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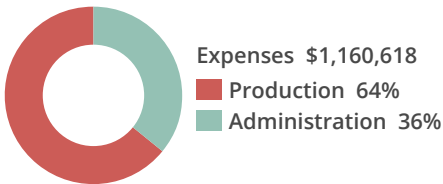
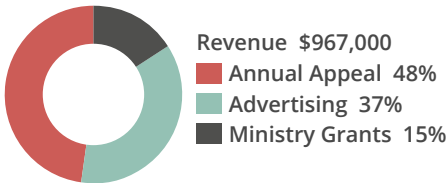
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BY THE NUMBERS

Ever wonder how *The Banner* is funded or what we do with the money? There are more costs to making a magazine than the printing and postage. And while we get some funding from the denomination via ministry shares to make up for any shortfall and from selling ads, the majority of our funding comes from you, our loyal readers. We are grateful for all the financial support readers have given to us over the years. Here's a breakdown of our budget:

Show Me the Money



WHAT'S ONLINE

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

- » News: Christmas Gift Outreach Bears Fruit for Michigan Church
- » *No Church In A While*, by Lecrae and 1K Phew
- » Book: *Moonshine Promises*, by John Van Rys
- » Podcast: *Off the Pulpit*

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Thea Leunk // There is no "pink letter" edition of the Bible.



What Causes Our Polarization?

Andrew Hanauer // Toxic conflict should be actively resisted.



Faith Matters: Slow Down and Take It In

Corey Van Huizen // I spend a lot of time listening.

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The Silenced Middle

A lot of good people who might have good ideas or even good questions end up silenced in fear.



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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IN OUR INCREASINGLY polarized society, many speak of “the shrinking middle.” It depicts the seemingly smaller number of people who hold moderate views between two polarized views. But some challenge this assumption. Is the middle really shrinking, or is it being silenced?

In the second of our “Seeking Shalom in the Midst of Polarization” series, Andrew Hanauer mentions this aspect of toxic polarization (“What Causes our Polarization?”, p. 32). He suggests that many moderates keep silent for fear of being kicked out of their group or attacked by other groups. Their silence often makes things seem more polarized than they are because only the extremes get air time.

David French, a conservative U.S. journalist, talked about the same issue in “Christians and Cancel Culture,” the keynote speech at last year’s Evangelical Press Association convention. French defined cancel culture as attempting to disproportionately punish someone for breaking group boundaries of acceptable ideas and behaviors. Cancel culture is rife in both the so-called right and left wings. But French noted that cancel culture is most dangerous and effective not when attacking an out-group, but when disciplining in-group dissenters. When someone is aggressively “canceled” by the out-group enemy, in-group members often will rally in defense of the canceled person. That person might even end up becoming a group martyr and hero, ironically, raising his or her influence and following. French noted that there is a growing trend of personalities deliberately courting cancel culture attacks from opposing parties to gain fame and influence in their own party.


Moderates within each party are, however, often the most vulnerable and isolated. If they criticize their

own group, they risk being canceled by their own with few to rally behind them. And they don’t get much support from anyone outside their group either. Ironically, these moderates are the most vulnerable to cancel-culture attacks from within their own group.

All of this results in a fear of speaking out, a fear of criticizing one’s own side for any flaws, excesses, or mistakes. A lot of good people who might have good ideas or even good questions end up silenced in fear. Nobody dares to suggest ideas different from the party lines. This silence only fuels more polarization.

So is it a shrinking middle or a silent majority in the middle? I don’t know if it’s a majority, but I do believe that the middle is intimidated into silence and self-censorship.

I don’t think throwing more facts and intellectual arguments at each other is going to solve the problem. But Hanauer reminds us that what we do and how we make people feel are more memorable, in the long run, than what we say or argue about. Higher emotional intelligence (EQ) is probably more needed now than higher IQs. This relates to my previous editorial “Cats or Toasters?” (February 2022).

