support every [CRC] church throughout North America."

"I love the diversity that I see when I look out on this group," he told the delegates. "The history of our church is the history of each and every individual, each and every people group represented. God calls us to unity." —Roxanne Van Farowe



Young Adults to Join Board of Trustees

Synod 2015 agreed that the perspective of young adults needs to be heard at the Board of Trustees' meetings as well as at synod. Two young adult representatives will be appointed to the board for two-year terms.

"Young adults are the future leadership of the Christian Reformed Church," stated the background information for the new policy. "Their voices are important for the decisions regarding strategic priorities for the denomination." The young adults will work on the faith formation and strategic planning subcommittees. Appointees will have previously been to synod as a representative.

—Roxanne Van Farowe

President Bruce Persenaire: "I'd like to thank our deacon advisors, who we've now made obsolete."

Deacon advisor: "Thank you!"

Banner Editor Bob De Moor Says Farewell

At Synod 2015, Rev. Bob De Moor, retiring editor of *The Banner*, looked back at some of the changes in his 11-year tenure and looked forward to where *The Banner* and the denomination might go in the future.

When De Moor took over as editor, *The Banner* was a subscription magazine with about 20,000 subscribers, a number that had been steadily diminishing for years. It soon became an every-household magazine, sent without charge to all the members of the Christian Reformed Church. The image used at the time, said De Moor, was everyone sitting around the “kitchen table” talking—including, he added, “Brother Jesus.”



Rev. Bob De Moor bids farewell to synod.

He told how the conversation had shifted from a time when editors of *The Banner* spoke with great authority to today, when the conversation has many voices. Not everyone agreed with each other

or was comfortable with what was being said, he said. *The Banner* could no longer be the authoritative “voice of the CRC.”

De Moor said that it became increasingly necessary “to make

it very clear that [not every voice] is the voice of *The Banner*.” He said that he had not always made the right judgments in this regard: “Last year I came to synod and admitted and confessed that I had made some editorial blunders.”

The print *Banner* has been remarkably successful, De Moor said. Marketing surveys conducted by an outside group reveal that over 90 percent of the people to whom *The Banner* is sent read some or all of it. It has a more than 70 percent pass-along rate, people passing it along to friends and family.

But now, De Moor said, the real *Banner* is [no longer] the print *Banner*. “The real *Banner* is online. [Online] is where *The Banner* lives.”

It was, he said, “Adapt or die.” Under his leadership, *The Banner* established and grew its online presence. But, he added, this is no longer enough. The new leadership needs to enhance the presence of *The Banner* in the various social media, mentioning Twitter and Facebook. He confessed, “I do not have a Twitter account. I

Ryskamp Bids Synod 2015 Farewell



Andrew Ryskamp at the testimonial banquet.

Andrew Ryskamp delivered a farewell speech to Synod 2015 as he retires from a 41-year career with World Renew, the last 17 spent as director of World Renew-U.S.

Ryskamp said his work with World Renew was the beginning of a spiritual growth journey. “It became part of my heart to do anything I could to lessen the suffering of others,” he told delegates.

Since he joined the organization in 1974, Ryskamp has served as an agronomist in Bangladesh, a field director in the Philippines and Sierra Leone, director of diaconal ministries-U.S., and finally director of World Renew-U.S.

Ryskamp spoke of doors he sees God opening. “God has opened doors not only for me but for World Renew. God is also opening doors for the Christian Reformed Church as a denomination. The heart that everyone has for serving the church has touched me deeply,” he said. World Renew has grown significantly since Ryskamp joined the organization.

“I’ve come to love many of you and the relationships we’ve formed,” he concluded. “I praise God for giving us the courage to walk through the doors he’s opened for us.”

—Julie Jansen

don't have a Facebook account." But, he observed, the young of our societies have now moved beyond these.

The shift he had in mind affects not only *The Banner* but the denomination and, especially, local churches. Local churches, he observed, often struggle to effectively reach young people. He said that churches should try new forms: "Maybe the half-hour homily is not the way to keep the young people." Perhaps, he added, we should sing a few songs and then announce, "Brothers and sisters, let us Twitter."

The point, he said, is not that the message has changed, but that God is always ahead of us. As the missionaries in the book of Acts observed, the Holy Spirit had gone ahead. De Moor said, "Jesus is Lord also over the Internet."

De Moor will return to full time parish ministry at the end of August.

—Clayton Libolt

Delegate Michael Ten Haken: "This form should be condensed, and then it will be much more useful in the churches. People's attention span isn't that great."

Reporter Richard Bodini: "I lost you somewhere there."

Report from the Board of Trustees: By God's Grace, We've Made Tremendous Progress



Rev. Scott Greenway, vice president of the Board of Trustees.

Rev. Scott Greenway, vice president of the Board of Trustees of the Christian Reformed Church, told delegates at Synod 2015 that through five years of significant change, some of it painful, God has provided in amazing ways. The 30-member board meets three times a year to do the work of synod in between its annual meetings.

"In five years, I've served alongside three executive directors," Greenway said. "There have been other changes in senior administration."

