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Feliz Navidad



2020 Year-End

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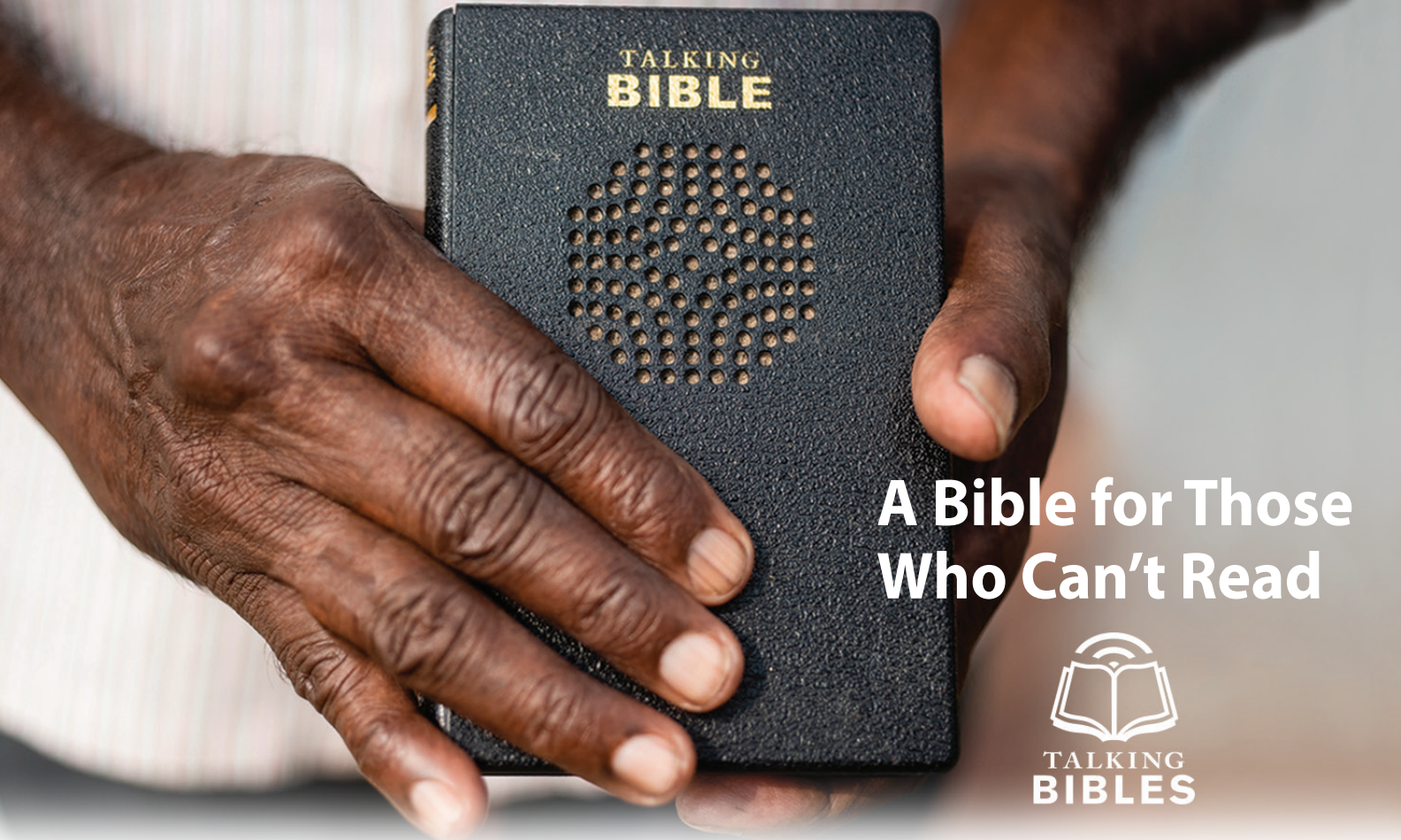
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— DR. FREDERIC DJONGALI
MOUNDOU, CHAD



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The Banner staff wishes a very blessed Christmas to our readers around the globe.

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

- » Michigan Church Members 'Adopt a Teacher'
- » Fires on West Coast Affect Christian Reformed Congregations
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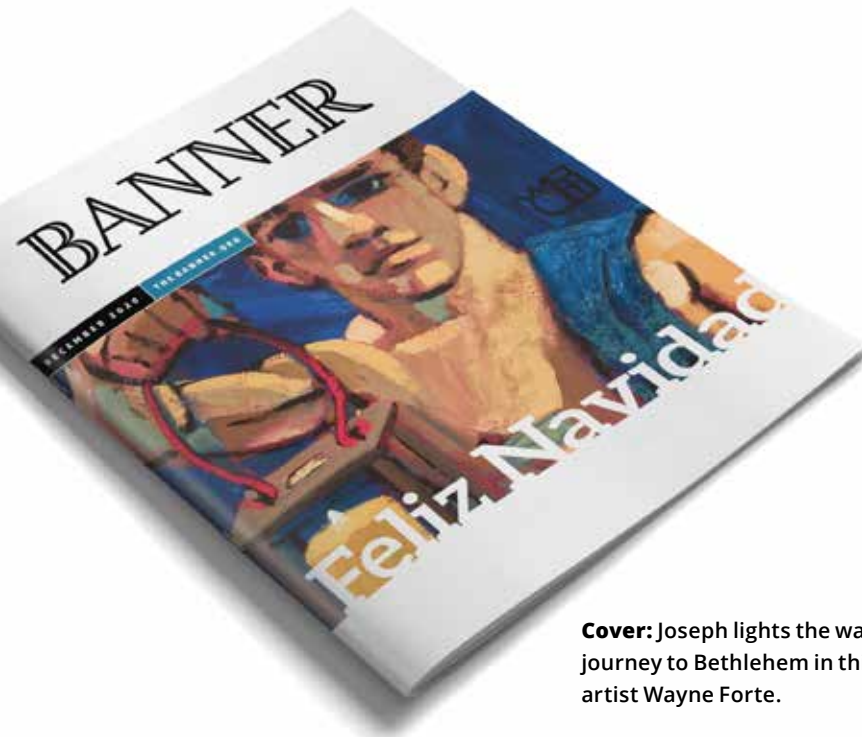


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BANNER

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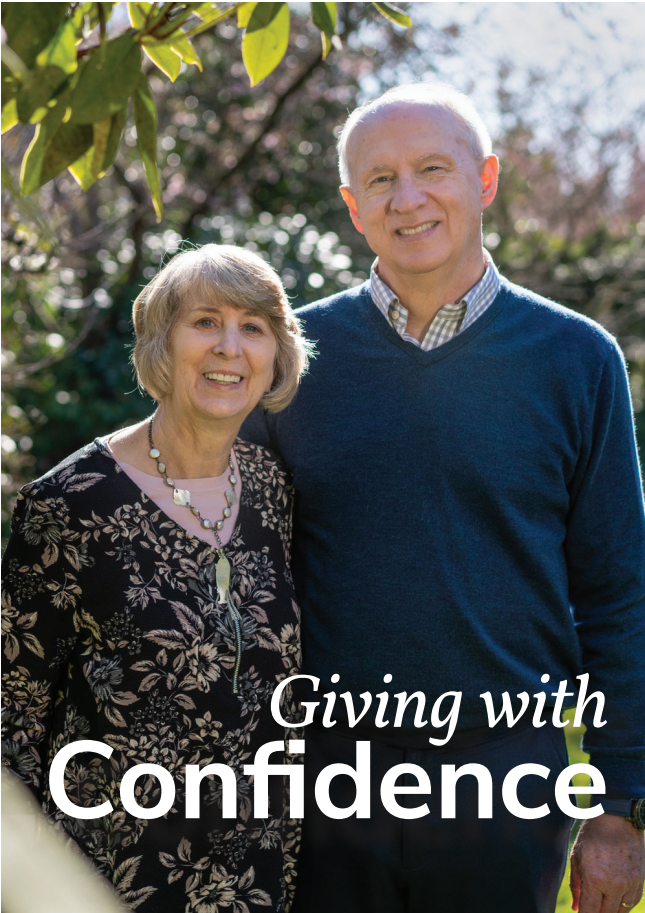
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Gifts from Outsiders

In this story, the “outsiders” were more righteous and more aligned with God’s purpose than the “insiders.”



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

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

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

WITH CHRISTMAS and Epiphany approaching, the story of the “wise men” from the East will once again grab our attention (Matt. 2:1-12). But I think Christians have not reflected deeply enough on the story’s radical significance.

First of all, “wise men” or “kings” are poor translations of the original Greek word “magi.” “Magicians” would be closer to the original meaning of pagans who specialize in soothsaying, divination, and astrology. The ancients might call them “sorcerers.” Some historians label them as the scientists of their time. For the ancient Jews, these Magi would be dabbling in detestable, even sinful, God-forbidden arts (Deut. 18:9-14).

Furthermore, the Magi were pagan Gentiles, likely Persians or Arabians. By all accounts, the ancient Jews would consider the Magi as religious and cultural outsiders, probably worthy of God’s judgment for their false religious beliefs and their sinful practice of reading signs.

Thus it is remarkable that Matthew recorded this story. Bible scholars believe Matthew was written primarily for a Jewish audience. Imagine how surprised the Jewish readers would be to find that God used these detestable pagan outsiders—even used their Eastern astrological “science”—to reveal the true divinity and kingship of Jesus as the Messiah. The contrast is striking. The Jewish leaders and chief priests, despite having God’s Scriptures, did not know or bow to the Messiah, and they needed the pagans to provoke them to search the old prophecies. But the Magi, through only God’s general revelation in the stars, sought the Christ and worshiped him. And Jesus received their gifts. In this story, the “outsiders” were more

righteous and more aligned with God’s purpose than the “insiders.”

The story of the Magi is a cautionary tale for us. Despite having and knowing the scriptures, are we, the Christian “insiders,” still missing out on God’s mission and God’s purposes? Should we be less quick to cancel “outsiders” with their insights, knowledge, and science simply because we have always thought them to be detestable and wrong? Could God actually use these detestable “outsiders” to bring valuable gifts to the church?

Church history shows that the church has often acted more like Herod than Jesus in regards to “outsiders.” We often learn from outsiders only enough to attack their insights and protect our own agendas and status quo. We have even sacrificed our own children, metaphorically speaking, in doing so. How many church members have been driven out of the church due to Christian judgmentalism about new ideas that are influenced by “outside” people and practices?

We in the Western church often fail to recognize that we already borrow much from our Western culture. Our Christianity is not pure. We often fail to genuinely learn from Eastern and Southern Christians. I recommend reading *Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes* and *Misreading Scripture with Individualist Eyes* to recognize how our biblical readings are already influenced, if not distorted, by Western culture.

Our Western Reformed heritage can use gifts from those outside our tradition, just as they can use gifts from us. But too often we choose the posture of a proud teacher instead of a humble student. May the Magi’s story humble us to change that posture. **B**



REPLY ALL

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

Women's Ordination

I was extremely disappointed to read of synod's decision to not go forward with the longer celebration of women's ordination and instead reduce it to two months in order to not offend the (minority of classes that do not) approve of women in office ("Recognition of 25th Anniversary of Women's Ordination Scaled Back," July/August 2020). ... I understand we allow this for the sake of unity, but what kind of unity are we basing this on when it undermines, denies, and excludes 50% of the population's equality, identity, and giftedness?

» Daina Kraai // Grand Rapids, MI

Reading The Banner

I really enjoy getting *The Banner* in the mail with its interesting articles, photos, and displays. I usually take time to finish the reading in one sitting, and then keep it in the magazine rack for deeper perusal later. ... I applaud the efforts of the editor and his staff to bring us articles that are germane in today's world of thought. Blessings in your effective ministry.

» George Groen // Thousand Oaks, Calif.

Another Take on Racism

I was deeply upset by George Young's "Another Take on Racism" (October 2020), but more distressed by comments on Facebook and the *Banner's* website

claiming that anti-Black racism in the U.S. is a matter of "opinion," and that any critique of that position is "censorship." I grew up in the Christian Reformed Church. Five members of my immediate family work for the denomination. But I struggle daily to remain a part of an institution whose members delight in ignoring or scoffing at the suffering of people of color in this country. It is heartbreaking to know that many in the church no longer hold the values they raised me with.

» Katie Van Zanen // Ann Arbor, Mich.

I wholeheartedly agree with George Young in his article "Another Take on Racism" and why he did not sign the CRC Statement Regarding Systemic Racism. There certainly is racism and wrongdoing in all ethnic groups. ... The CRC should promote love for all ethnic groups, state that there is guilt all around, and support Christians in calling for law and order and God's love for all.

» Dan Hoekema // Grand Rapids, Mich.

Anti-Semitism

(In the July/August *Banner*, Rev. Doug Bratt writes, "Very few of the nearly 200 American Protestant sermons I reviewed even mentioned the Holocaust." ("Combating Anti-Semitism"). ... They had the freedom of speech and assembly during the war years but were largely silent. The declaration on war crimes (1942) was front-page news in the U.S. that Jews throughout Europe were being exterminated by the Nazis. In Europe, we did not have this freedom of speech during Hitler's regime for fear of retaliation. Most churches were relatively silent except for Karl Barth. ... Are our American Protestant preachers discreetly silent about racial injustice?

» George Lieuwen // Langley, B.C.

September 2020

I want to thank you for three particular articles in the September 2020 issue: It was inspiring to read of the foresight, patience, and commitment demonstrated by the group of individuals from Eastern Avenue CRC ("From Vacant Lots to Affordable Housing: Church Members Participate in 'Restoration Row'"). ... I was moved to joyful tears to read of the partnership between Dordt College and Hope Haven ("Improving the 'Kid Chair' Meant Designing to Constraints"). Finally, thank you to editor Shiao Chong for "Model Kingdom Disciples." I appreciate that in all your writing you challenge and admonish while always being kind; you probe and question without inciting division; and you call out the problems with the manifestation of Christianity in North America without being sensational. I am glad for your leadership, which consistently calls us to cut through all the busyness of our culture to fix our eyes on Jesus and the way we should live for his kingdom.

» Elizabeth Knighton // Columbus, Ohio

Neland Ave.

I applaud the council of Neland Ave. (CRC) in their decision ("Woman in Same-sex Marriage Installed as Deacon," November 2020). Will it be a divisive decision? Only if it is allowed to become one. There are too many of our brothers and sisters and sons and daughters who are gay who find the church the last place in which they would be welcome. Where do they go to worship? How do they get to use their gifts in loving obedience to God? I pray for the woman elected as deacon, that she may experience more love and grace than possible rejection and judgment. And I pray for Neland Ave. as they continue to do what Reformed churches are supposed to do: live the gospel in the culture in which we live.

» Jim Dykstra // online comment

Music Speaks!

The most troubling thing about this decision is the blatant disregard for the denominational process. I know it can be slow, but pushing ahead unilaterally with such a divisive decision breaks covenant and hard-earned unity that is already fragile. No one is fooled by the “games” being played using old synodical pronouncements that pastoral advice doesn’t equate with confessional status. Of course not, but we have clear statements about the theological position of the CRC on homosexual issues going back decades and have been struggling with pastoral advice the whole time. I’m so deeply saddened by this move.

» Rich deLange // online comment

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As I Was Saying

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- » Days in the Doldrums, Nights in the Heavens
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- » Canadian Thanksgiving and the Indigenous Tension
- » Chronic Hope

“Where words fail, music speaks.”

—Hans Christian Andersen

MY DAD LOVED TO SING. When a community choir presented Handel’s “Messiah” in the sanctuary of First Christian Reformed Church in Muskegon, Mich., he was part of it. In his final years, when we played a recording of this beautiful work, the “Hallelujah” chorus would bring tears to his eyes. Music spoke to him.