I agree with French that Micah 6:8 should be our guide in this mess. We need to act justly, show mercy, and practice humility with people with whom we disagree. I will be the first to admit that I have not mastered this, nor do I boast of a high EQ. But I am committed to trying even when I often feel like I am caught in the vulnerable middle. 



REPLY ALL

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

Racism and the Bible

All my life, *The Banner* has seemed a frequent source of enlightenment in seas of controversy. Editor Shiao Chong's "Racism and the Bible" (February 2021) is such a ray of light.

» Bruce A. Scholten // Durham, England

Bethany Christian Services

The Council of Delegates' decision to rescind its support of Bethany Christian Services is misguided and ill-advised ("Bethany Christian Services No Longer Recommended for Offerings," online). The purpose of BCS is to serve foster families, children, and others in need. It does this effectively, lovingly, and with great care. As such, it should be encouraged and supported, not only by individuals but also as a church endeavor. I am aware of the recent controversy; however, considering themes expressed throughout the Bible (e.g., James 2:13, "Mercy triumphs over judgment") and the importance of what they do, I believe that decision should be reconsidered and rescinded.

» Stewart Treiling // Sun Valley, Calif.

Sanctity of Human Life

I was pleased to read the article "Learning Mercy from Down Syndrome" (January 2022). Doug certainly is a fellow image-bearer of God and has no less value in God's sight than any other human being. What about advocating mercy for the unborn? I was disappointed by the absence of any mention of abortion in the January issue, since January is Sanctity of Human Life Month. Around 73 million induced abortions take place worldwide each year, according to the World Health Organization. Instead of wasting precious resources on weather, which God controls, please advocate for restored protections for the unborn and highlight the many organizations working to save lives.

» Carmen Reitsma // New Sharon, Iowa

Forgiveness

Amanda (Benckhuysen), many thanks for your article on forgiveness and its relationship to repentance, reconciliation, and trust ("Let's Get Serious About Forgiveness," January 2022). It has helped me understand better what has sometimes gone on in my head and has explained what I have seen over the years and have heard regarding these in the lives of others.

» Dave Learned // Ann Arbor, Mich.

Sin No More

I appreciate greatly your interpretation of the John 8 telling of the interaction between Jesus and the woman caught in adultery and the pastoral nature of your editorial ("Sin No More," January 2022). It is a welcome antidote to the Calvinist inclination to position sinners in the hands of an angry God. I agree that we need both non-condemnation and encouragement to sin no more. I disagree, however, with your characterization of those who affirm same-sex marriage and LGBTQ+ inclusion in the church as "not talking about sin at all" and "distorting Christian discipleship." The nub of the present debate is that Side A and Side B disagree about what sin is. It is not that some of us don't want to talk about sin, but the Human Sexuality Report talks predominantly of sin and of exclusion rather than embrace. That is a grave error and not the face of God I want people to see.

» Thomas B. Hoeksema Sr. // Grand Rapids, Mich.

Thank you for your pastoral posture toward LGBTQ+ people in the Christian Reformed Church in your editorial. Your superb articulation notwithstanding, your editorial makes the underlying assumption that practicing homosexuality is a sin. It is my view, shared by many who have left the CRC in part because of their position on LGBTQ+, that Scripture does not teach a normative form of gender complementarity. Furthermore, moral logic underpinning the negative portrayal of same-sex eroticism in Scripture does not address loving, committed, and consecrated same-sex relationships (J.V. Brownson, *Bible, Gender, Sexuality*, 2013). "Sin no more" is condemnation and should not be the final word. Please continue to be pastoral, but also promote change; the CRC can do better than 1973.

» Wendell Wierenga // Rancho Santa Fe, Calif.

A Diamond Hidden in the Church Order

Children of God

Chris Schoon, very nice article (“Are All People Children of God?”, November 2021). I kept waiting for one of my favorite Scripture passages, but it did not happen. If I were your editor, I would have suggested this: In your last paragraph, where you say, “The light of these passages prompts us to ask additional questions,” follow that with this: “The first question you should ask should be, ‘How does a person become a child of God?’ John 1:12 tells us, ‘Yet to all who did receive him (Jesus), to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.’”