Greenway named many people who have become senior leaders in the denomination in the past five years, including Calvin College president Michael Le Roy, executive director Steven Timmermans, director of ministries and administration Colin Watson, Canadian ministries director Darren Roorda, as well as new directors in three agencies.

"That's a lot of change in a short period of time," Greenway said. "By the grace of God we've made tremendous progress."

Providence is a good Reformed word, Greenway said. He told delegates that he has witnessed God's hand providing again and again, and that can give us great hope for the future. "We can move forward boldly with confidence," he said. "We know God's hand will provide. I've witnessed it. I'm grateful for it."

—Gayla R. Postma

Joel Boot Imparts Words of Wisdom to Synod 2015

Now that the Christian Reformed Church has finally hired both an executive director and a director of ministries and administration, Rev. Joel Boot can step into retirement.

What began as a two-year assignment stretched into four years: Boot served as interim executive director from 2011 to 2014 and as interim director of ministries and administration from 2014 to 2015.

Boot gave words of advice to the church in his parting address to Synod 2015, the CRC's annual leadership gathering.

"I've been telling the Christian Reformed Church that the ground is shaking beneath our feet, but God is the still point in a trembling universe," he said.



Rev. Joel Boot: "When you're a leader, be a better follower."

Boot shared 10 suggestions for a life of ministry, including the following: When you're a leader,

be extra sure to be an even better follower. Remember that the church is bigger than we are, and God is bigger than both. And never forget that the word *pastor* must be a verb before it earns the right to be a noun.

"Can I plead with the church that we also remember just to be nice?" he added. "We need not agree when we discuss, and we must never be angry."

Synod's president, Bruce Perse-naire, addressed Boot: "I thank you that you brought your pastor's heart [to denominational leadership]. Thank you for getting us off shaky ground and getting us on a little more solid ground."

—Roxanne Van Farowe

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Reporter, after being asked a question: "Sorry, I was in la-la-land, Mr. President."

President Bruce Persenaire: "I'm trying to remember the question myself. Perhaps I was in la-la-land too."



Cousins Meet for First Time at Synod

First cousins Jean Lauziere, Classis Eastern Canada, and Trena Boonstra, a deacon advisor from California, met for the first time at Synod 2015.



Sisters in Ministry

Jenna Brandsen (right) was presented as a candidate for ministry at Synod 2015. Her mentor, Rev. Heidi De Jonge of Classis Quinte, was a delegate. "I'm just overwhelmed with gratitude that we get to stand on a stage together today," De Jonge said.



Delegates Immigrated on Same Ship

Delegates Nelly Eyk of Classis Alberta South/Saskatchewan and Dan Baarda of Classis Niagara discovered that they both immigrated to Canada from the Netherlands on the same ship. They traveled on the *Volendam* in June 1951. They were both four years old at the time.



Husband, Wife Both Delegates

Revs. Sid and Adriana Sybenga made synod history. The first husband and wife pair to be synod delegates, they were delegated from Classis Greater Los Angeles.



Same Name, No Relation

Rick and Richard Vanderwall never met before Synod 2015, but found themselves at the same delegate table with the same name.



Nine Female Pastors at Synod 2015

After having no female pastors delegated to synod last year, Synod 2015 delegates included nine of them. They were (l-r): Revs. Adriana Sybenga, Bonny Mulder-Behnia, Mary Stegink, Heidi De Jonge, Meg Jenista, Susan LaClear, Willemina Zwart, Rita Klein-Geltink, and Heather Strooboscher.



Father, Son Both Delegates

Lyle Ten Haken, an elder from Classis Minnkota (right), attended synod with his son, Rev. Michael Ten Haken from Classis Lake Superior.



Father-Daughter Delegates

Rev. Heidi DeJonge, Classis Quinte, and her dad, Rev. Jim Petersen, Classis Northern Illinois, were delegates together for the first time. They also served on the same advisory committee.

Reporter Richard Bodini: "They say when you don't know what to say, don't say anything."

President Bruce Persenaire: "That's wise."



Synod's Oldest and Youngest Delegates

Synod 2015's oldest and youngest delegates are separated in age by 61 years. Elder Don Dykstra, Classis Illiana, is 87; Elder Eric Kamstra, Classis Grand Rapids South, is 27.

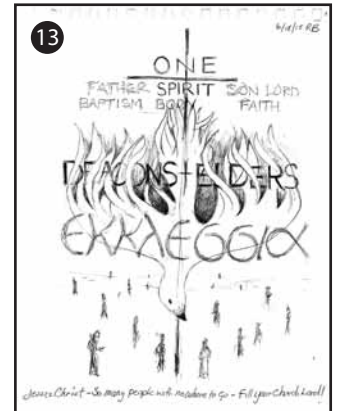
This was Dykstra's 15th synod. It was Kamstra's second. He wasn't a delegate the first time. His first time at synod was when he was 2 years old—his father attended Synod 1991 and brought along the family, including Eric and two brothers.