As a radio broadcaster and church musician, I made friends in the Black community and was blessed to participate in services where the music from African American history played a major role. The emotions of that Black gospel music brought tears to the eyes of especially the elderly who came to worship. They felt God’s presence. Music spoke to them.

I must confess that, among the various styles of Christian music, I do enjoy some country gospel. My wife and I were watching an old Gaither Homecoming video the other night. A performer who had struggled through some difficult problems gave a particularly moving rendition of an old gospel song. It brought tears to the eyes of many of the participants. And I found that my cheeks were damp, as well. Music spoke to us.

From the organ bench, where I add classical organ to my church’s praise bands, I am able to watch the congregation and witness their response to the music we are leading. I am touched when I see teenagers raising their hands in contemporary worship, singing at the top of their voices, with tears flowing down their cheeks. They feel God’s presence. Music is speaking to them.

And I get to thinking.

Shame on those of us who think we know what kind of music God prefers.

I’ve been blessed with the opportunity to worship in a tiny Native American church where the Lord’s Prayer was recited in Ojibwa. I’ve taken communion in a storefront church in the slums of Puerto Rico. I’ve worshiped in The Riverside Church in Manhattan, and I directed a choir in the Crystal Cathedral in Garden Grove, Calif., venues in which the majesty of the pipe organ was particularly thrilling.

I’d be hard-pressed to explain, however, which service was most meaningful, or which music touched my soul the most.

Shame on those of us who think we know what kind of music God prefers, what kind of music belongs in worship, or what kind of music we can anticipate in heaven.

“Music is one of the fairest and most glorious gifts of God, to which Satan is a bitter enemy.”

— Martin Luther



Doug Tjapkes is the founder of I Sing of Thee music ministries, His Men, and Humanity for Prisoners. He is organist and choir director at Ferrysburg (Mich.) Community Church and the author of three books.



A Theology of Listening

By Sara Korber-DeWeerd

Some of us are better at listening than others. My youngest child, who has Down syndrome, often finds himself in the position of listener. He needs extra help learning new skills, so he listens for guidance. It takes him more time to process language, so he listens to understand. It takes him longer to formulate speech, and sometimes conversations move on before he can add his thoughts. His family, teachers, friends, and classmates have to slow down in order to really know what he thinks. They have to listen.

The Privilege of Being Heard

Until I began navigating the challenges of communication with my son, I never thought of the ability to be heard as a privilege, a luxury available to some but not others. As a quiet child, I often chose not to speak, because it made me uncomfortable; I didn't enjoy the attention. Being an introvert

made me a careful observer of people. I learned a lot by listening—about others' differences and beliefs, about their strengths and challenges. But I've rarely been forced into that listening position.

Sometimes when he feels left out, my son grows frustrated. Having been ignored for too long, he inserts himself into conversations at his breaking point. His yelling or aggression is met with our reminders to be patient, but I often wonder how long he was waiting before we finally heard him.

In the political arena, even our churches, it sometimes seems as if everyone is talking, but no one is listening. I think of my son and the way he has always been compelled to listen, to hang on the margins of a conversation. Perhaps we can learn from those who are compelled to listen with forced regularity.

Slowing down to listen to my son and to my daughters has reminded me of

the listening posture I was comfortable assuming as a child. As a white, middle-class, heterosexual, non-disabled woman whose many privileges are unearned, I now recognize the benefit of choosing silence more often—not out of discomfort or fear, but out of a need to understand. Life with my son has also taught me there are many reasons for silence; whether chosen or forced, it does not mean that those who don't speak or are not heard have nothing meaningful to offer.

Imagine if we began listening to the silences themselves. Who is not present? Who has not felt welcome? What would it require of us to invite new voices?

From Tolerance to Listening

In today's information-saturated climate, we're inundated with others' convictions and opinions. We're expected to be tolerant of differences and asked to keep any "narrow" views to ourselves. Yet I am consistently

shocked by the intolerance of a mainstream culture that prides itself on tolerance. What happens, then, when tolerance begins to look like intolerance? Tolerance no longer serves when it demands my quiet acceptance that division or injustice “is just the way things are.” Is there a third way?

It’s time to shift the cultural focus on absolute tolerance to a more complex focus on listening. Tolerance and listening are not the same thing. Tolerance demands we abide by the rhetoric of the day, no matter how offensive. But listening, though it often requires our own silence, is always active and always engaged. We lay down our personal agenda; we silence long-held convictions not to avoid offending, but instead to understand. And maybe after we listen, we ask questions. Maybe we invite respectful dialogue, with the goal of seeing God in us—*imago Dei*.

People have often commented that our son is especially kind and emotionally intuitive, that he can read the feelings in a room with incredible and compassionate accuracy. I wonder if the practice of forced listening has equipped him with these superpowers, ones that individuals with Down syndrome are often said to possess. I’m not a fan of stereotypes that label individuals with disabilities; even positive labels have the power to subsume personal identity. But what if emotional intuition and interpersonal skills are not a stereotype, but a gift that some possess and grow by practiced repetition, a gift that has been cultivated, whether voluntarily or not?

Listening as an Act of Love

Listening is not dangerous; it will not subject the listener to unwitting conversion—perhaps convictions will remain unchanged; perhaps they shouldn’t. Listening does not lead to division beyond reconciliation; it is, in fact, the first step toward it, because listening is an act of love.

Imagine if when marginalized people groups spoke in the church to identify

Until I began navigating the challenges of communication with my son, I never thought of the ability to be heard as a privilege.

it as a historical place of oppression, coerced silence, and abuse, rather than quickly coming to our own defense or, worse, not responding at all, we said, “Tell us more.” These three simple words invite dialogue, and they make us ready to listen. These are the words my husband and I have been taught to use by speech therapists when our son produces an utterance that is too short to make his meaning clear but we know he wants his words to mean more. “Tell us more” is an invitation for him to try again, but it is also a signal that we, his family, are prepared to wait and to listen—that we want to understand. Do we in the church want to understand?

Consider also that there is more than one kind of silence. The silence of listening is active and engaged. But there is another kind of silence. Too often I have heard well-meaning Christians insist that our communal spaces remain apolitical. But that is impossible, because what is political is also personal. The choice to remain silent in the face of injustice is itself political, one that often perpetuates the very injustices we hope to avoid. In these cases, silence is a kind of consent. We should not be surprised,

for example, when peaceful protests turn violent. While no one condones violence, it is a symptom of a dominant culture that has too long ignored the pain and injustice of systemic racism.

Finding Common Ground

If we believe what Genesis tells us, that we are created in God’s image, then our common ground is not our opinions but each other. So if I am an image bearer and you are too, what can we offer one another? How do we need each other? What shred of holiness is in us that we might bring it to bear even on our disagreements?

When we recognize that our shared humanity is rooted in our shared Creator, we don’t need to agree to find common ground. Listening can help us navigate hot-button topics that have the power to divide—topics such as sexuality, abuse, discrimination, racism, and injustice. When we quiet the noise of competing ideologies, then we can listen. When we listen, then we can understand. When we understand and repent, then we can act. I see now that there are many steps to take before action. But too often, we leap before we look, we speak before we hear. In such a noisy world, perhaps a theology of listening is long overdue. **B**



Sara Korber-DeWeerd is a freelance writer and teacher based in Massachusetts. She and her family are members of Fairlawn Christian Reformed Church. You can find Sara at morethanshelter.blogspot.com.

1. Have you ever experienced an occasion when you felt people were not listening to you? Describe how you felt at the time and how you overcame the problem.
2. Why do you think our culture is generally poor at actively listening to others?

READ MORE ONLINE

BIG QUESTIONS

Stewardship

What do you think about “regifting”—giving someone else a gift that you had previously received yourself as a gift? Is it deceptive or ungrateful?

Regifting is something many of us have felt qualms about at one time or another. We get a gift that, however well-intentioned, just doesn't match our needs or our lives and thus will go unused. So rather than have it add to household clutter or get thrown out, why not regift?

There are, of course, considerations. Gift-giving happens within a web of relationships, and there are feelings to be considered (“Where’s that purple afghan I knitted you last Christmas?”). Seriously uncomfortable social situations ought to be avoided (“Why does this gift box have a receipt with your grandmother’s name on the credit card?”). There are times when integrity might require us to inform the original giver of our intention to regift, even if the conversation might be awkward. And one would hope that the recipient of regifting is receiving something truly appropriate to their use and enjoyment and not just a chartreuse breadbox suitable only for future regifting *ad nauseam*.

But if you think about it, the gifts the Magi brought to Jesus in Matthew 2 weren't all that practical. If I'd received those three gifts, I'd probably have hung on to the gold and been inclined to regift the frankincense and myrrh.



Illustration for The Banner by Laurie Sienkowski

Keeping these considerations in mind, I say, “Regift away!” In some ways, our reluctance to regift is a cultural attitude. In her book *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Robin Wall Kimmerer points out that in Indigenous and Native American cultures, the attitude toward giving is different: “Whatever we have been given is supposed to be given away again.”

Rolf Bouma is an ordained pastor in the Christian Reformed Church who teaches religion, ethics, and ecology in the Program in the Environment at the University of Michigan.

Church/Bible/Doctrine

What is the Christian Reformed Church’s position on divorce and remarriage? Can someone who is divorced and remarried serve as an elder?

For many years the CRC operated with an “innocent party” or “guilty party” approach to divorce and remarriage. After repeatedly trying to come up with a comprehensive moral framework for assessing what is a “biblical divorce,” Synod pivoted in 1980 to a different approach. First, it rejected the language of “innocent party,” “guilty party,” and “biblical divorce.” Rather, it stated, “although the Scripture speaks clearly in terms of principles regarding divorce and remarriage, it is neither possible nor wise for the church to attempt to construct a legal code which would

cover all cases or all the circumstances that would apply.” Second, it located primary responsibility for pastoral care and possible discipline not with synod, but with the local consistory, “for it has the most intimate and accurate knowledge of the situation of divorce and contemplated remarriage.” And the report warned that the church must be cautious in making judgments, saying the church must “speak with clarity where sinful conduct is overt and apparent,” but immediately adding: “However, recognizing the limits of human ability to discern the subtlety and intricacy of human motivation, the church must recognize the limits of its ability to assess guilt and blame in the intimate and private turmoil of marital distress.”

Today the CRC still considers divorce to be against God’s Word and God’s intent for marriage but recognizes that sometimes divorce occurs in this broken world, and local elders can best determine when discipline is appropriate, working pastorally with the individuals involved in each situation.

So, a divorced and remarried person can serve as an elder. Many have served well, also as deacons and ministers. In each case, the church council needs to discern whether there is repentance and forgiveness, who has suitable gifts to serve in a leadership role, and who can best serve in the offices of the church at a given time. But as long as they are

confessing members in good standing, these persons are eligible for office and can be nominated by the council and elected by the congregation.

Rev. Kathy Smith is senior associate director of the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship, adjunct professor of church polity at Calvin Theological Seminary, and adjunct professor of congregational and ministry studies at Calvin University. She is a member of First CRC in Grand Rapids, Mich.

Digital Life

What's a meme, and how should I pronounce it?

"Meme" rhymes with "team." According to Wikipedia, a meme is an idea, behavior, or style that becomes a fad and spreads within a culture by means of imitation. It often carries symbolic meaning representing a particular phenomenon or theme. The word "meme" was coined in 1976.

Oh, you want to know what an *internet* meme is? Internet memes first appeared in the mid-1990s and grew up with the internet. From the start, they were simple image files featuring a photo and a caption of some sort. Like everything online, the idea was to spread these images as widely as possible across the fast-growing web. Clever was better.

In the early days, memes were fairly tame. One popular series was created around demotivation—parodies of the black-bordered inspirational and motivational posters hanging in offices everywhere. But instead of words like "Leadership" in huge text, pictures of a lovely mountain range, and a pithy description of what leadership is, you'd find a word like "Procrastination," a nothing photo, and an equally disparaging bit of text. Funny, right?

Nowadays, memes often have a very distinct look that consists of a picture (or a single frame from a film) and across the top and bottom, in black-outlined, condensed white text, is a seemingly unrelated

caption—unrelated, that is, until you get the joke. Often it's a very short-lived joke because memes are almost always based on an event or person or phrase that's popular at the moment.

Over time, memes have gotten nastier—vulgar, even—but every now and then you'll come across one that is laugh-out-loud funny. As I'm writing this, an online search for "meme" and "fly" and "Pence" results in some hilarious reactions to an unscripted two-minute episode during a recent U.S. national event. Any subject matter is game.

At best, memes, in very few words and a single image, force us to take a less-than-serious look at our more-than-serious selves. At their worst, they are not, as they say, suitable for work (or anyplace else).

Interestingly, memes have gotten so popular and memers are apparently so underpaid that there's a move underway to unionize. No joke.

Dean Heetderks is co-director of Ministry Support Services of the CRC and art director of *The Banner*. Wondering about any part of the digital side of your life? Tell him about it at dean.heetderks@gmail.com.

Vocation/Calling

How do we cultivate calling in each stage of life?

Good question. Your question rightly assumes that calling is not reduced to a paid employment. Too often we confuse God's calling for our lives to a paid vocation. Therefore, there is a tendency to think that questions of discovering our calling are only relevant to younger people at the start of their careers. I believe calling is bigger than that.

I like how the Christian writer Frederick Buechner puts it: "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet." In other words, fulfilling your calling is not only doing

something that gives you joy. It should also be directed at helping to meet something our world needs. A musician, for instance, could be meeting our hunger for musical beauty that inspires joy or emotions. As Christians, we should have an understanding of calling that goes beyond simply self-fulfillment or social advancement toward joining God's mission of shalom-making.

Different life stages present different opportunities. Whatever our stage of life, we should prayerfully examine our deep passions as well as our gifts, asking how we can apply them to areas of need in God's world. Sometimes the same passions and gifts can be channeled to different mission fields, so to speak, as one grows older and more horizons open up before you.

For instance, my passion for God's Word and God's mission plus my gifts of writing and teaching were formerly employed in campus ministry for 15 years. But now, God has called me to use those same gifts and passions in service of the denomination through *The Banner*. I am still seeking to meet the world's need for God's truths, but in a different mission field. When I retire, I suspect I will still be using my gifts and joys, but maybe applied to a different mission field.

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



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

Council of Delegates Discusses Racism and Restructure

NEWS

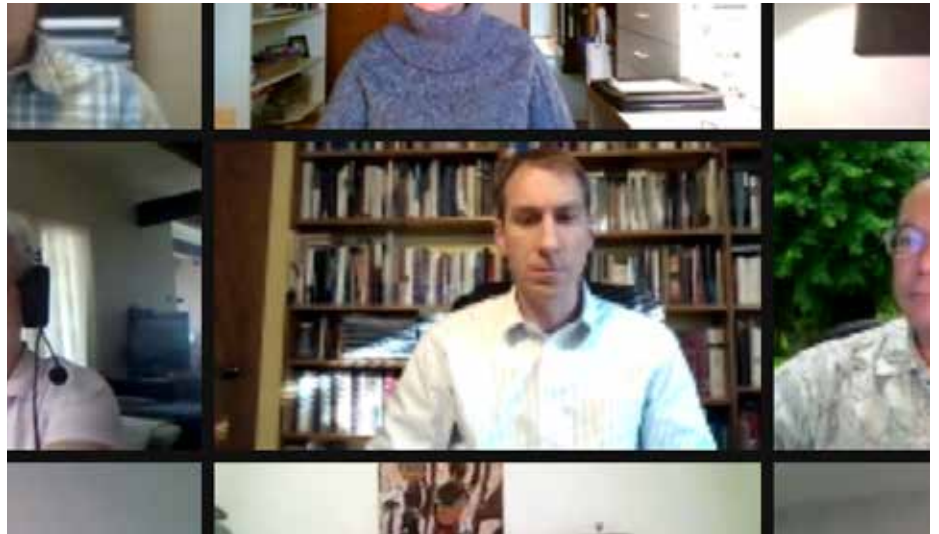
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Meeting by video conference Oct. 14-16, the Council of Delegates of the Christian Reformed Church had a full agenda, including reviewing planned new job descriptions for restructured positions, addressing unity and diversity, and hearing of pastors’ struggles to minister amid division (see “Your Pastor is Stressed,” p. 20).