» Russ Hoekman // Cypress, Calif.

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- » A Place of Acceptance
- » At the Feet of Jesus

LOOKING TO THE Christian Reformed Church’s Church Order as a source of inspiration or vision for ministry is counterintuitive, to say the least. But think for a minute how much effort, time, and energy goes into considering every article. I am specifically thinking about the Church Order articles related to the office of deacon and how they give instruction for the healthy functioning of a church in its context, locally and at the classis level.

Synod 2010 established a task force with a mandate to make recommendations that would restructure the diaconate in such a way that the church at local, classical, and denominational levels would be empowered to live fully into its justice and mercy mandate, ensuring that church and community flourish.

Synod 2015 formalized that 2010 vision by making it part of the Church Order. Using Ephesians 4:12 as a foundational text, the Church Order now calls deacons to prepare God’s people for works of service so that the whole body of Christ may be built up. As a result, the following shifts were incorporated into church order:

- » Deacons are now tasked to call the whole church into *diakonia* (New Testament Greek for deacon and servant) locally, regionally, and internationally and to emphasize justice and reconciliation as well as charity.
- » Both elders and deacons now are mutually accountable to their full council or classis for their respective parts of the church’s mission.
- » Continuity of vision and mission is made easier with more flexible organizational rules about such things as terms of service.


While progress has been made over the past six years, many deacons still

The Church Order now calls deacons to prepare God’s people for works of service.

find themselves with a few formal functions (often related to benevolence and finances) rather than the tasks of overseeing ministries of justice, mercy, reconciliation, and community connectedness as articulated in the synod decisions. Classes, too, are struggling to cast a regional vision for diaconal connections.

Diaconal Ministries Canada summarizes the ministry areas deacons ought to give oversight to: leadership development and administration, mercy and justice, stewardly living, and community engagement.

The responsibility of the deacons, then, is not to run the specifics that flow from these priorities. Instead, deacons see to it that these priorities are part of the ministry plan of the church, recruit leadership around each priority, and regularly track outcomes for each. These outcomes then become part of the diaconal report to the full council.

Let us live into this vision that is so deeply embedded in our Church Order. 



Andrew Ryskamp attends Madison Church (Square Campus) in Grand Rapids, Mich. After retiring in 2015 as co-director for World Renew, he enjoys investing in relationships as husband, dad, Opa, friend, and ministry consultant.



A Biblical Woman

By Thea Leunk

“Pastor Thea,” she asked, “can you direct me to some specific passages or a book of the Bible that will help me better understand how to grow my faith as a Christian woman?” We had just ended a gathering of our women’s Bible study, and the question came from a woman who was new to the Christian faith.

I admit it: I winced at her question. How to gently explain that as Reformed Christians, we confess that the Bible, as the Word of God, speaks to all of us with all of its words? The priesthood of all believers means that the Bible is equally accessible to all of us through the Holy Spirit, who opens

our hearts to God’s voice. Despite the best marketing efforts of Bible publishers, there are no “pink letter” or “blue letter” editions of the Bible. Regardless of which pronouns we use, all of the Bible is “inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness” for all of us (2 Tim. 3:16, NRSV).

But the question was genuine. Where could I direct her? To a woman of the Bible? Sarah? Deborah? Ruth? The Marys that walked beside Jesus? How about the list of Paul’s colleagues in Romans 16: Minister Phoebe, Teacher Priscilla, Apostle Junia? What if we looked at Rahab, the only woman listed in Hebrews 11 as an exemplar of the faith?