NEWS SYNOD 2015

1. Violinist Lisa Miedema with husband, Bradley Miedema, organist.
2. All the delegates and advisors for Synod 2015.
3. IT staff took a break to have a barbecue.
4. Delegates pray over ministry candidate Jenna Brandsen.
5. Dordt College welcomed Synod 2015 to its campus.
6. Tractors on display for the president's picnic.
7. Darrin Compagner (left) and John Mondt enjoyed Sunday night lawn games.
8. One of the coffee breaks was sponsored by Ministry in Canada.
9. Look who wished he hadn't come to synod!
10. Communications staffer Tim Postuma enjoying some time off.
11. IT staff, including Jim Boldenow (r), were on hand to help delegates with computer problems.
12. An orchestra of students and professionals from Christian Reformed churches in Sioux Center at the Sunday synod worship service.
- 13, 14. Delegate Randy Beumer sketched during opening worship each morning at synod.



LOOK WHO CAME TO SYNOD 2015



Chaplains Provide ‘Incarnational Ministry’

by Chris Meehan



LeRae Kuperus works closely with staff who are on the front lines responding to the needs of troubled young people at Wedgwood Christian Services in Grand Rapids, Mich.

As spiritual director of Wedgwood, Kuperus focuses on helping staff—including chaplains—with the difficult and challenging job of reaching out to young people in pain. Many of them are victims of physical abuse, neglect, and/or sexual abuse.

Wedgwood, one of the largest facilities of its kind in West Michigan, provides more

than 20 prevention, education, and residential treatment services and programs.

“What we are doing is offering an incarnational ministry to people,” said Kuperus, who served for several years as a residential chaplain working with clients and families before assuming her current role.

“It is Christ’s love that will ultimately bring hope and healing to people who desperately need it. We are armed with his simple assurance, ‘I am with you.’”

Being with people dealing with trouble and crisis is what the Christian

Reformed Church’s chaplains such as Kuperus are asked to do, said Ron Klimp, director of the CRC’s Office of Chaplaincy & Care.

These 130-plus chaplains are sometimes referred to as “spiritual first responders,” “critical incident caregivers,” “religious EMTs,” or “specialists in institutional pastoral care,” said Klimp.

CRC chaplains have a theological education and ordination, plus at least 800 hours of additional training in Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) or equivalent. They also complete an appli-

“ It is Christ’s love that will bring hope and healing to people who desperately need it. ”

cation and interview process with the Office of Chaplaincy & Care.

“They then commit themselves to a life of being with, and caring for, people in crisis,” said Klimp.

Chaplains serve in a variety of settings—from the prison to the Pentagon; from a cruise ship to the corporate boardroom—serving the emotional and spiritual needs of thousands of individuals and families in crisis every week.

Klimp said the Walcott family helps to tell the story of the ministry.

“They are three in one—not the Trinity, but a family of chaplains,” he says.

Tom Walcott has been a Navy chaplain since 1996. He has worked in the Pentagon on the staff of the Chief of Chaplains and earned the rank of captain (O-6) while serving the Coast Guard in Miami and now the Naval base in Norfolk, Virginia.



Tom and Jaci Walcott



Ron Klimp

Quick Facts about Chaplaincy & Care

- CRC chaplains make up more than 10 percent of the denomination’s ordained clergy.
- They provide \$10 million of ministry to individuals and families in crisis—all paid for by other agencies, employers, and institutions.

Please pray for the 130-plus men and women who bring the love and grace of Christ to people in crisis day after day, month after month, year after year.

Pray that they will be protected from harm, uplifted by grace, and that many will follow them into this specialized and growing arena of ministry outside of the local church.

—Ron Klimp

“The youngest of his three sons, Caleb, decided to enter seminary after finishing college,” Klimp said. “He then chose to become invested in CPE courses—basic training for chaplains—and became an endorsed chaplain in June 2014.”

He is now serving at Holland Hospice in Holland, Mich. Along the way, Tom’s wife, Jaci, also became interested in chaplaincy. She began taking CPE through a local hospice provider.

She hopes to complete her fourth unit this summer and seek ordination/endorsement as a chaplain, possibly also continuing to serve in a hospice or hospital setting.

“Our chaplains have the heart to serve people in many different situations,” said

Klimp. “They provide a ministry of presence in which they reach out to others and can get so much in return.”

When she thinks of her many years working with Wedgwood clients, Kuperus said the word “courage” comes to mind.

She said she appreciates how much courage she sees in the lives of clients and feels grateful she has had a chance to walk with them through their pain.

“Our clients learn from us,” she said. “But we also learn from our clients. It takes courage to think differently about God, to ask hard questions of faith, and believe that trust and hope in him are possible.” ■



Chris Meehan is news and media manager for CRC Communications.

Church Visiting: A New Approach to a Long-Standing Practice

by Chris Meehan

One church visitor reported sitting down with a church council where everything seemed to be going fine. But a week later, the church visitor learned that the council wanted to separate from its pastor.

Clearly, the council viewed the church visit—part of a long-standing tradition in the Christian Reformed Church—as perfunctory, noted Rev. Norm Thomsma, director of the Christian Reformed Office of Pastor-Church Relations.