The 60-member Council meets three times a year to conduct the work of the CRC’s synod between those annual meetings.

Anti-Racism Efforts

Anti-racism efforts popped up in various places in the agenda, from a 90-minute guided discussion about how the delegates can fight racism as a governance body, to approval of hiring a full-time leader for the Office of Race Relations for the CRC in Canada, to an anticipated mandate change for the Office of Race Relations in the U.S., expected to be considered at the February Council meeting.

Restructuring

The discussion of restructuring governance in the CRC administration along Canada/U.S. lines continued. The change started in February after legal counsel

John Lee, Classis Iakota, said he was in favor of the ecclesiastical officer position proposed, but “with disquietude about how we’ll live it out given our history of poor outcomes the past 10 years.”

in Canada advised that direction and control of Canadian resources had to be handled by Canadian delegates to the Council (known collectively as Canada Corporation) to be in compliance with Canadian tax law. Initial steps included identifying distinct leadership and budgets for each ministry in each country. (See “Restructuring Gives CRC in Canada More Ministry Control,” April 2020, and “Still Bumps in the Road for CRC’s Restructuring,” June 2020.)

At this meeting, U.S. delegates approved a proposed job description for an executive director for the CRC in the U.S. Canadian delegates approved a job description for the Canada executive director in July. (See “Recent Canada Corporation Meeting Discusses Governance Restructure,” September 2020.)

The most discussion took place when the Council took up a proposed job description for an ecclesiastical officer. The name for the role has not been finalized.

The officer is intended to bridge the two corporations as well as take on leadership of ministries that report directly to synod, such as the Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations Committee, the Office of Synodical Services, Candidacy, and *The Banner*.

Dan Mouw, a retired CRC pastor, chaired the task force that drafted the proposed ecclesiastical officer job description. "In our mandate, it talked about 'shepherding' the denomination, one who will communicate our Reformed vision, someone who would take a profoundly pastoral role," he said.

Delegate John Lee, Classis Iakota, questioned whether the position is just hopeful thinking. "I've heard and experienced a hurt both historically expressed and in interactions we've had together around the Canada Corporation and the U.S. Corporation. I've experienced distrust, unhealthy interactions, so I want to acknowledge that structure can't heal culture," Lee said. "If we're going to be one denomination, it has to be a shared desire, not just in word but in deed, on all sides of the church. If not, let's (create) two denominations with joint management agreements and call a spade a spade."

He said he was in favor of the ecclesiastical officer position proposed, but "with disquietude about how we'll live it out given our history of poor outcomes the past 10 years."

The Council endorsed the proposed job description. All three job descriptions will now go to a new task force that will look at how the three will interact and suggest any modifications that will be needed.

Neland Avenue CRC

In the wake of Neland Avenue CRC in Grand Rapids, Mich., installing a deacon who is in a same-sex marriage ("Woman in Same-Sex Marriage Installed as Deacon," November 2020), the Council received correspondence from one congregation and one classis (regional group of churches) asking for the Council to speak against the action. The Council voted by a narrow margin to send a letter communicating its grief to the Neland Avenue council over its decision. (See "Council of Delegates Discusses Neland Avenue CRC Decision," p. 21.)

Director Changes

The Council noted that in the next year, Colin Watson (executive director), John Bolt (director of finance and operations U.S.), Michele DeBie (director of human resources, U.S.), David Koll (director of candidacy), and Bonnie Nicholas (director of Safe Church Ministry) are all retiring. Additionally, Sarah Roelofs is moving to a part-time position, necessitating a search for a new director of Chaplaincy and Care.

The U.S. Corporation endorsed merging the director of finance and operations position with the director of ministries and administration position as part of the new executive position for the U.S. Corporation.

—Gayla R. Postma

Minnesota Church Celebrates 125 Years of Ministry



Kira Erickson, a member of Pease CRC, created a logo to reflect the church's anniversary theme.

Pease (Minn.) Christian Reformed Church marked 125 years of ministry in 2020.

The theme for the church's 125-year commemoration was "Building with Faith, Laboring with Love, and Inspiring with Hope," three key ideas from 1 Thessalonians 3.

Church member Kira Erickson created a logo to reflect the theme. "The partially built brick wall represents 'building with faith' and the expansion of our church," she explained. "The cross in the middle of the window represents 'laboring with love' and signifies the ultimate labor of love: Jesus' death on the cross. The final phrase, 'inspiring with hope,' is represented by a soaring dove with an olive branch."

Pease CRC ran a "125 Campaign" ahead of its anniversary year to help the congregation complete a building project. They opened the new fellowship wing in February 2020.

The anniversary committee also produced a cookbook, continuing a tradition of previous anniversaries.

There are plans to host a bigger celebration once COVID-19 concerns have lessened.

—Kyle Hoogendoorn

IN MEMORIAM



*Rev. Dr. John C.
Vander Stelt*

1934-2020

A passionate, challenging, and stimulating teacher, preacher, and reformational speaker, John Vander Stelt died Sept. 19 following several years of progressive dementia.

Vander Stelt grew up in the Netherlands in a home where family, church, and Christian education were the tripod of life. He initially studied at a mechanical trade school but later changed directions, eventually graduating from Calvin College (now University) and Seminary and the Free University in Amsterdam, where he obtained a PhD.

Ordained in 1965, he pastored Bethel Community Christian Reformed Church in Newmarket, Ont., and worked for a year for the Institute for Christian Studies before becoming professor of theology and philosophy at Dordt College (now University) where he developed and taught nearly 40 courses. Vander Stelt's calling was to help others discern the meaning of a kingdom-focused world and lifeview. He often preached on weekends and loved spending time with his family on their boat on Lake Okoboji. He retired in 1999.

The Vander Stelts moved to Kentwood, Mich., in 2006 to be closer to children and grandchildren, and then in 2019 moved to the Holland Home in Grand Rapids. Vander Stelt is survived by his wife, Sandy; four children and spouses; and nine grandchildren.

—Janet A. Greidanus

Adding Art to Advent



A 12-by-3-foot mural at the front of the sanctuary of Crossroads Christian Reformed Church in San Marcos, Calif., helped the congregation focus on the themes of Advent in December 2019.

Painter and art teacher Ron Van Der Pol, a deacon at Crossroads, created the artwork over six weeks, illustrating interim pastor Stan Drenth's sermon series "Living Streams."

The sermons and art highlighted the stories of Mary, Joseph, John the Baptist, the shepherds, God incarnate in Jesus, and the Magi, illustrating how they connected to streams of ministry.

Crossroads has since welcomed Jeff Kempton as its new pastor. Kempton has been working with the church's eight-person worship planning team to design both physical and digital visual elements to accompany the 2020 Advent series "All Roads Lead to Bethlehem."

"Due to COVID," Kempton said, "we are learning to be very nimble and creative in new ways, knowing that we might need to shift to indoor or outdoor worship on short notice."

—Alissa Vernon, news editor



Wisconsin CRC Hosts Operation Christmas Child Workshop

Baldwin (Wisc.) Christian Reformed Church increased its involvement in the annual Operation Christmas Child (OCC) shoebox gift program this year by hosting a local workshop for other interested churches. The congregation is among the top five organizations in western Wisconsin for number of supplied boxes packed. Humanitarian mission Samaritan's Purse runs the annual campaign, shipping gifts to show God's love to children in over 20 countries.

Billie Jo Korn, one of the coordinators of the program at Baldwin CRC, said she found out about the church's ranking when the operation invited the church to host a workshop this fall.

"Area churches and individuals were invited to hear about OCC, what they do, who they reach, and how they reach them," Korn said. About 20 people attended the Sept. 12 workshop, which was part of a nationwide workshop series by Operation Christmas Child.

OCC spokesperson Yves Dushime attended the Baldwin workshop and told of his experience receiving a shoebox when he was 11 years old and living in a refugee camp in Togo after he and his family fled the Rwandan genocide.

"Not only did Yves receive a shoebox, but 299 other children did as well," Korn said. "As a result of these shoeboxes and hearing the



gospel, hundreds of people in the nearby village gave their lives to Jesus Christ."

Yves Dushime, an Operation Christmas Child representative who as a boy received an OCC Christmas box, leads a workshop at Baldwin (Wisc.) CRC.

Korn said their congregation collects items all year long to fill the boxes. Every box includes a backpack or bag, school supplies, hygiene products, something to play with, and a book that helps to tell the story of Jesus and his love for all.

"Packing boxes is such a wonderful way to be a small part of sharing God's love with as many children as OCC does every year," Korn said. "This is another way to send out the word of God and his great love."

—Callie Feyen

Ontario Church Collects Mittens, Hosts Tree Lighting

Mount Hope Community CRC in Hamilton, Ont., has hosted its community's annual Christmas tree lighting for the past three years. For 2020, the church was once again working with the Mount Hope Volunteer Association to see how they could safely carry off the tradition without increased risk of COVID-19 transmission.

Collecting mittens and warm hats on a "mitten tree" for the community's mission services is one part of the annual event.



IN MEMORIAM



Rev. Harvey Alan Stob

1944-2020

A deep thinker with an insatiable appetite for books, languages, and learning, Harvey Stob had a heart for the poor, the homeless, immigrants, widows, and those struggling with mental illness. "Dad simply offered kindness to all out of his love and gratitude for Jesus," said one of his children. Stob died Sept. 25 after a brief illness. "When I think of my dying," he said in response to his diagnosis, "I can honestly say that I look forward to seeing the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, to witnessing their love for each other, and to being personally drawn into that love."

After ordination in 1972, Stob served for 11 years as a missionary in Argentina. As a hobby, he bred and kept canaries and finches, enjoying them for their beauty and song. After returning to the U.S. in 1983, Stob pastored Cincinnati (Ohio) CRC; Ridgewood (N.J.) CRC; and Ann Arbor (Mich.) CRC.

After retirement in 2009, Stob enjoyed traveling with his wife, spending time with grandchildren, and training for RAGBRAI, an annual group bicycle ride across Iowa that he participated in many times.

Stob is survived by Audrey, his wife of 51 years; three children and spouses; and eight grandchildren.

—Janet A. Greidanus

Your Pastor Is Stressed: Reports of Struggle for Pastors

Several reports received by the Christian Reformed Church's Council of Delegates at its October meeting noted concerns of tension, stress, and struggle for pastors.

While some of the pastors' concerns were gathered from the denomination's check-in calls with churches during the COVID-19 pandemic, delegate Drew Sweetman (Classis Muskegon) remarked, "The issues were there before COVID, and we should be mindful they won't go away after COVID."

That matches what Lis Van Harten, director of Pastor Church Resources (PCR), is seeing. Her report to the Council reads, "COVID has a way of exposing underlying dysfunction." It also notes, "PCR has seen an uptick in the number of consultations with churches. A few of the consults are directly related to COVID. Many are indirectly related."

Dave Den Haan is one of two ministry consultants with Pastor Church Resources. He says he has "a front-row seat" to pastors and churches sorting through issues, and in many recent consultations he's noticed COVID-19 is "generating anxiety and making people less capable of disagreeing with one another in love."

A season of ministering while living through a public health crisis, racial and political conflicts, and economic pressures has tapped pastors' energy. "Pastors are getting tech fatigue, they're getting decision fatigue, they've been wrestling with ambiguity fatigue, they've got relationship fatigue," Den Haan said. "They are fatigued."



Delegate Drew Sweetman (Classis Muskegon) reminded delegates that "the issues were there before COVID, and we should be mindful they won't go away after COVID."

What's the solution?

Al Postma, who works for Pastor Church Resources in Classis Renewal, wants to see those regional networks strengthened to be supportive communities for pastors. He's focused some attention on regional pastors—ministers given the task of pastoring pastors—"as people who can cultivate that supportive presence." Part of that is through Thriving Together, a mentoring program funded by a grant of the Lilly Endowment Inc. that supports and encourages pastors in times of transition.

Overall, Postma said, the hope is to have classis be "the sort of space where it can be a rich exploration of (questions such as) 'How can we grow through this?', 'What does innovation look like at this time?', (and) 'How do we hold on to the good things and try new things?'"

Outside of pastors directly connected by their regions, Van Harten said she's seen a small increase in the number of pastors applying for peer learning grants, which

allow a group of pastors to regularly gather in community over the course of a year. They've been offered by Pastor Church Resources since 2003.

"The focus of those groups is really well-being and caring for one another," Van Harten said, and the increase in applications ahead of the Nov. 1 deadline could be a reflection of pastors' current need for more community. (See "Peer Learning Grant Helps Pastors Share Their Challenges," May 2020.)

Perspective

In some situations, a pastor's experience goes beyond fatigue. "One of the dynamics that we're seeing is pastors observing members of their congregation behaving badly and despairing that all of their years of ministry have been for naught," Den Haan said. "I wish these pastors understood that the picture is larger—much larger—than just their ministry function over a season of a church's life."

"Pastors who are wondering, 'Have I had any effect in my congregation?'—I think they should hear a message of hope somehow in this, that if they weren't there being faithful, their churches would be in worse shape," Den Haan said.

Den Haan pastored two congregations, one in Minnesota and one in Michigan, before joining Pastor Church Resources in 2018. He thinks pastors would also benefit from using the Pastors' Spiritual Vitality Toolkit, a resource from the CRC available in English, Spanish, and Korean. The toolkit is available online. Search for "Pastors' Spiritual Vitality Toolkit" on crcna.org.

—Alissa Vernon, news editor

Council of Delegates Discusses Neland Avenue CRC Decision

The Council of Delegates of the Christian Reformed Church, which met Oct. 14-16 by video conference, received letters of concern over a decision by Neland Avenue CRC in Grand Rapids, Mich., to ordain a deacon who is in a same-sex marriage.

The letters were sent by Classis Minnkota, a group of Christian Reformed congregations mostly in Minnesota, Wisconsin, and South Dakota, and the council of Cottonwood Church, a Christian Reformed congregation in Jenison, Mich.

The Minnkota letter reads, "Classis Minnkota appeals to the Council of Delegates to speak into this situation by instructing Classis Grand Rapids East and the Council of Neland Avenue CRC to comply with Scripture, our Reformed confessions, our Church Order, and synodical decisions on sexuality (1973, 2002, 2016). All synodical decisions are settled and binding unless proven they conflict with God's Word or the Church Order (Art. 29). This is in part what it means to be in covenant with other churches."

The Council of Delegates considered responding to Minnkota and Cottonwood with an open letter that would be made available to all CRC congregations. The letter was drafted by the Council's executive committee. But several delegates were not comfortable with the letter.

Lora Copley, Classis Red Mesa, noted, "Neland broke covenant with the congregations, but (with this letter) it feels like protestors (of that action) are getting chastised. I would ask that the executive committee write a letter to Neland reproving them," she said.

Bruce DeKam, Classis Northern Michigan, also didn't like the letter. "It's not forceful enough. It skirts too much around an issue that really has potential to split the church and cause a lot of pain."

Roger Sparks, Classis Minnkota, also spoke against a response that would



Roger Sparks: "If you're telling us to be patient without addressing the impatience of Neland, that's not going to fly very well."

ask concerned churches to wait through the process of congregational, classical, and synodical accountability without addressing Neland on its action. "There is a challenge (to churches) to be patient," Sparks said. "I can be patient, but if you're telling us to be patient without addressing the impatience of Neland, that's not going to fly very well."

The delegates decided to table the letter and ask the executive committee to reconsider it.

And then the council chose by a narrow margin to communicate directly with Neland Avenue CRC.