Rahab—a heavyweight of faith in salvation history? Rahab, no pretending otherwise, is a prostitute. Her story is told in Joshua 2, a story of bumbling spies and seamless lies. Sent by Joshua to check out the defenses of Jericho, the spies spend little time engaged in actual reconnaissance. Instead, they sneak into town and head right to its brothel. They aren’t capable of keeping a low profile, either. Alerted to their presence, the king demands that Rahab turn the spies over to him. Instead, Rahab hides them and tells the king they had already sneaked out the city gates the night before and headed back to the Israelite camp. Rahab then sends the spies to hide in the hills in the opposite direction of the king’s search party until it’s

safe for them to return to their camp, where all they can report back to Joshua is Rahab's intel.

But before the spies leave Jericho, Rahab secures a promise from them that she and her family will be saved when the city is destroyed. And indeed, as the city falls, Rahab lowers the agreed-upon signal—a red cord—from her window, and she and her family are saved.

But why does the writer of Hebrews praise Rahab? Whatever the reasons that might have forced her into her profession, Rahab is a marginal figure in her society. Even where she lives tells us that: she lives in the city wall, on the very edge of town at the boundary between inside and outside. Maybe that's why it's easier for her to respond differently to the invading Israelites. Rahab is truly an outsider: she is a woman, a prostitute, and a pagan. Perhaps that is what makes it possible for her to turn traitor and liar. Yet it is Rahab who understands best who Yahweh is: "Your God is indeed God in heaven above and on earth below" (Josh. 2:11, NRSV).

The story of Rahab is less about what happened than why it happened. It is Rahab's confession, not her subterfuge, that is the focus of the story. Through the grace and mercy of God, this woman serves as a witness to truth and as a role model of faith. It's another story in which God reminds the Israelites that they weren't chosen because they were a great or mighty people. Israel's story is the story of God's compassion and mercy rather than a story of Israel's inherent righteousness. That is the beauty of Scripture: hearing again the biblical story and its rich themes. And one theme in that story is the theme of Rahab's story: who it is that God calls to be part of the family of God.

Rahab is truly
an outsider: she
is a woman,
a prostitute,
and a pagan.

We like stories where there are clearly defined roles, where wrong is wrong and right is right, where it's easy to know who the good guys are and who the bad guys are. Of course we think the good guys are always us; we are not the pagan Canaanites. We often read these stories with the conviction that God likes us. We're the sheep, not the goats.

But the truly astonishing fact is that the Bible has more stories about goats becoming sheep—people whom the community of faith has cast out but whom God hauls back in. God comes to the Egyptian Hagar in the desert and promises to make a great nation of her son Ishmael. A Samaritan woman brings her entire village to faith in Jesus. And a Canaanite prostitute saves two spies and reminds us all that Yahweh is God "in heaven above and on earth below."

So how is it that such a woman becomes the great-great-grandmother of King David? How is it that her name appears three times in the New Testament: as an ancestor of Jesus in Matthew 1, as an example of true Christian hospitality in James 2, and as the only woman in the Hebrews 11 roll call of superheroes of the faith?

"By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had received the spies in peace" (Heb. 11:31, NRSV). Rahab knew that there is more to this world than what meets the eye. She sensed that a new world was breaking into her present one—a world ruled by the God of heaven and earth.

Every person making that list understood faith as a verb, as a spiritual muscle that allowed them to act as they would have otherwise been unable to act. Faith is what enabled them to persevere even in the middle of difficult circumstances, to step into the unknown with courage to live a life of risk.

We, too, live by faith. By faith we know that the world and all its inhabitants are destined by God for redemption and that even now history moves steadily toward the day when Christ will come again and God's reign will be established in fullness—a new heaven and a new earth. By faith we pray, "Your kingdom come. Your will be done." By faith we live in "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (Heb. 11:1, NRSV). By faith, we live into a vision that is not yet present or visible to the eye yet empowers us to move into the future with trust and confidence, knowing that our world belongs to God. We claim that future even when it demands our radical trust and costly obedience. We join those who, like Rahab, look for the ultimate completion of God's saving work.