They didn’t disclose what was really going on in the congregation.

Church visitors are two ministers—or one minister and an elder—who are appointed by each classis to visit the church councils within that classis. The Church Order specifies that church visitors should be “experienced and competent officebearers.”

That experience isn’t unusual, Thomsma said. “Increasingly, churches had



Stan Koster, Rodger Rice, Carl Kamaraad, and Norm Thomsma speak about pilot project.

begun to see a visit from a church visitor as an ineffective obligation.”

He said there are many reasons for this. Some churches view the church visitors as a sort of denominational police; others prefer to sort out their challenges on their own.

But that is starting to change as the CRC reevaluates its approach to and purpose for church visiting. Some churches are starting to see the benefit of having church visitors come alongside them.

Church visitors schedule the visits and often allow for a wide-ranging discussion on all aspects of a congregation’s ministry. After a visit, they report back, informing classis of the status of and issues facing a local church.

In addition, churches are free to call on them whenever serious problems arise.

Although church visitors are supposed to visit each church at least once a year, that frequency had fallen off, Thomsma noted. And without the annual visits and



Derek Atkins and Holly Koons talk about church visiting.

close relationships, problems tended to reach a crisis stage before classis or the denomination became aware of the situation.

But Thomsma said there are encouraging trends. “As Pastor-Church Relations works with churches, we sense that the trend toward congregationalism is waning, and there is a growing appreciation within congregations of the need to support one another and learn from each other.”

This has contributed to the energy surrounding the Better Together Project (see sidebar, p. 53).

It appears that the Better Together work is riding a wave of renewed interest in ways that classes (groups of regionally

Church Visiting Support Located in Pastor-Church Relations

One of the recommendations that came out of the Better Together Project was that the practice of church visiting be connected to one of the denominational offices for mutual learning, support, and the development of best practices.

Recently the denominational administration asked the Office of Pastor-Church Relations (PCR) to include in their mandate the support and resourcing of classis church visitors. As PCR develops its strategic plan going forward, this new responsibility will be part of that plan.

—by Norm Thomsma, director of Pastor-Church Relations

gathered churches) might contribute to thriving congregations in the Christian Reformed Church, Thomasma said. “We are starting to see a revival of interest in working together, and church visiting is part of this.”

A growing number of separations between pastors and churches led Synod 2012 to request that Pastor-Church Relations find ways to get involved earlier. Part of the strategy that developed was to take another look at the church visitor process.

Church visitors connect the classis, the local churches, and their officebearers for strengthening, care, and accountability, Thomasma noted. Church visitors can get a sense of the issues a church is facing in its ministry.

One way that church visiting is gaining a fresh appearance is in a pilot project involving four classes in West Michigan: Holland, Kalamazoo, Grand Rapids East, and Zeeland. The pilot is part of the Better Together Project.

“This spring I sat with three experienced leaders whose enthusiasm for revisiting and revisioning church visiting is contagious,” said Thomasma. “They talked of their work in imagining and experimenting with church visiting.”

Rodger Rice, Stan Koster, and Carl Kammeraad are working with the four classes in helping them review the process and in finding ways in which church visiting can become more meaningful for individual churches. ■

—by Chris Meehan

The Better Together Project

Synod 2012 noted the rising number of separations between congregations and their pastors and instructed the Board of Trustees (BOT) to address this issue.

At the board's request, the administration asked the Office of Pastor-Church Relations (PCR) to develop recommendations for action steps. Pastor-Church Relations formed the Better Together Delivery Team to determine how better to equip classical leaders for helping churches and their pastors build strong, healthy relationships.

To date, the delivery team has connected with more than 400 leaders from 44 classes. The focus has been on church visitors, regional pastors, stated clerks, mentors, and classical counselors.

For a copy of the Findings document, which includes a summary of what has been discovered, please contact Lis Van Harten at Ivanharten@crcna.org.

—by Lis Van Harten, Better Together Team Leader

Safe Place = Honesty

“There’s a lot of secrecy and shame around church problems. By the time the problems are brought to light, it’s too late.”

“If a problem arose that I didn’t know how to deal with, I’d be scared to death.”

These comments came a few months ago from a gathering of church visitors from seven classes.

Gathered by the Better Together Delivery Team (see sidebar), the church visitors had a chance for an open, honest conversation about the issues and challenges they face when visiting churches.

After introductions and an overview of the Better Together project, the church visitors were divided into two groups and sent to separate

rooms. They were assured that everything they said would only be used anonymously.

The plan was to walk the church visitors through a number of questions. But the first question, “Tell us a little about what you do as church visitor,” was all that was needed.

“I really struggled when I was asked to be a church visitor because I didn’t fit the mold,” one said. Another said, “I’ve always struggled with the relevancy of the whole process of church visiting.”

A number of suggestions were offered regarding the tradition of church visiting.

Some church visitors are engaging in a more supportive and resourcing role rather

than what is sometimes seen as a policing role.

One classis is using coaching teams, with one church visitor playing a coaching role while the other has a more traditional role.

Another classis has changed how churches give their reports at classis meetings. They now include things that are going well and things that need prayer.