In a vote of 24-20, with one delegate abstaining, the council decided to "send a letter to Neland Avenue CRC grieving Neland's decision to break covenant with the CRC and ordain a deacon who is actively involved in a same-sex relationship before Synod 2021 has addressed the Report on Human Sexuality." The executive committee was tasked with writing that letter.



Aaltje Van Grootheest: "We shouldn't take sides with synod going to be looking at this not too far down the road."

Aaltje Van Grootheest, Canadian delegate at large, spoke against sending the letter to Neland because she felt it exceeded the mandate of the Council. "We are overstepping," she said. "We have to be very, very careful here. We shouldn't take sides with synod going to be looking at this not too far down the road." Synod 2021 is to receive the final report of the Human Sexuality Committee appointed by Synod 2016. "There are many churches that would welcome something along this line (of Neland's action). Procedurally, this is not our role," Van Grootheest said.

Sam Sutter, Classis Atlantic Northeast, said he had mixed feelings. "I appreciate how carefully the executive committee avoided overstepping," he said, but he wished the Council to speak clearly. "After so much feedback, we have to make sure the perception is that we are unhappy with Neland's actions. Neland put a gauntlet down. Silence is tacit approval."

Fifteen delegates registered their negative votes on sending a letter to Neland.

—Alissa Vernon, news editor

Denominational Staff Get Additional Time Off

At its October meeting, the CRCNA U.S. Corporation (the U.S. portion of the Christian Reformed Church's Council of Delegates) approved four holidays a year for U.S. denominational staff to be taken between Christmas and New Year's Day each year. The proposal for the time off came from senior leadership.

Canadian staff also received four extra holidays in 2020. That decision was announced independently of the American proposal over the summer in a memo from the Canadian Ministries Team signed by Canadian Ministries director Darren Roorda.

Roorda told *The Banner* that it was a management decision to give this one-time gift to staff in consideration of the strain of conditions generated by COVID-19. "We know as staff directors, because of the pandemic especially, (but) also out of a realization of the additional stress due to racial issues that are so current, our staff at the various parts of CRCNA-related ministries have worked ongoing extra hours to serve local churches," Roorda said. "They have stretched themselves to the fullest even while being plunked into high-emotion conversations and demands."

—Gayla R. Postma

Portuguese-Language Ministry Growing in Alberta



Centrepointe Community Christian Reformed Church in Edmonton, Alta., and its developing Portuguese-language ministry Igreja Ponto Central are in partnership, "one body, one church."

Ponto Central is Portuguese for "Centrepointe," a name chosen deliberately to indicate that the churches are not separate entities. Co-pastors Carlos and Meire Rosa, a married couple, began the ministry with a desire to help Edmonton's growing Brazilian population worship in their mother tongue. About 3,225 Brazilian immigrants live in Edmonton. Igreja Ponto Central hosted the first Protestant Portuguese worship services in the city on Nov. 19, 2017.

Carlos and Meire met while studying at a Presbyterian seminary in Brazil and graduated with the equivalent of an MDiv. After planting two Portuguese Reformed Church of America congregations in Canada—one in Toronto and another in Montreal—the Rosas felt a call to move to Alberta. Carlos found work and a house in Edmonton, and Meire followed shortly after with their two children.

"They joined Centrepointe in the middle of 2015," said Jeremy Vandermeer, Centrepointe's pastor, "so they were with us, being part of the body." Eventually, Meire started a Portuguese-language Bible study in her home. That was the springboard for launching the Portuguese ministry. "They approached council (because) they wanted this to be a ministry of Centrepointe—one body," Vandermeer said. "Council approved, and we've been walking forward in that now for the past two years."

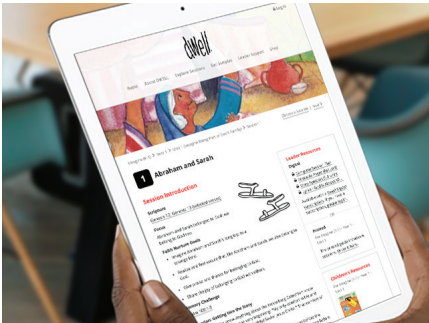
Both Rosas are now commissioned pastors in the CRC. Classis Alberta North examined and welcomed Meire at its March 2020 meeting. Carlos' examination was postponed when that meeting ended a day early due to COVID-19 restrictions on gatherings, but was completed at the October classis meeting, convened by video conference. Stated Clerk Gary Duthler said, "Now Carlos and Meire together form a team of commissioned pastors ministering to the Portuguese membership of Centrepointe Community Church."

—Janet A. Greidanus

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Talking About God in a Post-Christian World

By Cassie Westrate, Resonate Global Mission

How do you share your faith in a world where people are no longer familiar with Christianity—or any god at all?

“Christianity is no longer seen as the center of our culture and society. We’re one voice of many at the table,” said Kevin DeRaaf, Resonate Global Mission’s acting director in Canada. “Historically, we’ve typically gone in from a place of proclamation or telling. Now, in a post-Christian context, it’s one of listening and serving. What does it look like for us to earn the trust and respect and care of others and make them feel like they’re genuinely cared about by us?”

Through ministry shares, Christian Reformed Church congregations work together to share the hope of the gospel with people throughout the world. And as CRC ministry leaders listen and serve, they discover the Holy Spirit at work in people’s lives—even when people might not believe in God.

Post-Christian Is Not a New Challenge

A post-Christian context is not a new ministry challenge for the CRC’s work, especially for CRC campus ministries in Canada and the United States.

“I think it could easily be argued that our CRC campus ministries have, from their start more than 80 years ago, always existed on post-Christian campuses,” said Mark Wallace, Resonate’s campus ministry leader. “The Christian worldviews on campus do not occupy a privileged position over other worldviews.”

In fact, Wallace said, in today’s context, the Christian worldview might be more discounted compared to other beliefs, and over the past few decades, people have become wary of Christians.

“A more prevalent assumption now is if you’re Christian, you’re (intolerant). You’re biased. You’re anti-intellectual. You’re only out to convert me,” said Wallace. “Frequently campus ministers and campus ministries have to justify their existence and prove that they are different than they are assumed to be.”

Graduate Christian Fellowship, a Resonate campus ministry partner at the University of Washington in Seattle, provides

Resonate missionary James Lee (pictured here on the right in a pre-COVID photo) works in campus ministry in Mexico, but isn’t allowed on university campuses.

a space where academics and Christian faith intertwine. One way they do this is through the Kuyper Fellows program.

“This is a one-year intensive, vocational discipleship program for emerging academics,” said campus minister Ashley Van Dragt. Through reading, research, and mentorship, students explore what it means to be a Christian academic. The program also invites the wider campus to the conversation.

“Our ministries are not going

into uncharted territory.

We are simply discerning and

discovering where God

is already at work

and joining God in that work.”

Each year, fellows present on a project they’ve completed throughout the year. This past year, faculty and students from the university’s English department listened to the presentations.

“They asked such lovely questions, and it was grace to us—and I think for them too—to have this thoughtful, honest exchange around faith and learning and vocation,” Van Dragt said. “Each student begins their presentation by sharing their faith journey. ... I am hard-pressed to imagine a better way to witness in that candid, here-it-all-is sort of way.”

We Can’t Assume a Shared Story

“Being post-Christian, I think, first and foremost means that increasingly people do not have a world- and lifeview shaped by an understanding of God,” said Kevin Stieva, who serves with the CRC Chaplaincy and Care Ministry and the Canadian Armed Forces. “As a result, they have little understanding of human brokenness and sin.”

Many people throughout the world do not wrestle with the idea of human brokenness that is part of the gospel message, but for deployed soldiers, it can be difficult to grapple with the death, pain, and destruction they encounter. The shame and guilt they might feel can cause them to spiral into depression.

“I had an artillery officer who came back from Afghanistan. He returned with deep regret—I would even say self-loathing,” Stieva said. “With no context of human brokenness, with no understanding of a process of confessing and seeking forgiveness, he came to the point where he was so filled

with regret and self-loathing that he contemplated taking his own life.”

Stieva spent two and a half years meeting with this man and walking alongside him in his pain, helping him to process and heal. In a post-Christian society, it can take a long time for someone to accept the grace of Christ, but Stieva and the man came to a point where they prayed and read Scripture together. Stieva was eventually relocated but connected the man with another chaplain to provide encouragement and guidance.

A Variety of Religious Backgrounds

As people move throughout the world, countries that were once predominantly Christian are welcoming people from a variety of religions as well as people who have no spiritual background at all.

“Most of the crew members I interact with come from around the world and come from backgrounds where Christianity is not the foremost religion in their area,” said Michelle DePooter-Francis, who serves with the CRC Chaplaincy and Care Ministry and Ministry to Seafarers at the Port of Montreal.

“I’ll often have conversations with seafarers about the things they see when they are sailing, and I will point out my belief that this is part of God’s creation. I approach them in a very non-judgmental way and ask them if what they see corresponds with their faith or belief system.”

DePooter-Francis and other chaplains who serve with CRC Chaplaincy and Care Ministry seek to provide spiritual care to people of all faith backgrounds. During one conversation DePooter-Francis had, a Muslim seafarer shared about his difficulties at home and challenges his wife was facing.

“When I was leaving the ship, he specifically asked me to pray for his wife,” said DePooter-Francis. “His ship returned every month, and our interns and other staff had a chance to get to know him. After several months, there was a personal tragedy at home and we were able to sit with him, grieve with him, and pray with him while he processed the news.”

DePooter-Francis and her team said they could feel God at work during this time through this tangible expression of the gospel.

Never Post-Christian

While Canada, the United States, and many other countries throughout the world might be “post-Christian,” there are still many regions where Christianity, or at least religion, thrives.

“In Mexico, there’s a saying: ‘If you’re born in Mexico, you’re Catholic,’” said Resonate missionary James Lee.

While Catholicism in Mexico is often fused with traditional Aztec beliefs, society is still very religious—except



Michelle DePooter-Francis (right), a CRC chaplain serving with Chaplaincy and Care Ministry, delivers gifts to seafarers at the Port of Montreal.

on university campuses. Lee works with Compañerismo Estudiantiles A.C. (Compa), a local campus ministry, but he isn’t allowed to set foot on school grounds.

“Mexico prohibits any religious activity on campus,” said Lee. Instead, he connects with university students through local churches. Lee mentors students one-on-one, prays with them, and provides biblical guidance. He provides much-needed discipleship and support for students trying to navigate being a Christian in an environment that can be indifferent and sometimes hostile toward faith.

Recently a student named Azrael invited classmates to an online game night. They’d been working together on group projects for class, and Azrael suggested they get to know one another and have some fun outside of school work. At the end of the game night, Azrael shared he was a Christian and invited them to a Bible study. One student who participated in the Bible study was raised Catholic, sometimes attending Mass with his parents, but he didn’t take faith seriously. He said he never realized he could personally study God’s Word.

“Students are searching for something more than themselves,” said Lee.

“Although campuses are post-Christian, they are certainly not post-God,” Wallace said. “Our ministries are not going into uncharted territory. We are simply discerning and discovering where God is already at work and joining God in that work.”

As the world continues to change, CRC ministry leaders continue to respond by providing care that people need. They continue to point people to where God is at work in their lives and the world around them. **B**

Emerging Adults Plan Pre-Inspire Event Exploring Faith Formation

WHAT WOULD IT LOOK LIKE to invite emerging adults to speak into the life and direction of the church? What if there were an event geared toward equipping young adults to strengthen their church communities—and what if those young adults planned the event?

These questions came out of a conversation between Youth Ministry catalyst Ron deVries, Faith Formation Ministries director Chris Schoon, and Therefore Go executive director Rick Zomer in 2019. As they spoke together, the three conceived the idea of an event planned by and for emerging adults and ministry leaders to take place Aug. 4-5, 2021, right before the Christian Reformed Church's Inspire 2021 conference.

"When it comes to talking about the actual 'being' of the church and speaking into direction, quite often we don't give a lot of space to emerging adults," said deVries. "It became very clear to us that we shouldn't be the ones planning (the event), ... but we can certainly walk alongside."

DeVries reached out through the network of CRC Youth Ministry Champions to identify young adults who might be a good fit for the opportunity. The selected candidates formed a planning team representing the geographic spread of the CRC across North America, with members from Arizona, Iowa, Alberta, Ontario, and Quebec.

"The team's strength is really in our ability to synthesize each of our unique outlooks and use them to pour into a common goal," said team member Scott Bandy of Calvin CRC in



Ottawa, Ont. "I've enjoyed listening to the feedback of my co-planners and hearing their hearts behind this event." As the team continues to meet virtually, they are also discussing ideas for a virtual event if public health guidelines still discourage large in-person gatherings in 2021.

While the logistical details of the event have not been finalized, organizers hope to gather around 100 emerging adults and youth ministry pastors to wrestle with questions such as "What does it mean to be church?" and "What does faith formation look like?" Event participants will then be equipped to bring what they've learned and experienced back to their church communities.

"So often there are generational divides, especially in the church, and we don't know how to connect with one another," said team member Kylie Kalmbach of Covenant CRC in Edmonton, Alta. "I pray that God will use this pre-conference to bring us all together."

—Megan Herrema

The View from Here

Christmas in a Post-Christian World

CHRISTMAS IS one of the biggest holidays in the world. It's celebrated in more than 160 countries, including many places that are not actually Christian. In fact, the tying of Christmas to secular traditions such as stockings, reindeer, and Christmas trees is one of the reasons that some Christians raise an alarm about "the war on Christmas" and the need to put Christ back into it.

The truth is that we are living in what many call a post-Christian era, one in which a Christian worldview is no longer at the forefront of public affairs and societal norms. Instead, even in places where Christianity has previously flourished, we now see alternative worldviews such as secularism or nationalism taking the primary role.

Although one might be tempted to despair at this situation and doubt our ability as a church to effect change in a new direction, there is another choice.

In the book of Galatians, the apostle Paul writes, "I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you to live in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ" (Gal. 1:6-7).

Paul then goes on to recount how he was selected by God, suffered persecution, endured significant interpersonal conflicts, and persevered to spread God's Word. Our present neighborhoods and communities might be difficult places in which to

be overtly Christian, but for most of us, our present environments are nothing compared to the experience of the early church.

Stories about the spread of Christian ministry in tough places in a pre-Christian world should give us hope that God will continue to work through us to reach others and change lives.

As I think of the many ways in which we all participate in God's ministry, I'm reminded of a story about a group of bricklayers. When the first is asked what he is doing, he responds, "I am moving bricks." The second responds, "I'm building a wall." But the third bricklayer, with great pride and obvious enthusiasm, responds, "I'm building a cathedral."

May we hold God's grand vision in mind as we do our work and remember that the cathedral we are building is one held together in Christ—the one who came to us as a child in a manger, becoming like us so he could atone for all our sins. May God bless our work abundantly as we faithfully follow him!



Colin P. Watson Sr. is the executive director of the CRCNA. He is a member of Madison Square Christian Reformed Church in Grand Rapids, Mich.

포스트 기독교시대의 크리스마스

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그리고 나서 바울은 그가 어떻게 하나님께 택함을 받아 고난을 받고, 사람들과의 관계에서 얼마나 어려움을 겪으며 하나님의 말씀을 전파하기 위해 견뎌왔는지 이야기합니다. 우리가 살고 있는 지역이나 커뮤니티에서 기독교인인 것을 드러내기가 쉽지 않지만, 우리의 현재 환경을 초대 교회의 상황과 결코 비교할 수는 없을 것입니다.

Navidad en un mundo post-cristiano

기독교 이전의 세계의 거친 환경에서 그리스도의 사역을 전파한 이야기들은 하나님께서 계속해서 우리를 통해 다른 사람들에게 다가가고 그들의 삶을 변화시킬 수 있다는 희망을 보여줍니다.