Rahab's story isn't just for women because it isn't just a woman's story. It's God's story, and God's story is always bigger and greater and grander than our individual stories.

What joy! We dwell in the deep assurance and the solid conviction that God's story is big enough to include us all. **B**



Thea Leunk is a retired pastor of the Christian Reformed Church in America. She most recently pastored Eastern Avenue CRC in Grand Rapids, Mich.

BIG QUESTIONS

Ethics

I work for a large corporation. Recently I received a bonus in my paycheck. Though I could really use the money, I think it might have been given by mistake. Do I have an obligation to say anything?

The fact that you're asking this question speaks well of your integrity—and suggests that you already know the answer.

“Obligation” is a strong word. Whether we have an obligation often depends on our knowledge of the circumstances. If all you knew was that your supervisor was happy with your recent work and you had been given a bonus, then you're not really obligated to do anything other than to accept the bonus with gratitude.

However, if you have additional knowledge—say, that this bonus was meant for someone else or has specific criteria that don't actually apply to you—then that additional knowledge brings with it a stronger obligation. And yes, the right thing to do is to ask your supervisor if there was a mistake.

Doing so is definitely not fun. It's a good reminder that doing what is right sometimes brings with it a cost. Your employer might take back the bonus and give it to the correct person. It's also possible that they will let you keep it, since it was their error and not yours. But if that happens, you'll be able to enjoy the windfall with a clearer conscience than if you didn't inquire.

If they do take the money back, that may be disappointing. But you'll have the peace of mind that flows from doing what is right. That peace of



Illustration for *The Banner* by Gisele Bohórquez

mind will also be a reminder that the choices we make in small, everyday matters of life play a big role in shaping our character. Character should matter to us as Christians, even though in this particular instance we can imagine non-Christians coming to the same conclusion about the bonus. For Christians, minor opportunities for faithfulness are the training grounds of grace, shaping us as disciples who will more naturally follow the way of Christ in the small and big moments of life that come our way.

Matt Lundberg is the director of the de Vries Institute for Global Faculty Development at Calvin University. He and his family are members of Boston Square CRC in Grand Rapids, Mich.

Faith Formation

Our church is filled with retired people. We don't have many children. How can we minister to the children if there are so few of them?

Every church would love to have a nice mix of young and old people, but there are times when, for a variety of reasons, that doesn't happen. In setting up a ministry to children, the default position is to set up classrooms separated by age, like a school. If you have just a few children, though, that might not work for your church. But

there are resources designed specifically for small churches. DWELL Flex, available from Faith Alive Christian Resources, suggests ways to teach multi-age classes.

You have a unique opportunity to use the rich resources of an older congregation. Older church members' experiences can provide stories, wisdom, and perspective for all the people in your church. Work specifically to connect children with some of the seniors in your congregation to be prayer partners or pen pals.

Children, teens, and adults can learn together. Talking about personal connections with a Bible passage or story instead of asking only fact-based questions can engage everyone. Having people respond to Scripture by creating something artistic also makes space for everyone's involvement. Participants will not only learn about the Bible but will build relationships.

A variety of publishers offer resources to help you connect generations. Our go-to resource is the intergenerational *WE* curriculum from Faith Alive. Using *WE*'s lesson outlines, you can create your own intergenerational events too.

Intergenerational connections strengthen community and enhance the faith formation of all members of your congregation. A church with many retired people, like yours, seems

well positioned to make this a significant part of your ministry.

Laura Keeley is a regional catalyzer for Faith Formation Ministries and director of children's ministries at 14th Street CRC in Holland, Mich. Robert J. Keeley is a professor of education at Calvin College and director of distance education at Calvin Seminary.

Relationships

It feels as if the Christian Reformed Church is headed for a denominational divorce over LGBTQ+ concerns. Is a church split inevitable?

The quick answer, of course, is that “with God all things are possible” (Matt. 19:26), and therefore no, a split is not inevitable. But even though this verse reflects an eternal truth, it can be more reflective of our desire for a quick fix of a complex issue than an expression of our faith. There are a number of factors that will determine whether the denomination's collective response will maintain church unity or provoke a split.