“When churches made this switch to self-reporting, they became more honest,” said one person.

From the conversations with these church visitors and many others who were interviewed over the phone, the delivery team created a list of recommendations regarding church visiting.

Recommendations included providing training and developing materials to better equip church visitors, and working toward rebranding church visiting to reflect the healthy, relational aspect of the task and the role of church visitor.

Those recommendations were passed along to the Office of Pastor-Church Relations.

One church visitor said, “One of the strengths of church visiting is the sense that we’re supposed to be in this together. We’re not standing alone. This is a good thing.” ■

—by Lis Van Harten,
Better Together Delivery
Team Leader

God Is Blessing Us

Recently I addressed Synod 2015 on the state of our church.

My remarks were scheduled early in the week-long assembly, so they arose out of my experiences during the past 11 months as executive director—not out of my experiences this year at synod. But I'm happy to report that my pre-synod assessments—that God's blessings are evident in exceeding greatness among us—were validated time and time again during the days of Synod 2015.

I began by sharing two misconceptions that I often hear. These misconceptions have a way of clouding a clear view of what God has done, is doing, and will do in and through the Christian Reformed Church, so I wanted to set the record straight.

The first misconception is that the Christian Reformed Church is shrinking. The second is that Ministry Shares are declining. Let me explain.

Most of us see the denomination from a singular vantage point—one specific window. If we are in a church that is experiencing explosive growth,

we might assume that's the story throughout the CRC. Or, if we are in a declining church, we might believe that the whole CRC is shrinking—a view that is reinforced when we hear reports in the media that Christianity in North America is wasting away.

But if we look at the data in our *Yearbook*, there are more members in the CRC now than there were last year, and the year before that, as shown in the top graphic above.

Of course, faithfulness isn't captured by a trend line or a set of numbers. But I wanted to share with synod, and now with you, that it isn't accurate to say we're shrinking. God is blessing us, especially when we consider that decades ago, our growth—while looking spectacular at times—was boosted by bunches of immigrants and batches of babies, not by evangelism and church planting.

The second misconception is that Ministry Shares—our unique way of funding the ministries we commit to doing together—are shrinking. I used the second graphic to show that over the last number of years, the amount of Ministry Shares received has been relatively stable.

While these data are not adjusted for inflation, changes in the number of adult confessing members, etc., the point is that we haven't plunged over a cliff and no pool has dried up. Congregations have consistently provided \$24 to \$25 million each year for our shared ministries.

There are issues we need to address: that while some churches give all or most of their Ministry Shares commitment, other churches give very little. That a significant number of dollars are requested but not received, requiring greater reliance on costly fundraising. That some churches struggle to meet the Ministry Shares commitments. But our commitment to serve God together remains strong.

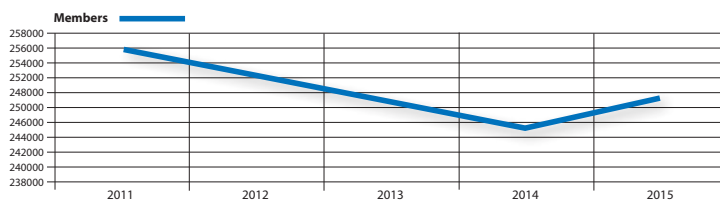
During the week I spent at synod I saw again and again the evidences of God's blessings

- in video clips that showed our churches and members serving God at home and around the world;
- in young adults who led us in stirring and inspirational worship;
- in visionary leadership that is finding better ways of working together, such as joining two mission agencies in a way that provides even more effective outreach;
- in the pioneering work of Calvin Theological Seminary in the areas of Hispanic leadership development and prison ministry;
- in vibrant leaders such as Carol Bremer-Bennett who will not only continue the good work God has been doing in and through us, but perhaps also point us in new directions.

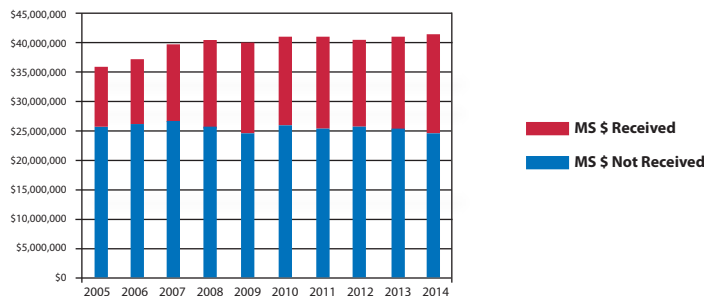
These are just a few signs of the ways God is blessing us. My hope is that we all will take note of his blessings each and every day, not only during the week that synod meets.

As the old hymn says, "Count your blessings; name them one by one." Let's not stop counting.

To God be the glory! ■



2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
255,706	251,727	248,258	245,217	249,227



MS \$ Received
MS \$ Not Received



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

OUT AND ABOUT

Joint Earthquake Response Brings Hope to Nepal

Ram Singh, a seminary graduate in Nepal, vividly recalled how his sisters were in church when the 7.8 magnitude earthquake struck on April 25. The church collapsed around them, and they were completely buried under the rubble, along with 45 other members of the church.