우리 모두 하나님의 사역에 참여할 수 있는 여러 방식들을 생각할 때 벽돌공 무리의 이야기가 떠오릅니다. 첫 번째 벽돌공에게 무슨 일을 하고 있는냐고 묻자 그는 “벽돌을 나르고 있습니다”라고 대답했고, 두 번째 벽돌공은 “저는 벽을 만들고 있습니다”라고 대답했습니다. 하지만 세 번째 벽돌공은 자부심과 열정 넘치는 태도로 “저는 대성당을 짓고 있습니다”라고 말했습니다.

우리가 우리의 일을 하고 우리가 짓는 대성당이 그리스도 안에서 함께 지어져 가는 것이라는 사실을 기억하며 하나님의 원대한 비전을 가슴에 품기 바랍니다. 그 그리스도가 바로 구유에 어린 아이로 오셔서 우리 모두의 죄를 사하여 주시기 위해 우리와 같이 되신 분이심을 기억하십시오. 우리가 믿음으로 그 분을 따라갈 때 하나님께서 우리의 사역을 풍성하게 축복해 주시기를 기도합니다!

LA NAVIDAD ES una de las fiestas más grandes del mundo. Se celebra en más de 160 países, incluyendo muchos lugares que no son realmente cristianos. De hecho, la vinculación de la Navidad con tradiciones seculares como la de las medias, los renos y los árboles de Navidad es una de las razones por las que algunos cristianos suenan la alarma sobre “la guerra contra la Navidad” y la necesidad de volver a poner a Cristo en ella.

La realidad es que estamos viviendo en lo que muchos llaman una era post-cristiana, una en la que una cosmovisión cristiana ya no está a la vanguardia de los asuntos públicos y las normas sociales. En cambio, aún en lugares donde el cristianismo ha florecido anteriormente, ahora vemos que las cosmovisiones alternativas como el secularismo o el nacionalismo pasan a primer plano.

Aunque uno podría estar tentado a desesperarse ante esta situación y dudar de nuestra capacidad como iglesia para efectuar cambios a una nueva dirección, hay otra opción.

En el libro de Gálatas, el apóstol Pablo escribe: “Me asombra que tan pronto estén dejando ustedes a quien los llamó por la gracia de Cristo, para pasarse a otro evangelio. No es que haya otro evangelio, sino que ciertos individuos están sembrando confusión entre ustedes y quieren tergiversar el evangelio de Cristo.” (Gal. 1:6-7).

Pablo luego pasa a contar cómo fue elegido por Dios, sufrió persecución, soportó conflictos interpersonales significativos y perseveró para difundir la Palabra de Dios. Es posible que

nuestras vecindades y comunidades actuales sean lugares difíciles en donde poder ser cristianos abiertamente, pero para la mayoría de nosotros, nuestros entornos actuales no son nada comparados con la experiencia de la iglesia primitiva.

Los relatos sobre la difusión del ministerio cristiano en lugares difíciles en un mundo pre-cristiano deberían darnos la esperanza de que Dios seguirá trabajando a través de nosotros para alcanzar a otros y cambiar vidas.

Cuando pienso en las muchas formas en que todos participamos en el ministerio de Dios, me acuerdo de una historia sobre un grupo de albañiles. Cuando se le pregunta al primero qué está haciendo, responde: “Estoy moviendo ladrillos”. El segundo responde, “Estoy construyendo un muro”. Pero el tercer albañil, con gran orgullo y obvio entusiasmo, responde, “Estoy construyendo una catedral”.

Mi esperanza es que tengamos muy presente la gran visión de Dios al hacer nuestro trabajo y que recordemos que la catedral que estamos construyendo es una que se mantiene unida en Cristo, aquel que vino a nosotros como un niño en un pesebre, haciéndose como uno de nosotros para poder pagar por todos nuestros pecados. ¡Que Dios bendiga abundantemente nuestro trabajo mientras lo seguimos fielmente!

Answering the Difficult Questions

SEEKERS IN CHINA often run into a frustrating problem. Although they first see the Christian faith as intriguing, they often can't find answers to the difficult questions they have.

"The academic world in China has many prejudices against faith, which can leave those who are asking questions at a loss," said Jerry An, Chinese team leader for Back to God Ministries International, the Christian Reformed Church's media ministry. But BTGMI is helping people find some of the answers.

Stories from Peers

In late 2019, An and the rest of BTGMI's Chinese ministry team published a book of testimonies from students at Tsinghua University, one of the most prestigious universities in the country.

Shortly after the books were printed, volunteers began sharing them with students at the school. One volunteer named Yong passed out the books after church services and at a Christian conference. That's where he met Min.

"I gave the book to Min and told her the story of the book," Yong shared. "The next morning, Min contacted me. She had decided to follow Jesus and asked me to lead a prayer for her."

"I am sure that the book contributed to her journey of faith," Yong continued. "She had been seeking for many, many years and always asking tough and deep questions along the way."

A Friendly Rivalry

Because of the success of this book, as seen through people like Yong and Min, BTGMI's Chinese ministry team wondered if a little school rivalry might encourage Tsinghua University's long-standing competitor Peking University to undertake a similar project.

"We told contacts from Peking University about the project with Tsinghua University, and the idea took hold," said Jerry An.

Altogether, the new three-volume collection will contain 100 testimonies of God's grace in the lives of Peking University alumni. The next volume of this series will be available for Chinese New Year in February 2021. The books are also available for order in North America at BackToGod.net/new-songs-of-wanderers.

"I have heard over and over how people not only in China but around the world are struggling with life's most important questions as we continue to face the pandemic," BTGMI director Kurt Selles said. "As Christians, we don't have all the answers, but we have the most important ones."

—Brian Clark,
BTGMI

Girls Who Never Get to See Their Dreams Fulfilled

HANSA PRITY, 12, dreams of becoming a doctor.

Currently she is a high school student in a South Asian country, living within the poverty-stricken coastal belt also known as one of the most vulnerable areas to climate disaster. Life here is difficult, especially for girls like Hansa who are vulnerable to yet another type of tragedy: child marriage.

For girls and boys like Hansa, a World Renew partner runs some clubs for adolescents in this area. Hansa became a member of one such club in 2018, and she was enjoying her school and her time in this club, where she learned about justice issues.

But this good time did not last long for her. She was told she was to get married soon. Her father, a fisherman, suffered great business losses due to last spring's Cyclone Amphan, and he continues to face hardship due to COVID-19. He is unable to provide for his family of five. Marrying Hansa off would help him reduce some of his economic burden.

It was shocking news for Hansa. She does not want to get married now; she wants to complete her studies. She went to the local peace and justice committee that she had learned about in her club. Committee members including a school teacher, the president of the committee, and two other members of World Renew's partner went to Hansa's house to talk to her parents. Hansa's father said, "I understand everything, but what should I do? I am helpless and unable to support her studies."

The committee chairman, a school teacher, assured the father that the school would support Hansa's education. Hansa's father then agreed not to give his daughter in marriage before the age of 18, as per the law.

It was a great relief for Hansa. Her heart is happy at the news that she will be able to go to school again. But she has a long way to go. Along the way, will her father keep his word? What will happen when she turns 18? And will she be able to fulfill her dream of being a doctor?

Most girls like Hansa never get to see their dreams fulfilled. But they have hope that things can change as they learn to rely on help from those in their club and others who support the dreams girls like Hansa hold.

—By a World Renew field staff member
in South Asia

Ready to Be Virtually Inspired

ONE OF THE JOYS of the Christian Reformed Church's past two Inspire gatherings—in Detroit, Mich., in 2017 and Windsor, Ont., in 2019—was running into friends and colleagues one hadn't seen for a while.

People attending this biennial denomination-wide event could stop to chat and catch up on one another's lives and ministries. Participants from across North America could also tour parts of the host cities, hear from local CRC congregations, and visit community nonprofits.

Inspire 2021 is scheduled to take place Aug. 5-7 at the Tinley Park Convention Center near Chicago. But it is possible the in-person gathering could be postponed or canceled because of COVID-19.

Where will this leave the deacons, Sunday school teachers, worship planners, praise band members, refugee committee members, and those who want to learn more about how to serve their local church? How will they get together for plenary sessions, seminars, times of worship and simple times of fellowship?

The Inspire 2021 planning team is preparing for that exact possibility. If COVID-19 is still preventing large

meetings and gatherings, the CRC is making sure the event—in as robust a way as possible—can be offered online.

"We'll monitor the situation closely over the coming months to see if gathering together will be possible and what a dynamic virtual event could look like," said Kristen VanderBerg, a member of the planning team for Inspire 2021. "Either way, our plan is to make at least some of the content available online for people who are unable to come or are uncomfortable with attending."

Whether in person or via a virtual event, ministry leaders including pastors and authors Sandra Van Opstal, Ken Shigematsu, and Bishop Zac Niringiye are scheduled to lead plenary sessions at Inspire 2021.

"We have more than 80 workshops planned on a variety of topics, and we are trying to ensure that the workshop presenters, worship leaders, and speakers represent the breadth of diversity that we see in our CRC churches," VanderBerg said.

This year's theme, "Inspired to Be One," will focus on celebrating the

denomination's diversity as well as the need to come together as one church.

Home to several CRCNA congregations and ministries, Chicago is the third-largest city in the U.S., with a mixture of cultures and peoples that makes the city an apt metaphor for what Inspire—a binational event for everyone in the CRCNA—hopes to be.

Inspire will connect people across generations, cultures, and missions, reorienting them to the hope of God's kingdom.

All who are interested in attending are encouraged to mark themselves as "interested" on the event's Facebook page or sign up for Inspire emails to receive the most up-to-date information about speakers, workshops, and event logistics.

—Chris Meehan,
CRC Communications



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Home



MANY OF US HAVE SPENT a lot of time at home this year: working from home, learning from home, and just plain staying home.

Homes come in many different shapes and sizes.

- » In Coober Pedy, a town in the Australian Outback, more than half of the people live underground in dugouts and old opal mines to escape the extreme summer heat.
- » Other homes are way up in the sky. At 1,550 feet (472.44 meters), Central Park Tower in New York is the tallest residential building in the world.
- » In places where flooding occurs, homes are sometimes built on stilts.

Throughout history and around the world, homes can be built from many different materials, including snow, mud, bamboo, and adobe. During the 1800s, settlers on the Midwestern prairies would build homes called soddies from blocks of sod (grass and soil held together by the grass's roots).

You can visit bit.ly/2GTEsos for a tour of homes around the world.

Some homes are for living in all the time. Others are just for a while. Today, some people might be tired of being stuck at home because of COVID-19, but there are others wishing that they could be at home. Every day around the world some people have to leave their homes behind because of war, natural disasters, or other dangers.

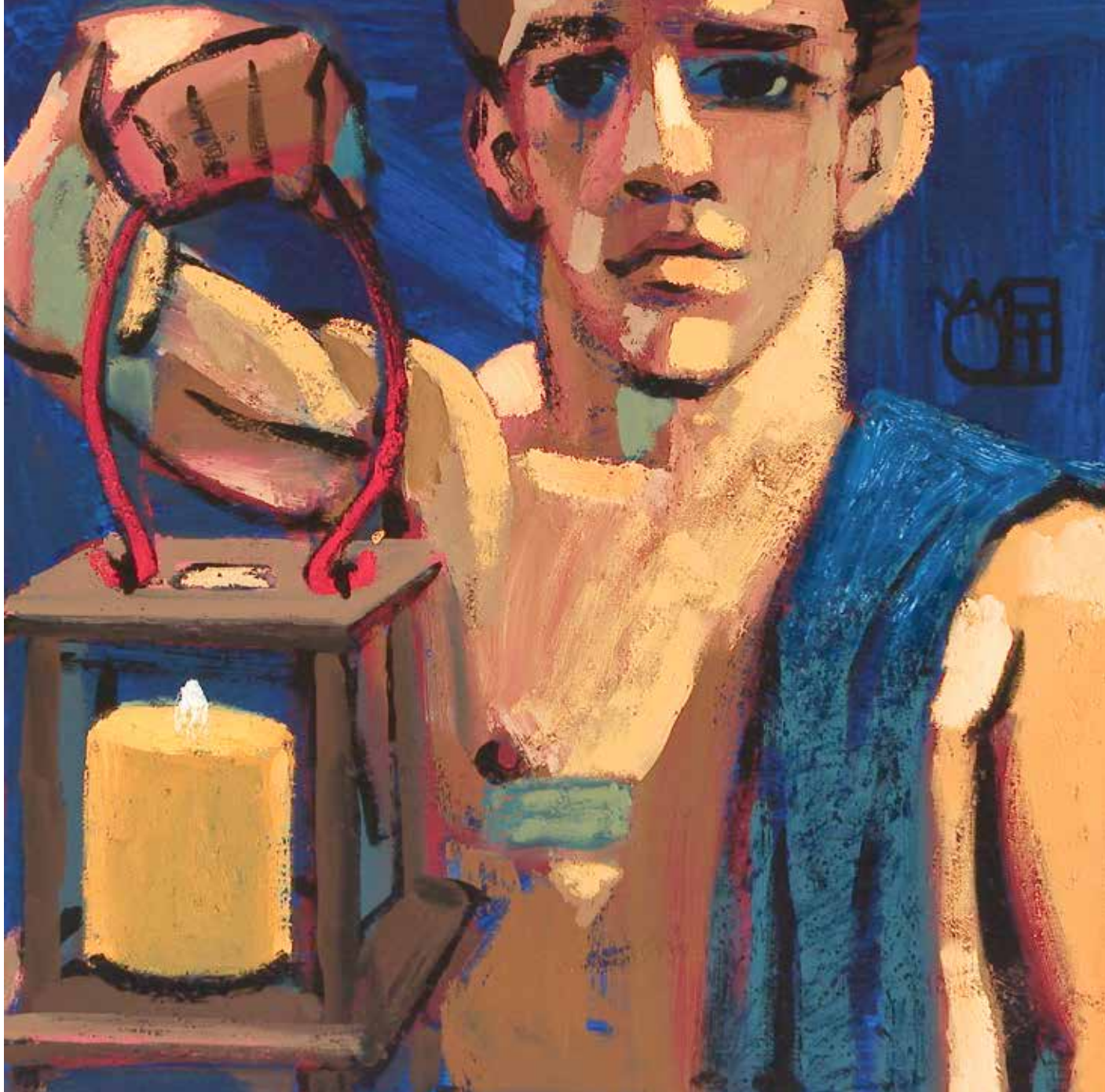
Jesus, the King of kings, was born not in a palace but in a place where animals were kept. Then he lived as a refugee for the first years of his life on earth. Our great God, who made the world and everything in it, loves us so much that he came from heaven to live

with us in our messy world: "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us" (John 1:14).

Jesus lived with us to make a way for us to live with him forever. He died to pay for our sins and then rose again, defeating death. Those who trust in him as their Lord and Savior will have eternal life. In John 14:2-3, Jesus says, "My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am." And we will never get tired of our eternal home with Jesus. **B**



Rachel Lancashire is a freelance writer with an educational background in wildlife. She grew up in the Christian Reformed Church and currently attends Gilmour Memorial Baptist Church in Selwyn, Ont.



Joseph 1:48 © 2019 Wayne Forte | EyeKons

Feliz Navidad

By Felix Fernandez

“**F**eliz Navidad!” These are the Spanish words for “Merry Christmas” that we love to say and sing in December. *Feliz* means merry or happy, and *Navidad* is connected to the English word “nativity” and means “arisen from birth.” So when we say “Feliz Navidad,” we are celebrating the Savior who, 33 years before he rose

from the grave, was raised to life in a manger in Bethlehem.