In a marriage, when divorce is being considered, a couple's motivation to stay together plays a big role. It takes only one person to break a relationship, but the desire and work required for a marriage to go forward and become healthier cannot succeed if both partners are not highly motivated to work for success. One person alone cannot make it happen. (The official position of the CRCNA is that divorce is not permitted except in the case of infidelity.)

Similarly, a denomination such as ours—binational, theologically Reformed, accepting not only of “special grace” but also of “common grace,” active in culture rather than dismissive of it—must be motivated to make unity (i.e., belonging) a priority.

It seems our particular church of Jesus is facing the same crossroads that many other Christ-believing denominations have had to resolve one way or another—namely, should our denomination stay together or split apart? Help!

And that is the best option for all of us: to turn to God for help in times of trouble. Jesus' last recorded prayer before his ascension was about unity (John 17). It appears that Jesus' last prayers have not yet been answered, but we can trust that they have been heard.

Judy Cook is a family therapist and a member of Meadowlands Fellowship CRC in Ancaster, Ont.

Missional Living

What's the role of prayer in missional living?

Prayer is a foundational practice for those seeking to join the Spirit on God's mission. And what comes to mind first in this regard is prayers for our neighbors and others whom we long to know God's grace and love.

However, intercession is not the only essential prayer practice when it comes to missional living. Listening prayer must initiate and permeate our missional living, guiding us, our discernment, and our intercession. We learn to listen to the Spirit through the text, through one another, and through our neighbors. The apostle Peter demonstrates this for us in Acts 10. Peter is seeking to listen to God when he is given the same vision three times—and even then, he is still puzzled about the meaning of what he has seen and heard (Acts 10:9-20). He must continue to listen as the Spirit speaks to him through three unknown foreign men, and he must follow the Spirit in them into what would have been for him an uncomfortable and unfamiliar context—one in which he is a guest and a listener. And that is where

he discovers God at work: in Cornelius and his household.

What unfamiliar and uncomfortable context might the Spirit be inviting us to enter in order to listen and discover God already at work? Paul and his companions find themselves in a similar situation. After listening to and following the Spirit's leading in Acts 16, they discover God at work in a group of women outside the city gate. Only after Peter and Paul have been present with the “other,” asking questions and listening, do they hear God and join with the Spirit in God's work—not only in the other, but in them. Peter exclaims, “I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism” (Acts 10:34).

Prayer in missional living, then, is about practicing presence with a listening posture. As we listen, we learn to be present literally, curiously, attentively, humbly, openly, and intentionally in all the places and in all the ways God sends us. I wonder how and where you will practice listening prayer today—and what you might learn.

Karen Wilk is a Go Local catalyzer with Resonate Global Mission and Forge Canada. She is a pastor of Neighborhood Life, a home church movement in Edmonton, Alta., where she also enjoys being a wife, mom, and neighbor.



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

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Know of a noteworthy event or accomplishment in the life of a CRC member?

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Photo by Emily Dimmick

Protect Life Michigan members who traveled to Washington for the March for Life on Jan. 21, 2022.

Emily Dimmick, campus activist supervisor for Protect Life Michigan at Ferris State University in Big Rapids, Mich., led a group of 15 to the U.S. capital to attend the March for Life in January. The annual event, in its 48th year, began as a demonstration in response to the U.S. Supreme Court’s 1973 decision legalizing abortion. Organizers now say it’s the largest pro-life event in the world and envisions “a world where every life is celebrated, valued, and protected.”

This was the first year that Dimmick, a member of Fellowship Christian Reformed Church in Big Rapids, attended. She said about 150 students from

Michigan traveled to Washington for the Jan. 21 march.