Slowly, Ram's sisters crawled toward a small light and eventually escaped with only minor bruises. Unfortunately, their pastor and 16 other church members did not survive.

Ram's story is not different from those of millions of others who were affected by Nepal's largest earthquake in more than 80 years. In the midst of this tragedy, however, the Christian Reformed Church is sharing God's love with people in Nepal.

Hearing of the need for food and other assistance from people like Ram, World Renew combined its expertise in inter-

national disaster response with the well-established networks of Christian Reformed World Missions staff in Nepal to respond quickly.

"Many people died, and many new Christians lost

their homes," said a CRWM staff member in Nepal who leads a network of eight church plants. "Our church members were severely affected. Many lost their homes and had to take shelter under temporary sheds."

Ram was a student at Evangelical Presbyterian Theological Seminary (EPTS), where several CRWM staff serve. This established connection opened the door for World Renew to respond quickly with relief efforts for the homes in Ram's village and thousands of other households.



Earthquake devastation.

It took three days before enough of the mudslides were cleared from the road for Ram to travel to his village. When he arrived, he discovered that two of his family members did not survive, and almost all of the homes were destroyed.

Through disaster response training and funds provided through World Renew, Ram and a local response team were able to distribute clean water; tarps; and food assistance, including cooking oil, rice, and salt to provide the first wave of relief.

The assistance given by the combined response team that included World Renew, CRWM, and local church partners was in many cases the first relief the people from these villages received. This made it even more difficult when their limited supplies ran out.

"After everything was gone, we had to turn many people away," remembered a team member. "That was so heartbreaking. About 70 people had filtered down from the mountains from various villages

that we could not feed. No government aid had come yet."

Aside from initial restoration, many earthquake survivors need continued healing and support. Fear of further tremors and collapsed buildings returned after the country had a second large earthquake on May 12 (7.3 magnitude).

World Renew expects to provide at least three months of food supplies, tarps, ropes, blankets, hygiene supplies, and water filters to those most in need. It is also coordinating with the Integral Alliance, a global network of 22 Christian relief and development organizations, to address long-term needs for psychosocial support, the reconstruction of homes, and the restoration of livelihoods.

CRWM staff will continue to work with churches and individuals in Nepal, providing spiritual support during this time of trauma. ■

—by Brian Clark, World Missions, and Kristen deRoo Vanderberg, World Renew



Ram Singh

Working with Kids to Revise a Bible Translation

Yvonne Hoekstra Van Ee's retirement took a fascinating turn as she partnered with Holland, Mich., third-graders to produce a revised translation of the New International Version of the Bible.

Always an innovator in her Calvin College classroom, where she taught early childhood education, Van Ee was asked by Zondervan Publishing's Zonderkidz division to help with a revision of the New

International Reader's Version (NIRV) first published in 1995.

Van Ee was asked to join a team of theologians as an education specialist.

The team, headed by Michael Williams, professor of Old Testament at Calvin Theological Seminary, reviewed sentence length and word usage.

They sought to provide an accurate and clear translation at a third-grade reading level.

The team tested its work by enlisting the help of third-graders, and Van Ee chose Rose Park Christian Elementary School in Holland.

Van Ee would test a translated sentence by giving the students limited choices of words or phrases that could be used in a sentence. They also read selected passages for clarity.

"For me, the experience was incredible," she said. "On one hand I listened to theologians debate the meaning of words or phrases. . . . On the other hand I had the joy of working with young children as they excitedly participated in testing the wording of Bible passages." ■

—by *Michael Van Denend*,
Calvin College



Yvonne Hoekstra Van Ee, Calvin College emerita professor of education.

Calvin Seminary Joins Angola Inmates for Service

Linked by cameras and microphones, the inmates who are part of the chapel at Angola State Prison in Louisiana joined with the community of Calvin Seminary in the seminary chapel.

The service started as John Rottman, a professor of preaching at Calvin, welcomed these communities as one body of worship.

From Angola, Gary Sumrall gave an opening reflection based on Numbers 11 that set the tone for worship. Then he spoke a simple prayer: "God, we are grateful for the ways you have lifted the yoke of oppression from Angola. Help us to be attuned to you and to follow."

The first worship song sung in Louisiana and in Michigan was an old favorite—"Jesus Paid It All."

Students who had visited Angola a few months earlier as part of a program overseen by Rottman recognized the faces of prisoner friends they had met.



Calvin seminarians worship with Angola inmates.

Angola pastor Eric Matthews preached a sermon that was biblical, contextual, and authentic—all the marks of solid preaching that Calvin seminarians are taught. Referencing a text from Revelation 3 about the church at Laodicea being lukewarm, he drew a hearty laugh when he said, "We're seminarians here—let's see what the Greek says about this word 'spit'."

The service continued with a testimony from an inmate who found at Angola the love he had been looking for his whole life. It ended with a song led by Calvin seminarians.

Voices blended between Grand Rapids and Angola as the worshipers experienced the bond of the Holy Spirit. ■

—*Jinny De Jong*,
Calvin Theological Seminary

You add.
God multiplies.