We can hardly say this season’s greeting without first cracking a smile and knowing in our hearts that we are sharing in a joy that is beyond us and yet inside of us. The words *Feliz Navidad* decorate Christmas with a Latin flavor, helping us to understand that Christmas is universal and, more

importantly, that Jesus is universal. Have you ever noticed how Spanish has a way of rolling off our tongues? Whether it’s Doris Day singing “Que Sera, Sera” or Arnold Schwarzenegger growling “Hasta la vista, baby,” Spanish is a Romance language, full of fun and full of passion, and I can tell you that Hispanics have a lot of love for family, culture, and the Lord Jesus Christ.

What's in a Name?

Three of the most popular names in Spanish are José, María, and Jesús. Translated into English these names are Joseph, Mary, and Jesus. Latinos don't have to look very far to find the holy family within their own families. My uncle's name is José, my mother's name is María, and my cousin's name is Manuel de Jesús, which means "Manuel, a descendant from someone named Jesus."

Who would name their child Jesus? Some might exclaim, "You are setting up that child to fail!" But someone else might say, "You are setting up that child to succeed!" After all, that's what going through the waters of baptism means: God is placing his name on us. So why not name your child after the name that is above every other name?

My name is Felix, a name that's in the Bible. The Bible even addresses Felix as "most excellent" (Acts 24:3). Never mind that Governor Felix, while he was sitting next to his Jewish wife, Drusilla, rejected the gospel message when he heard the apostle Paul speak about living a godly life and the coming judgment. The point is that I'm part of the story! That's what most Latinos want more than anything else for every single member in their family: to be part of the greatest story ever told—the story of Jesus! There are two particular ways that Latinos enter the story of Christ at Christmastime.

Noche Buena

The first way we celebrate Christmas is through *Noche Buena*. In Spanish, *buenas noches* means "good evening" or "good night." But when we reverse the order of these words and say "*Noche Buena*," we are specifically referring to Christmas Eve. This is the most sacred day in the Latino calendar.

To appreciate what *Noche Buena* means to Hispanics, we have to see Christmas the same way that Jewish people understand the 24-hour day. In Genesis 1:5, the Bible says, "There was evening and there was morning—the

first day." In the Jewish mindset, a new day begins when the sun sets, not when the sun rises. This is the first step to understanding why December 24 is so much more important than December 25 in the Latino understanding of Christmas. We know the

The words *Feliz Navidad* decorate Christmas with a Latin flavor, helping us to understand that Christmas is universal.

shepherds outside of Bethlehem were keeping watch over their flocks by night when the angels appeared to them, announcing the birth of Christ. I trust we all understand this to mean Jesus was born the night before the day we have chosen to call Christmas. And because Jesus was born the night before Christmas, that's when Hispanics get together to celebrate the birth of Christ.

Many people from Mexico and Guatemala prepare for *Noche Buena* by observing something called *Las Posadas* in the weeks before Christmas. *Posada* comes from the word meaning "to rest." During *Las Posadas*, two people in the community take on the roles of Joseph and Mary and go to different homes in the neighborhood, knocking on doors and asking if there is any room in the home for Joseph and Mary to stay or rest. Imagine a large group of people from your neighborhood showing up at your doorstep singing, beating on homemade musical instruments such as turtle shells, and asking if

there is room for Joseph and Mary. If the residents in the home say there is no room, they are expected to join the procession to the next home to ask the same question. This process is repeated until the band of travelers arrive at a pre-designated home that welcomes the group (and Joseph and Mary) into their home for a night of celebration with food, piñatas, and Roman Catholic rituals reserved for that evening.

Puerto Ricans similarly celebrate during Christmastime with a *parranda*, which means "party." *Parrandas* are very similar to *posadas*, but the idea behind a *parranda* is to surprise a homeowner with a group of Christmas carolers on their doorstep. If the party shows up at your home, it's your responsibility to welcome the carolers in and feed them. Once the group is done eating your food, it's your job to join them on their way to their next stop that same evening.

Whether Latin Americans prepare for Christmas Eve with a *posada* or a *parranda*, the understanding is that every mini *fiesta* is building up to the greatest *fiesta* of the year: *Noche Buena*.

Growing up in Miami, I felt as if *Noche Buena* was the most important night of the year. It seemed as if every aunt and uncle and every first, second, and even third cousin was invited to my house for the party. It didn't matter if the people walking through my front door were blood relatives or not; everyone under one's roof on *Noche Buena* is treated like family and welcomed with a hug and a kiss. Both of my parents are from the Dominican Republic, and the only other place I saw so many Dominicans gathered together was on the island of Hispaniola. On *Noche Buena* you could call my house a "little Dominican Republic."

If the *Noche Buena* invitation says the celebration starts at 6 p.m., it doesn't really get going until 8 p.m. Latinos as a whole are not known for being punctual. For the most part, we keep time

differently from our Anglo brothers and sisters in Christ. We are more a *kairos* than *chronos* kind of people.

In the New Testament, there are two different words for time: *chronos* and *kairos*. *Chronos* is more concerned with the traditional sense of time. It's about when things start and when things end. But *kairos* is different. *Kairos* is focused on making the most of the time. Don't be discouraged when Latinos fail to keep *chronos* time, because when we eventually walk through those doors, *kairos* time is about to begin. We are talking about the most rhythmic music you have ever danced to, the most flavorful food you have ever tasted, and the funniest stories you have ever heard. But the goal of every *Noche Buena* celebration is to make it to midnight. It is precisely at midnight that something amazing happens: you get to open your Christmas presents! (Do you have any idea how hard it is for a 7-year-old to make it to midnight without falling asleep? I know. I can remember.)

El Día de los Reyes Magos

For old-school Hispanics, opening presents on Christmas is still considered a novelty. They will tell you that Christmas is not the day to give and receive presents. Christmas is about celebrating Christ.

This brings us to the second-most important day on the Latino calendar during the Christmas season: Jan. 6, the day commonly referred to in Spanish as *el Día de los Reyes Magos* (Three Kings Day). This is the day for presents.

It was the Magi who, following the star to Bethlehem, brought the newborn king gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. The traditional way of thinking is that since the Magi brought Jesus gifts, then on the day we commemorate the Three Kings we too should share gifts with each other.

You need to know that Hispanics love the Magi. We rely heavily on church tradition for the names of the three

kings: Melchior, Caspar, and Balthasar. Melchior is said to be the one who gave Jesus the gift of gold. He is described as an old, white-haired man with a full beard. Caspar is said to be the youngest of the group—he didn't even have a beard! It's said he gave baby Jesus the gift of frankincense. Lastly, Balthasar is said to be the dark-skinned, dark-haired, full-bearded wise man who gave Jesus the gift of myrrh.

There is still a parade every year on Calle Ocho in Miami's Little Havana that celebrates Three Kings Day. While I lived in central Florida, a church hosted a special celebration every Jan. 6 for their predominantly Hispanic congregation to commemorate the arrival of the Magi.

Changing Times

Despite the traditionalist's firm grip on the way things should be in the Latino community, times are continually changing. With the Latinization of North America, Hispanics in the United States have slowly adapted their customs and traditions to fit the times and the country in which they now live. I didn't realize that when we opened our presents at midnight it signaled a shift in the customs of our culture. That's true for every Latino, whether you are a Cuban in Miami, a Dominican in New York City, a Colombian in Chicago, an El Salvadorian in Los Angeles, or a Mexican in Dallas.

Today, my three children are all teenagers. They grew up differently than I did. Both of my parents were immigrants from the Dominican Republic, but my children were born to parents who were both born in the United States. I was born and raised in Miami; my wife, of Scottish and Hungarian descent, grew up in Pennsylvania.

This means that my children grew up in a home in which the parents took the best Christmas traditions of both worlds (Latino and Anglo) and made it work for the children in a new way. We've raised our children to appreciate Christmas as a two-day celebration

including both Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. Our children don't have to stay up until midnight to open their presents Dec. 24. Right when we get home from the Christmas Eve service, each opens one present in honor of *Noche Buena*. On Christmas morning they open the rest. Then, on *el Día de los Reyes Magos*, it's been my tradition to give each of my children at least one present to help them remember the significance of Jan. 6, both in the church calendar and our Latino heritage.

This is the way we say "Feliz Navidad" in 2020. Many of us are familiar with this greeting because of the 1970 song by Puerto Rican native José Feliciano. It's amazing how such a simple song has captured the hearts of millions throughout the world for half a century. Many people who love "Feliz Navidad" may not know that Feliciano is blind. Like Ray Charles, Stevie Wonder and Andrea Bocelli, he is a gifted musician who, though unable to see, is able to open our eyes to an invisible beauty through his art. My prayer is that God will use this article to open your eyes to the wonder of a Savior who is still being born anew in the hearts of different cultures. 



Felix Fernandez is pastor of South Kendall Community Church in Miami, Fla.

Crumbs for Underdogs

When Jesus sees
that she sees, he
blesses her.

UNDERDOGS LIVE in a liminal world. People love them but don't support them. The greatest underdog in the New Testament is a nameless woman. Her story, sandwiched between two miracles, is neglected, but she accomplishes a Herculean feat: she verbally routs Jesus (or at least impresses him). The Pharisees try their best to outwit Jesus but fail. Not so with this Canaanite woman.

In Matthew 15:21-28, a Canaanite woman cries, "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is demon-possessed and suffering terribly." At first, Jesus ignores her, and his disciples find her annoying. "Send her away," they say. When she continues, Jesus rebuffs her: "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel." Undeterred, the woman kneels before him and utters: "Lord, help me!" Jesus responds, "It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs."

The text jars us. Did Jesus just call her a dog? But at this moment, the woman's words change the flow of the dialogue: "Yes it is, Lord. Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table." Jesus is thunderstruck. In essence, this woman agrees with his words and says crumbs are enough. Matthew says, "Her daughter was healed at that moment" (Matt. 15:28).

In the previous chapter, Jesus feeds 5,000 people, and immediately after this story of the woman Matthew records Jesus feeding 4,000 more. If anyone has bread, it is Jesus. The woman, however, intuits that Jesus also gives spiritual bread, and she is not too proud to beg.

The juxtaposition of her robust faith with the Pharisees' dearth of faith blindsides the reader. No wonder Jesus quotes Isaiah concerning the Pharisees:

"These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me" (Matt. 15:8). Jesus' disciples fare only slightly better; Jesus calls them dull and has to explain that externals are not as important as the heart. The Canaanite woman knows this. Outwardly, she has nothing and is nothing.

Sometimes we have to be marginalized to appreciate mercy. The Pharisees, smug and secure, ooze confidence in their traditions and standing. If faith is being confident of what is unseen, then they are too confident in what is seen to care about the unseen.

On the other hand, the Canaanite woman knows she is the epitome of a cultural outsider. She embodies the other, the foreigner, the non-entity. She asks for what she does not deserve. She understands mercy. Sinners do not have claims before God. When Jesus sees that she sees, he blesses her.

We have much to learn. We often feel secure not in God's promises or God's character, but in our performance, positions, and perceived talents. We don't ask for mercy; we barely ask for grace. Israel did not intend to lose its faith. Decline creeps at a snail's pace. A lack of faith here, a pinch of self-aggrandizement there, and before she knew it, Israel had concocted a potion for decay. The Bible declares that God loves underdogs. The Canaanite woman is one, and, unbeknownst to her, she approaches another, the Lamb of God. Through Jesus' work, mercy wins. All we need to do is cry, "Son of David, have mercy on us." **B**



John Lee is the head of the Upper School at The Geneva School of Manhattan, a Christian classical school. He also serves with Ben Spalink at City Grace Church in the East Village of New York City.

1. How did you feel or react when you first read or heard this story in Matthew 15:21-28?

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Are We Having Fun Yet?

Although I was weak and in a lot of pain, I was joyful that I was still in the land of the living.



Dennis Vander Plaats is a retired professor of education at Dordt University who lives in Sioux Center, Iowa, and attends Covenant Christian Reformed Church. He has six sons, 13 grandchildren, and four great-grandchildren.

THE YEAR IS MEASURED in seasons. Creation wakes up in spring, matures during summer, bears fruit in autumn, and sleeps the winter away. For a teacher like me, autumn is the season of preparation, getting to know new students, and falling in love with teaching all over again. Autumn is a season of joy. No one told me November was the month of the dead.

I had just retired from Dordt College, and my wife and I had begun our retirement years. These were the years we had long been anticipating. Gloria, my life partner of more than 40 years, and I had plans to fulfill. We had a long list of places to see and things to do. This was to be our season of joyful exploration: spending time with family, filling carefree days with play and adventure, walking paths not traveled on a snowy evening. We were going to have fun!

I was building a woodworking shop that summer. I had laid the foundation as soon as the frost was out of the ground and was framing the walls when Gloria was diagnosed with signet cell carcinoma, an aggressive appendix cancer. Our plans to fill our retirement years with fun were destroyed. After she went through surgery in mid-May, we spent the rest of the summer living one day at a time as Gloria was released from the hospital and readmitted several times. The cancer seemed so unfair because it was robbing us of expected enjoyable years together.

Soon after her first major surgery to remove as much of the cancer as possible, we understood that Gloria did not have long to live. In early July our family met to hear our decisions for her final days on earth. Gloria was at peace with dying, but she wanted to

die at home. After months in hospital rooms, I finally took her home on Sept. 25, our 43rd wedding anniversary, and I cared for her until the end.

While I was Gloria's caregiver, I was also building my workshop. One day in mid-October I came in from working on the shop to check on Gloria. She had been watching me work from her hospital bed in the living room. She must have been thinking of my future without her, and she said to me, "You're going to have so much fun when I'm gone!"

Her words broke me. Without her with me, I was anticipating the opposite of fun. I came to her bedside and hugged her while I sobbed. She asked me what was wrong, and I said, "I don't want to have fun without you." She died Nov. 4, and I felt as though my life had ended, too. Grief weighed me down that entire month. Grief might not be fatal, but it feels as if it should be.

On Dec. 3, one month after Gloria passed on to eternal life, I almost followed her. During November, I had continued building my workshop. I was working on the second floor on a cold wintry day. I remember my boot slipping off the first rung of a stepladder I had set up on the second floor, and my foot came down on a small block of wood, causing me to lose my balance. I stumbled backwards toward the open stairwell and fell about 12 feet to the concrete floor below.

The fall knocked me unconscious for a short time. When I woke up, I was in serious pain. I took my cellphone from my pocket to call my son Josh, who was staying in my house, but because I had hit my head so hard, I could not figure out how to use it. I thought, "Well, I can either lie here and die, or I can try to

get to the house." I know I didn't walk in a straight line, but I got to the house and called for Josh to take me to the emergency room. He drove me to the hospital, where the last thing I remember is getting into a wheelchair. I was airlifted to Avera Hospital in Sioux Falls for surgery, but I remember nothing about it.

The most serious of my injuries was head trauma. They did surgery that evening to remove a large blood clot that was putting pressure on my brain. My other injuries were a broken shoulder, three broken ribs, breaks in several lumbar vertebrae, and four chipped or broken teeth. I remained in a coma for several days. I remember waking up for just a moment to notice my daughter-in-law and granddaughter sitting by my bedside. I was dying of thirst but amazed I was still alive; hardly able to breathe because of my cracked ribs but so glad to be breathing; in almost unbearable pain but so thankful for God's blessing of life. We visited for a moment, and I went back to sleep.

Later that day I woke up again. I saw my daughter-in-law still sitting by my bedside and thought, "Just a month ago my kids lost their mom, and now they almost lost their dad. What did I almost do to them?" I said to myself, "I have so much to live for!" I was still feeling the loss of Gloria, but I was no longer overwhelmed with grief. I was still sad I had lost my life partner, but I no longer felt despondent and hopeless. I was grateful for the gift of life.

It took me a while to recover to the point where I was able to remain alert for any significant length of time. Although I was weak and in a lot of pain, I was joyful that I was still in the land of the living. Through much of the month of November, the month of the dead, I had been feeling sorry for myself. In fact, it would have been easy for me to give up on life myself.