Pastors show off their plaques celebrating years of service.

Black Pastors Recognized at Conference

Rev. Denise Posie thought of the song “We’ve Come This Far by Faith” as she stood with other black pastors being recognized at the Black & Reformed Conference held at a church in Muskegon, Mich.

“We’ve persevered, been steadfast, immovable, and held each other up at times,” she said.

Dr. Steven Timmermans, executive director of the Christian Reformed Church, recognized Posie and 13 other CRC black pastors with service of 15 years or longer with plaques.”

“Being honored was good for the young people in the audience to see us. The dream is that one day they will be in leadership in the CRC,” said Posie, who served an urban church before becoming a consultant with the CRC’s Pastor-Church Relations Office.

After the presentation of plaques, tulips symbolizing the Black & Reformed tradition were given to the pastors. Other ministers present with fewer than 15 years of service were also recognized.

“These are people we needed to say thank you to,” said Rev. Bob Price, director of the urban ministries team for Christian Reformed Home Missions.

“The historic piece is noteworthy. We need to remember that those who have labored in this denomination are not that many.” ■

—by Chris Meehan, CRC Communications

Silent Listener Comes Back to Christ

Now in his 80s, Nagahiko Kuroda was baptized when he was very young. But he fell away from church life and stayed away for most of his life.

Even though he stopped going to church, Kuroda continued to listen to Back to God Ministries International’s Japanese broadcast.

“My only source of Christian life came from the radio,” he told BTGMI Japanese ministry leader Rev. Masao Yamashita.

Kuroda sent a letter to BTGMI Japanese staff in November 1990 saying he was listening. Between then and 2004, he contacted the staff many times. “Then we lost contact with him,” said Yamashita.

However, Kuroda had picked up the broadcast on the Internet and continued to listen.

At the beginning of 2015, he showed up at the worship services of Sendai Reformed Church. That’s how he learned about the March 21 Discovery Bible Study at Sendai church, sponsored by BTGMI’s Japanese ministry and its partner, Christian Reformed World Missions.

He attended the Bible study, where he said he was blessed by God’s Word and Christian fellowship.

“As my life is coming near the end, I have repented and returned to the Lord,” Kuroda told Rev. Yamashita. ■

—by Nancy Vander Meer,
Back to God Ministries International



Mr. Kuroda found peace in a BTGMI Bible study.

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

Why I Am Still Christian Reformed

In your 20s or 30s? We want to hear what's on your mind as it relates to living out your faith in today's world. Please send manuscripts (600 words) to editorial@thebanner.org. (And, no, you don't have to be ordained!)

THE ISSUE OF PEOPLE LEAVING the church has an impact on many denominations, and ours is no exception. At its height, the CRCNA had around 300,000 members, but since the secession of many conservatives leaving and joining the United Reformed Churches, the CRC has been steadily losing members. In the last 25 years alone, the CRC has lost about 20 percent of its membership. And it seems that this pattern is unlikely to change for our denomination anytime soon.

As I reflect upon people leaving the church and the membership decline in my local Christian Reformed congregation, it makes me wonder: Why do I remain in my church even though there are many things I dislike about it? In a society that promotes no-fault divorce and doing whatever makes you happy, why not also apply this attitude to spirituality and church membership?

Like many Dutch-Canadian kids, I was born, baptized, and professed my faith in the CRC, and I attended the local Christian schools. With my blonde hair and blue eyes, I was pretty much the poster child for traditional Dutch Protestantism.

But like many young people entering high school, I began a quest of spiritual wandering. I began asking more questions about what it meant to be Christian, to be Reformed, and to be a church. In response to my questioning I thought about joining a number of different denominations. Around this time, I also began feeling a call to the ministry.

Even though I had no idea what denomination I would seek to be ordained in, I was determined never to be one of those “hyper-Calvinists” who believed that God was sovereign and could actually send anyone he wanted to hell. I spoke to my pastor about the call to ministry, and he encouraged me

to read *Putting Amazing Back Into Grace: Embracing the Heart of the Gospel* by Michael Horton. Immediately after reading the book, I was completely convinced that Calvinism was, as Benjamin Warfield wrote, “just religion in its purity.”

After my “born-again conversion” back to Reformed theology, I began critiquing my denomination in an effort to determine how “pure” it was. I saw that the CRC was moving away from what many perceived as traditional theology. Many CRC churches no longer practiced catechism preaching. They began accepting women in office and admitting children at the Lord’s Supper. All of these things concerned me, and once again I began thinking about leaving my home denomination.

But I refuse to abandon the CRC. Why?

I’m still here because of two people. First, my pastor. As I sat in his office voicing my concerns about making profession of faith in the “liberal” CRC, he said, “The other Reformed denominations may be doctrinally sound, but if you join a church that has no problems, then that church does not need you.” The second person who influenced my decision to stay is Jessica Driesenga, program coordinator for Calvin Seminary’s Facing Your Future program in which high school students explore a call to ministry. She taught me to “shout where Scripture shouts and whisper where Scripture whispers.”