I'm not suggesting I shouldn't have been feeling sorry for myself. I understand that's a normal part of the grieving process. But when I regained full consciousness and realized I was still alive and was expected to make a full recovery, I was overwhelmed with thankfulness that my life had been spared. It was as though God had given me back a chunk of time I didn't deserve so I could enjoy living, enjoy interacting with those I love, and enjoy God's goodness.

I was still grieving the loss of Gloria, of course. I expect I will be grieving her loss for the rest of my life. But my accident helped me focus on what I still had. Although my injuries were serious, I was thankful that, given time, they would heal. God used the accident that almost took my life to renew and energize my life instead.

Now, almost five years later, I understand what Gloria was saying when she told me I would have so much fun after she was gone. I believe she was giving me permission, even encouragement, to have fun—to see the places and do the things we had been planning to see and do together.

I believe every new day we are given is a new beginning, a day the Lord has made to see new places and do enjoyable things.

Each day begins a new season of discovery, offers learning adventures and playful times, provides opportunities to discover unexpected treasures, and gives meaningful moments interacting with family.

Each day offers chances to walk paths not traveled. Let's have fun! 



Top 7 Faith-Boosting Books of 2020

Try Softer

By Aundi Kobler

The journey to wholeness is sacred work. Kobler, a Christian therapist, gently invites us to lay down our burdens and become more attuned to the connection between our bodies and our emotions. She encourages us to move through our emotions rather than get stuck in them. Takeaway: There is divine healing power in self-compassion. (Tyndale)

Uncommon Ground

By Timothy Keller and John Inazu

How can we Christians love one another when we are so deeply divided? In this contentious year, *Uncommon Ground* encouraged me and gave me hope. As one soaking sore, tired muscles, I immersed myself in stories and testimonies from a wide range of contributors, including artists, thinkers, and leaders. Takeaway: Without a vision, the people perish, but we can and must pursue love with great hope. (Thomas Nelson)

When Narcissism Comes to Church

By Chuck DeGroat

Though I have never experienced having a narcissist pastor, this book helped me understand a loved one and even develop compassion for that person. This book allowed me to get a grip on what I was dealing with and how to live my life well and with boundaries. Takeaway: My eyes are open to the truth, and my hands are open to God's healing. (IVP)

The Mindful Christian

By Irene Kraegel

Anyone who worries that mindfulness is some kind of stealthy Buddhist practice need not fret. "I have come to recognize the practice of present-moment awareness as deeply embedded in Scripture and in the Christian tradition," Kraegel writes. Takeaway: Living in a broken world, where Satan seeks to agitate and exploit our thoughts, Christian mindfulness helps us

be "transformed by the renewing of our minds." (Fortress Press)

Chasing Vines

By Beth Moore

Beth Moore goes deep into the vine analogy spiraling through the Bible in a book about fruitfulness. How will we grow and flourish? How will we avoid drying up? I closed this book alight with new insights, having laughed way more often than I expected. Takeaway: God wants us to attach more securely to the Vine. (Tyndale)


Get Out of Your Head

By Jennie Allen

Allen, the visionary behind the women's discipleship ministry IF:Gathering, challenges us to flex our God-given power to shift negative thinking patterns and take back control of our thoughts and emotions. Allen vulnerably shares her own battle with toxic thoughts and tells us how she learned to take control and transform her emotions. Takeaway: Spiral *up* with runaway thoughts instead of spiraling *out*. (Waterbrook)

On the Road With Saint Augustine

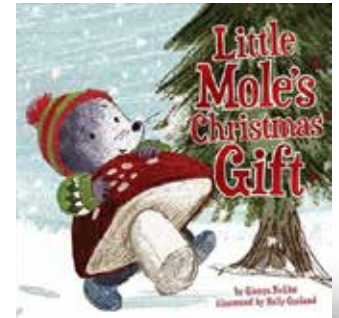
By James K.A. Smith

I was moved by this exquisite book about the relatable St. Augustine, especially by the chapter about fathers. Both Smith and Augustine experienced deep disappointment in the choices their fathers made. At the end of the journey, Smith and Augustine point us back to the Father who sees and knows us." (Brazos Press) 



Lorilee Craker, a native of Winnipeg, Manitoba, lives in Grand Rapids, Mich., in a 1924 house full of teenagers, pets, exchange students, and houseplants. The author of 15 books, including *Anne of Green Gables*, *My Daughter and Me*, she is the Mixed Media editor of *The*

Banner. Find her at Lorileecraker.com or on Instagram @thebooksellersdaughter.



Little Mole's Christmas Gift

By Glenys Nellist,
illustrated by
Sally Garland

Reviewed by Sonya
VanderVeen Feddema

Little Mole believes it's going to be the greatest Christmas ever because he has found the perfect gift for Mama: "the biggest, the best, the most beautiful mushroom he had ever seen!" As he drags the mushroom home, he imagines how surprised and pleased Mama will be to receive his awesome gift. As Little Mole sets off for home, he encounters needy creatures and is challenged to offer kindness again and again. Each time, his mushroom offers a solution to the problem. This gentle children's picture book about the gift of kindness subtly reflects author Glenys Nellist's trust in God, who showed immeasurable kindness by sending Jesus to redeem humanity and all of creation. (Beaming Books)



My Gift

By Carrie Underwood

Reviewed by Robert J. Keeley

When choosing Christmas music, many want both novelty and comfortable familiarity. *My Gift* delivers both, with excellent renditions of songs we know along with fine new songs, including “Hallelujah,” a duet with John Legend. While many listeners might wonder if they really need another version of “O Holy Night,” Underwood’s version is outstanding. Best of all, both the song selection and Underwood’s exceptional delivery communicate that she believes what she is singing. This album from the Academy of Country Music’s 2020 Entertainer of the Year is a worthy addition to your Christmas music collection. (Capitol Records Nashville)



Well-Read Black Girl: Finding Our Stories, Discovering Ourselves (Audiobook)

By Glory Edim

Reviewed by Michelle Loyd-Paige

I listened to this book twice while on a nine-hour road trip to Nashville, Tenn. *Well-Read Black Girl* is an anthology of 21 essays by 21 African-American female authors, curated and read by Glory Edim. Listening to these essays, I saw myself. I heard the voices of my dark-skinned sisters. I witnessed the struggles of my female neighbors, and I was connected to women who look like me but whom I have never met. This is the power and purpose of the anthology: to illuminate the lives, loves, and works of Black women. With wonder, curiosity, longing, and revelation, each woman testifies to the complexities of Black life in America. (Random House Audio, Audible)



Everything Beautiful in Its Time: Seasons of Love and Loss

By Jenna Bush Hager

Reviewed by Sharron Carrns

“As long as I’m alive, my grandparents will not be forgotten,” says Jenna Bush Hager, granddaughter of President George H.W. Bush and Barbara Bush. “I hear their voices in the letters they sent me and in my memories. They offer comfort, support, and guidance, and I will listen to them always.” Hager’s book is a collection of intimate stories about how her grandparents affected her life, from early childhood to her loss of three of those grandparents in just 13 months last year. Her grief is new, and she invites her readers to walk through it with her as she reflects on her memories, which she now sees through her own lens as a woman two generations later. (William Morrow)

The Lowdown

All Things Are Possible: In *An Impossible Marriage: What Our Mixed-Orientation Marriage Has Taught Us About Love and the Gospel*, husband and wife Laurie and Matt Krieg reveal how her same-sex attraction and their mutual commitment to God has shaped their unusual union. (IVP)

Greenland: Starring Gerard Butler, this thriller details an estranged married couple who must get their son and themselves to safety as a massive object from space threatens to destroy the world in less than 48 hours. (STX Entertainment)

Revisiting Charles and Diana: Emma Corrin plays Lady Diana Spencer and Gillian Anderson plays Margaret Thatcher in the fourth season of *The Crown*, which portrays the increasingly divided royal family in the 1980s. (Netflix)

Mediocre: From Ijeoma Oluo, the author of *New York Times* bestseller *So You Want to Talk About Race*, comes this subversive history of white male American identity. (Seal Press)

How Do We Know Christianity Is the Only True Religion?

Though all of humanity's religious efforts to grab hold of God fall short, God drew near to us and actually became one with us in Jesus Christ.



Chris Schoon serves as the director of Faith Formation Ministries for the Christian Reformed Church and is the author of *Cultivating an Evangelistic Character*.

Editor's Note: In November's Cross Examination column, we considered the question "Do all religions point to the same god?" This month's reflection continues that conversation.

Making the Unknowable Known

The book of Acts describes how the citizens of Athens built altars to many gods, including one "to the unknown God" (Acts 17:16-34). In response, the apostle Paul tells them about this unknown God—specifically, how God, the Creator, has reached out to save humanity in Jesus Christ.

Paul describes the way the unknowable God became knowable in Jesus, particularly in his death and resurrection. God, who is far beyond human comprehension, chose to become known to humanity.

Here is where we encounter one of the central truth claims of Christianity: though all of humanity's religious efforts to grab hold of God fall short, God drew near to us and actually became one with us in Jesus Christ.

Truthing: Embodying God's Love

One of my university professors said, "The greatest truth is not something we hold on to, but that which holds on to us." What we encounter in Jesus Christ is this truth in action: God grabbing hold of us in love to save us—and the whole cosmos—from our sin and all of its consequences.

Jesus Christ, then, is the living, active truth (John 14:6) that embodies God's love. As such, Jesus is transforming our understanding of truth from a noun that describes an abstract, philosophical concept into a living verb that shows us what God looks like in action. And what we see in Jesus' truthing is

the embodiment—the flesh and blood expression—of God's love.

Astoundingly, because humanity was created in God's image, when we look at Jesus, we are not only seeing who God is, we are also seeing the fullest expression of what it means to be human. Jesus, as the singular in-the-flesh expression of God's love, reveals the truth about God and about us.

Humility Required

So then is Christianity the only true religion? Inasmuch as Christianity calls us to recognize our dependence on God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ in order for us to know God, to follow in God's ways, and to be saved, then yes, Christianity is the one true religion.

However, this reality is not for us to boast about, take pride in, or lord over others, including people who follow other religions. As with every human community and institution, Christianity is full of people like me and you who bring their brokenness with them everywhere they go. Yes, the Holy Spirit is in the process of transforming us. But, as we've seen so clearly over the past year alone, Christianity can be co-opted by political agendas, Christians can be enslaved to a love of money and power, and the church can be an incubator for sinful behaviors that harm others. To the extent that we abandon our call to love our neighbors as God in Jesus loves us, Christianity fails to be the true religion.

We are called into a humble way of life that seeks to embody the love of Jesus through the Spirit so that the whole world might come to know God, the Creator of heaven and earth, in and through Jesus Christ. For the truth of Christianity is not that we somehow found our way to God, but that God, in Jesus Christ, came and found us. **B**

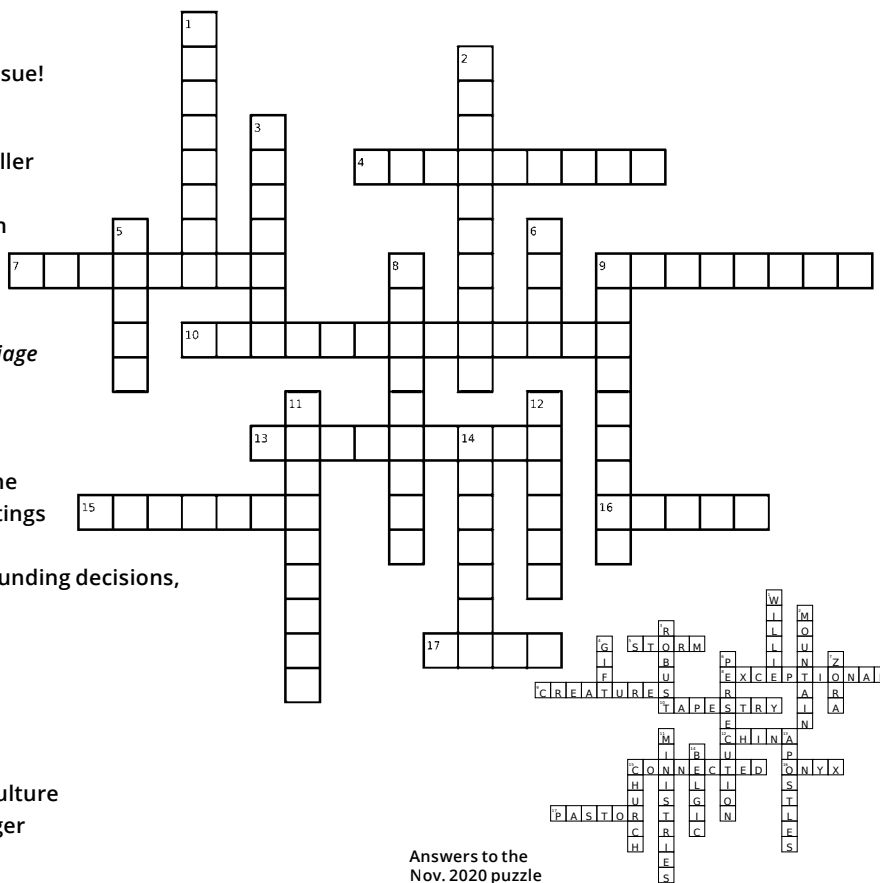
Find the answers to the crossword clues in this issue of *The Banner*. See the solution in the next issue!

Down:

1. First word in the title of the book by Timothy Keller and John Inazu
2. The ministry language of Igreja Ponto Central in Edmonton, Alta.
3. Crossroads CRC featured art depicting "Living _____"
5. Last name of the authors of *An Impossible Marriage*
6. They brought gifts to Jesus
8. One of the biggest holidays in the world
9. This woman begged Jesus for crumbs
11. The 60-member Council of _____ conducts the work of the CRC's synod between annual meetings
12. A beloved wife dearly missed
14. Pastors have been experiencing _____ surrounding decisions, tech, relationships, and ambiguity.

Across:

4. An active silence
7. A party in Puerto Rico
9. Pease CRC printed an anniversary _____
10. When Christianity is no longer central in our culture
13. *Everything _____ in Its Time* by Jenna Bush Hager
15. Planned for August 2021
16. What Jesus is
17. A word coined in 1976



Answers to the Nov. 2020 puzzle

Great News

A simple & tax-wise giving option!

IRA Charitable Gift conditions. . .

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- Your gift must be received before December 31 to qualify

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- Distributions made directly to 501 (c)(3) charities are not treated as taxable income

Would you like to contribute part of your IRA to the CRC and have questions? Contact us for more information at 1-800-272-5125



A Different Kind of Waiting

We were all waiting. But we weren't waiting like the rest of the world.



Linda L. Hanstra is a Speech-Language Pathologist in Edwardsburg, Mich. She and her husband attend Church of the Savior CRC in South Bend, Ind. She writes about faith, empty-nesting, and other topics at lindahanstra.com.

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

It was mid-December. We were all waiting. But we weren't waiting like the rest of the world.

In homes, they waited for Christmas. Young children counted the days with their Advent chains and calendars, anticipating that wonderful morning when they would tear the paper, fling the boxes, and see their wishes come true. Adults, also waiting, planned gift-giving, organized party menus, and made travel plans to visit family.

In the church, they waited for the Christ child. Advent services on those cold December Sundays counted down the weeks. Lighting each candle brought celebration of his birth one week closer. Pine boughs adorned the window sills, and the annual Angel Tree stood in the corner of the fellowship hall. Familiar carols filled the sanctuary in anticipation of the joyful Christmas hymns to follow.

We sang those carols. But our voices were restrained and melancholy. We yearned to focus on joy and celebrate the season as we always had. But this year was different.

We were waiting. But it was a different kind of waiting.