I realized from these conversations that yes, there are things I dislike about my own denomination. Yes, I am still a committed conservative. And yes, I do have concerns about the future of the CRC. But many of the “liberal” influences my denomination adheres to are issues that are really only worth whispering about. I have decided that I would rather be shouting that Jesus is Lord of every square inch with the Christian Reformed Church than shouting about one or two particular issues in another denomination. ■

Aren Plante is a grade 12 student at Hamilton District Christian High School in Ancaster, Ontario. This article is adapted from an article that first appeared on YALT’s Momentum blog, weareyalt.org.

NEXT



Many of the “liberal” influences my denomination adheres to are really only worth whispering about.

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!

One evening Ole and Lena were relaxing in their living room. Lena was knitting and Ole was reading the Bible. Ole said, "Lena, I just came to the conclusion that Noah was crazy."

"And how in the world did you come to that conclusion?" Lena asked.

Ole responded, "Well, I just think that nobody in their right mind would have taken those two skunks on the ark with him."

—Bill Kortmeyer

The sign in front of a Christian school in Calgary had an interesting combination of announcements. It read:

"God shapes the world by prayer."

"Progress reports, March 13."

—Herman Vanderburg

Bill: Deacon Jones gave a very moving speech last night at the congregational meeting.

John: I'm surprised.

Bill: Yes, before he had finished, half the congregation had moved out into the hall.

—Dick Bylsma

My grandson and his family came for a visit. When it was time to go home, his mother

said to their 3-year-old daughter, "Go and give Grandpa a goodbye kiss."

She replied to her mom, "No, I can't, because we're not married!"
—Albert Marcus

Working as a pediatric nurse, I had the difficult assignment of giving immunization shots to children. One day, I entered the examining room to give 4-year-old Lizzie her injection. "No, no, no!" she screamed.

"Lizzie," scolded her mother, "that's not polite behavior."

With that the girl yelled even louder, "No, thank you! No, thank you!"

—Bob Schuyler

A doctor, a lawyer, a priest, and a little boy were aboard a small private plane when suddenly the engine stopped. Before bailing out, the pilot grabbed a parachute and told the passengers they'd better jump. But only three parachutes remained.

The doctor grabbed one. Before jumping, he said, "I'm a doctor. I save lives, so I must live."

Next, the lawyer took one. Exiting, he said, "Lawyers are the smartest people in the world. I deserve to live."

The priest looked at the boy and said, "My son, I've lived a long life, and yours is still ahead. Take the last parachute, and go in peace."

"Don't worry, Father," the boy replied. "The smartest man in the world just took off with my backpack."

—Gerry Buurstra

Six-year-old Angie and her 4-year-old brother Joel were sitting together in church. Joel giggled, sang, and talked out loud. Finally his big sister had had enough. "You're not supposed to talk out loud in church," she said.

"Why not?" Joel asked. "Who's going to stop me?"

Angie pointed to the back of the church. "See those two men standing by the door? They're hushers!"

—Bruce D. Quinn

When I saw my pastor coming into my shop on Tuesday morning, I said to him, "That was the most horrible message I ever heard!"

"Which one," he asked, "the one on Sunday morning or Sunday evening?"

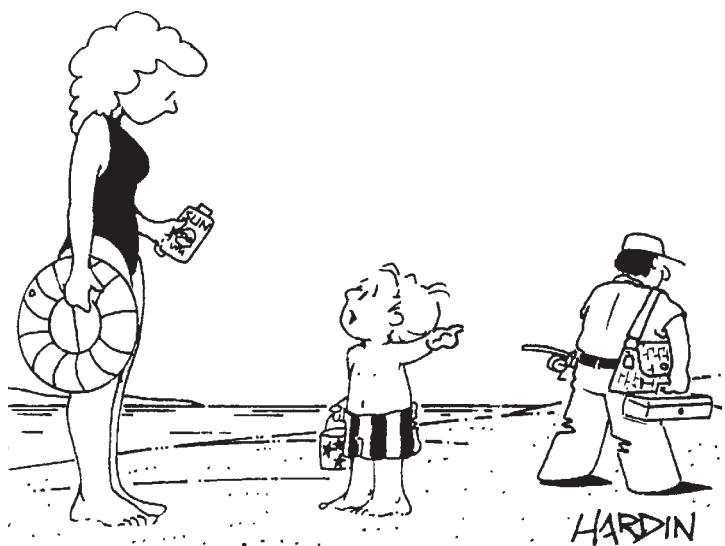
"Neither," I said. "It's the one you left on my answering machine on Monday morning that you were not coming because you were sick!"

—Barry Huisman

A customer was hassling an airline agent at the ticket counter, yelling and using bad language. The agent was polite and pleasant while the customer continued to abuse her. When the man finally left, the next person in line said to the agent, "Does that happen often? I can't believe how nice you were to him."

The agent smiled and said, "No problem. I took care of it. He's going to Detroit, but his bags are going to Bangkok."

—Jan Veltkamp



"I don't want to go in the water—that man said the fish were really biting today!"