A young man who had spent his entire childhood as a member of our church was dying of a rare form of cancer. Morgan Bolt, 27-year-old husband to Christina, son to Marv and Linda, brother to Elyssa, Korynne, and

Ariane, and friend to many, was slowly fading with each passing day. We awaited the news none of us wanted to hear, yet we knew was coming.

Our holiday preparations were tempered by constant thoughts of Morgan and his family and what they were going through. Thoughts of growing tumors eclipsed trimming the trees. Reports of liver failure overshadowed holiday lights. And the word "hospice" drowned out the "Hallelujah" Chorus.

To ease our sadness, we prayed and spoke often of Morgan, remembering the sweet young boy who had stolen our hearts with his love of nature and hawks, roller coasters and snowboarding.

Morgan had taught us much in the four years since that dreadful day of his diagnosis. We learned to appreciate the gift of each day as we witnessed him and Christina living fully "in the moment"—that is, as much as that's possible when one doesn't know how long "the moment" will last, and when juggling a host of medical symptoms, procedures, and treatments.

We learned through Morgan's example, but also through his own words. Between chemo treatments and bucket-list adventures, he wrote a book. *Cancer Just Is* was published just weeks before his death. In it, he helped us understand that cancer isn't evil, and it doesn't "happen for a reason." It just is. With his bright, curious mind and a firm faith in God, Morgan shed new light on difficult questions of disease and suffering.

Morgan's book was his parting gift to us. He challenged us with these words: "So go volunteer. Go take a risk. Go live, really live. Life is shorter than

we think, and we have no guarantees. Live well and love everyone, without exception.”

On Dec. 18, one week before the Christmas celebration so many were waiting for, we got the call we had been waiting for. The call we had been dreading. Morgan had taken his last breath, his wife and parents at his bedside. The waiting was over. Our hearts were broken.

In this Advent season, as we stand in long check-out lines, sing our Advent tunes at church, and wait impatiently in traffic, we would do well to look around and remember the many who are hurting.

Waiting is not always a time of excitement, great expectation, and hope. The holidays are not without suffering and pain. “The Most Wonderful Time of the Year” might be the most difficult time for the stranger or friend standing next to you.

The pain of losing a loved one or celebrating a first Christmas without that someone may fill their minds. They stand next to us, brokenhearted from the sorrow of the previous Advent season or the pain from a season of loss long ago.

Is anyone you know suffering this holiday season? Is there someone who has lost a loved one over the past year? Drop them a note or card, send them a message, or give them a call. Let them know you are praying for them and that you haven't forgotten them or their loved one.


And if you're the one who is hurting this holiday season—if you can't find joy in the music, if you're waiting for someone to remember you in your pain—know that you are not alone. Others are mourning with you. Despite our joyful exteriors, our hearts ache for you.

We live in a fallen world where pain, suffering, and loss are inevitable. Cancer and car accidents, heart failure and miscarriages, gun violence and war: they are all part of our current reality. And we continue to wait.

We wait for cures. We wait for solutions. We wait for peace.

But we do not wait without hope.

We light our candles. We remember the birth of the Christ child and pray as we wait for his return. For we have been promised, “He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away” (Rev. 21:4). Our hope is assured by this Christ child. And he is worth waiting for.

Come quickly, Lord Jesus. 

DEADLINES: 11/30/20 for January; 1/4/21 February. Subject to availability. Details online.

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LEAD PASTOR - Aylmer CRC in Aylmer, Ontario is seeking a Lead Pastor gifted in the areas of shepherding and teaching. We are prayerfully searching for a self motivated and compassionate Pastor who is devoted to providing Reformed preaching, passionate about nurturing our spiritual growth and equipping us for community outreach. If this is a position you may feel God's calling to, we would love to speak with you. Please contact Lisa at 519-520-1220 or email bruceandlisavk@hotmail.com. Job description and church profile are available on the Portal.

LOOKING FOR A LEAD PASTOR Our pastor retired on August 1 and we are praying for a new pastor with a heart for multicultural ministry and proven experience bridging English and Spanish Languages. A pastor with a passion for church growth will encourage our members to share their stories with our neighbors. A pastor who is reformed and biblical in his teachings, with good communication, administrative, and leadership skills, who is able to shepherd old and new members alike, and who is bilingual and bicultural is the one we are trusting God to help us find. Please send us your resume along with your letter of interest for this very unique position to: searchteam@leestcrc.org attn Brian and Jack

PASTOR Creston CRC in Grand Rapids, MI is seeking to fill the position of Pastor who will work to promote Creston CRC's ministries and encourage our congregation in carrying out the church's vision and following the gospel. Through leading worship, providing pastoral care, mentoring and equipping, the pastor will help create a strong community of believers to love each other and our neighbors. If this is a position you may feel God's calling to, we would love to speak with you. Please contact Sheryl at 616-460-4507 or email crestonsearchofministry@gmail.com. The church profile and job description are available at Crestonchurch.org.

PASTOR POSITION AVAILABLE Champlain Valley Christian Reformed Church is seeking a full-time pastor to lead our congregation in Vergennes, Vermont. Please visit <https://network.crcna.org/church-positions> for more information or to submit an application.

PASTOR Zuni CRC is seeking a pastor to lead us in worship, encourage us in our growth, and to be a part of our cross-cultural community. Contact: tbecksvoort@zunichristianmission.org

WORSHIP COORDINATOR The Junction Church in St. Thomas, ON is seeking to fill a 16-20 hour per week position for a Worship Coordinator. This position requires music proficiency and an ability to plan a variety of worship styles in a multi-generational setting within the Christian Reformed perspective of Blended Worship. Interested candidates can visit our website at thejunctionchurchstthomas.com for a more detailed job description and to submit a resume with references.

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WORSHIP IN CENTRAL FLORIDA You are invited to worship with us at Lake Alfred Ministry, a church of Reformed persuasion in Central Florida, meeting from Nov.15-April11, Services: 10AM & 5:50PM. Pastors: Rev. David Adams, Nov.15-29; Rev. Herman VanNieuwenhuis Dec.6-27; Rev. Jim Admiraal, Jan.3-31; Rev. Ed Tamminga, Feb.7-28; Rev. Ron Noorman, March7-April11. Address:140 Mallard, Lake Alfred FL. Directions: lakealfredministry.org or call 269-720-6413

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Birthday

BIRTHDAY 102 YEARS

GRADA (VOORTMAN) RIETEMA will celebrate her 102nd birthday on January 15, 2021. Grada was a church organist in her younger years and the daughter of the late Rev. J. Voortman and wife of the late Clarence Rietema. Her family wishes to honor her with a card shower. Greetings can be sent to 340 W 40th St, Holland, MI 49423.

BIRTHDAY 95 YEARS

LOIS RITZEMA of 961 Parmelee Ct. GR 49504 will celebrate her 95th birthday on December 27. She is much loved by her children Robert Ritzema, Mary and Jim VanderWerp, Thom and Jan Ritzema, eight grandchildren, and nine great-grandchildren. The goodness of God shines to and through her!

BIRTHDAY 90 YEARS

ANNETTA KOETJE (DAMSTRA) celebrates her 90th Birthday on December 14, 2020. She was married to the late Harold Koetje for 63 years and lives at 3083 Thorncrest SE, Grand Rapids, MI 49546. Her children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren are thankful for her constant love and Godly example to everyone. Happy Birthday Mom!

MARILYN FERGUSON (MRS. GORDON) OOSTERMAN celebrates 90 years of grace on November 7, 2020 at 132 Pine St. Oxford, PA 19363. Children: William, Oxford, PA., Mary & Daniel Armistead of Las Cruces, NM: Her sons, Timothy (2018) and David (2013) already with the Lord.



MARION BRETON (DEVRIES) Will celebrate her 90th birthday on December 11. Born and raised in Lansing, IL, member of 1st CRC and charter member of Bethel CRC in Lansing. Attended Calvin College 1948-1950. Marion was the first teach-

er of deaf students at Elim Christian School in 1953. She is now a member of Delavan CRC in Delavan, WI. Marion is the mother of four children-Bob, Lei Ann, Mary and Ron: eleven grandchildren and nine great grandchildren as well as four step grandchildren and twelve step great grandchildren. Love to Mom, Grandma, Gigi. Address: 830 Oak St. Delavan, WI 53115.

Anniversary

WEDDING ANNIVERSARY 65 YEARS

BALLAST, Rod and Joyce, 65th Wedding Anniversary. - Dec. 5 - Cards can be sent to: 1725 Port Sheldon; Apt. C103; Jenison, MI 49428



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Obituaries

BAKKER, Thea Groenewold, age 86, of Elmhurst, went to be with her Lord on October 8, 2020. Beloved wife of the late Gerrit Groenewold and the late Richard Bakker; loving mother of Jacob (Linda) Groenewold, Frank (Mary) Groenewold, Carol (Andy) Van Someren, and Ken (Jennifer) Groenewold; devoted grandmother of 11; fond sister of 13; sister-in-law of Joanna (Donald) Jones; aunt of many nieces and nephews. Memorials to Timothy Christian Schools, 188 W. Butterfield Rd, Elmhurst, IL 60126.

BEELLEN, Kenneth 95, of Holland, MI passed away on August 24, 2020. He was preceded in

death by his first wife Elaine. He is survived by his wife of 23 years, Aggie; children Martha (Bruce) Frens, Beth (John) Bouws, Karen (the late Charles) Walker, Sandy (Steve) Hirdes, Kathy Beelen, Joan Beelen, Ken (Nancy) Beelen, Tim (Tonia) Beelen, Gary (Teresa) Beelen, Michael Beelen and Aggie's children Mike (Barb) VanderPloeg and Brenda (Scott) De Jonge. 37 grandchildren, 41 great grandchildren and one great grandchild.

DEKKER, Johanna "Chris" Christina, 95, of Grand Rapids, MI, passed away on Oct. 26, 2020. Preceded in death by her husband Martin Dekker and survived by her children, Barbara Murphy of Milton, MA, David (Peggy) Dekker, Dan (Patty) Dekker, and Beth Dekker;

19 grandchildren; 10 great grandchildren. Also surviving are her brothers, John (Clar-etta) Lobbes, and Ken (Ruth) Lobbes; and her sister-in-law, Marilyn (Alvin) Lobbes.

DYK, Louise, 99 of Manhattan, MT-the Lord took her to Heaven on October 24, 2020. She will be greatly missed by her children, Ron (Connie) Dyk, Kathy Dyk, Karen Dyk, two grandchildren, seven great grandchildren, her sister Nell VanDyken, brother-in-law Arie Dyk and sister-in-law Cena Brouwer.

IPPEL, Ruth (Zylman), age 92, of Grand Rapids, Michigan, and formerly of Sheboygan, Wisconsin, went to her heavenly home on October 19, 2020. She was preceded in death by her husband John, daughter Pat, parents, siblings and in-laws, and many friends. She is survived by her three children Jack and Cindy Ippel of Zealand, Mich, Steve and Kathy Ippel of Kentwood, Mich, and Jane and Phil Hilbrand of Hudsonville, Mich; eight grandchildren and 17 great-grandchildren; sister-in-law Connie Zylman.

LAUTENBACH, Shirley, age 89, and Don, age 93, of Grand Rapids passed away on October 20 and October 28, 2020 respectively. They enjoyed 66 years of marriage and will enjoy an eternity together with their Savior. They are survived by their children Kris Skinner, Kerri and Brian Diemer, Kim and Bill Lodewyk, Doug and Jackie Lautenbach, Kelli and Kevin Schutte; 22 grandchildren; and 20 great grandchildren.

VENHUIZEN, Roelena, Age 94, of Manhattan, Montana, passed away October 6, 2020. She is survived by her sons, John (Barb) and Dale (Nancy) and daughter, Donna (Jake), as well as 10 grandchildren and 29 great grandchildren. We are thankful to God for her long and fulfilled life.

WICHERS, Berendina, 93 of Bradenton, FL went home to her Lord on Oct 3, 2020. She is survived by her husband of seventy one years. Children: sons, Louis, Wilbert, Thomas and daughters Sandra L., Debrah, 12 grandchildren and 26 great grandchildren.

WORST, Frances, 105, of Grand Rapids, passed away October 15, 2020. Preceded in death by her husband, William, she is survived by her children, John (Ruth Tucker), Jim, Steve, and Mary. A life-long member of Creston CRC, she was a student of the Bible, taught adult education and served in neighborhood evangelism. Her warmth and humor endeared her to everyone, including the staff at Edison Christian Health Center where she spent the final decade of her life.

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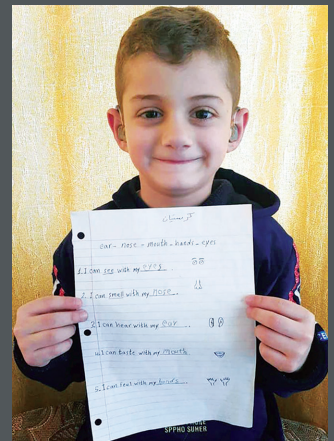


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Sitting in the Sun

Once we were seated, the server brought water and asked if we might be more comfortable in the shade. We would have been.



Rod Hugen is pastor of The Village Church and leader of The Tucson Cluster, a church planting effort in Tucson, Ariz.

“SHALL WE GO OUTSIDE and sit in the sun?”

I’m in Arizona, and I’d rather sit anywhere else than in the sun. Temperatures were in the mid-90s. Sitting under a cloudless sky with an afternoon sun baking my skull didn’t sound like anything I wanted to do. I had hoped for a nice table inside the air-conditioned restaurant, but she suggested that on such a lovely day we should sit on the patio. I couldn’t say no.

We moved slowly to the patio.

“You choose,” I offered, while looking longingly at the table under the shady mesquite tree. It wasn’t meant to be, of course. She pointed at the table near the edge of the patio, pristine white in the brilliant sunlight. “We’re in luck,” she smiled. “A table in the sunshine with a lovely view of the mountains.”

Great. Lucky us.

I’d known her many years before when I briefly served a church she attended. She was now skin and bones, looking sickly. She had aged severely. I remembered her as sweet-hearted and kind. But the church had long since closed. We hadn’t kept in contact, but we crossed paths at a funeral, and she suggested we have lunch.

Walking slowly with the aid of a walker, she struggled to make her way to the table. Once we were seated, the server brought water and asked if we might be more comfortable in the shade. We would have been.

“Oh, no,” she laughed, “this is perfect! We were just talking about getting the best seat in the house.” The server shrugged, took our drink orders, and wandered off. “So, how are you? What is God doing in your life? It’s been a long time.” Joy filled her eyes.

It had been a long time. I gave her a quick review of the highlights. We paused to order. She asked for a bowl of the *albondigas*. “Soup warms my bones,” she said.

Perspiration trickled down my neck and stained my shirt. I mopped my forehead and wondered if she’d noticed. She didn’t mention it. She pointed out the Cooper’s hawk circling high in the blueness above. We watched it plunge toward the horizon and disappear into the distance. “Gorgeous creatures, aren’t they?”

They are, but I was miserable. The food came. She barely touched hers. “I don’t have much of an appetite,” she explained. “I’m full of cancer.” She added matter-of-factly, “I probably won’t be around much longer. Soup is about all I can stomach these days.”


What do you say to that? I couldn’t find my voice.

“Don’t look so sad.” She smiled. “It’s a lovely day. The sun is shining. We got to watch that beautiful hawk. I got to reconnect with an old friend. God is being so good to me. Tell me more about your church.”

I didn’t know what to talk about. I picked at my salad and answered her cheerful questions. The server cleared our bowls. She asked him for the check.

“Let me get it,” I pleaded.

“Not a chance.” She laughed. “Just look at you. You’re burning up in this hot sun. Don’t think I didn’t notice. Yet you never said a word. Thank you for that. With this awful disease, I just can’t stay warm. The least I can do is buy your lunch.”

She did. It was the last time I saw her .

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