Sydney Pringing, another student in the group, had participated in the March for Life before, but said this experience felt different with closer friends and deeper involvement. For her, the best part was the day after the march when the group encountered a pro-choice rally in front of the Supreme Court building. “It hurt to hear what the other side was saying, how they were making personal attacks,” Pringing said. “But ... to pray with the people who were on our side of the barrier was just everything to me.”

—Eliza Anderson



Cheryl Grey Bostrom

Noteworthy

Cheryl Grey Bostrom’s genre-crossing novel *Sugar Birds* received an **Award of Merit from Christianity Today**, tying with another title in the fiction category for the magazine’s list of **top books for 2022**. Bostrom is a member of Sonlight Church in Lynden, Wash.



After 15 years of promoting the production of “content worth consuming,” **Dordt University’s Prairie Grass Film Challenge mounted its final event in January 2022**. It had decided on its 10th anniversary to close in five years. The final winning films were presented Feb. 18.

Investigation Concludes, Recommendations Pursued Over Abuse at Christian Academy in Japan

In response to the conclusion of an independent investigation of abuse at one of its ministry partners, Resonate Global Mission has issued an apology and is contributing to the implementation of report recommendations.

The Telios law firm, hired by four contributing missions of the Christian Academy in Japan (CAJ), released its final report in late January. The investigative findings include corroboration of 46 allegations of abuse against nine adult offenders. Wrongdoing included instances of sexual, physical, and emotional abuse and acts of leadership failing “to adequately report or act on credible accounts of abuse.” Allegations brought to the investigation spanned decades, from 1957 to 2001.

Resonate published a statement Jan. 29, hosted a service of repentance and commitment for staff Feb. 2 and 3, and has contributed to implementing the recommendations of the report that connect to it as a sponsoring organization.

“Resonate recognizes and laments the harm its staff did to CAJ survivors,” Resonate director Zachary King said. “Resonate is trying to let them take the lead and to be responsive to their needs, to their requests, and to serve them throughout this entire process. We’re trying to do our best to do what’s right in their eyes and to listen to them carefully and put their needs and requests first.”

The investigation was prompted by requests from survivors and alumni and launched in 2019. It was cosponsored by the Christian Academy in Japan and four mission organizations and conducted independently. The investigative team reviewed more than 1,400 documents from more than 50 years of CAJ’s history and traveled across the United States and internationally to conduct in-person interviews with 59 witnesses, the summary report said.

Resonate’s statement and a link to the Telios report can be found at bit.ly/ResonateStatement.

—Alissa Vernon,
news editor

IN MEMORIAM



Rev. Xay Xue Yang

1951-2021

Xay Xue Yang, founding pastor of the Hmong Christian Reformed Church in Sheboygan, Wisc., died Dec. 15, 2021.

Yang completed four years of studies at The Bible Institute in Laos in 1975 just as the Vietnam War ended. Thousands of Hmong who had collaborated with the U.S. during the war fled to refugee camps in Thailand, where Yang ministered for five years. Many, including Yang, eventually immigrated to the U.S.

He started a couple of churches in Pennsylvania and after moving to Sheboygan became connected to the CRC. Ordained in 1987 under Church Order Article 7 (because of exceptional gifts), he planted and pastored Sheboygan Hmong CRC for 11 years.

“I am amazed at what Pastor Xay Xue and his wife, Pa, endured and accomplished in the course of their lives,” said a fellow pastor in Classis Wisconsin. “They had to lead their flock of Hmong people and help them adjust to a new country, new language, new culture, new denomination. I stand amazed at Pastor Xay Xue’s faithfulness through it all. I thank God for him.”

Predeceased by his wife, Pa, and a daughter, Yang is survived by three daughters, three sons, their spouses, and 30 grandchildren.

—Janet A. Greidanus

IN MEMORIAM



Rev. Arlan Willis

Koppendray

1958-2021

Arlan Koppendray, aged 63, died Dec. 24, 2021, following a sudden stroke.

Ordained in 1989, he was the youngest of 12 children and graduated from Calvin College (now University) and Seminary. He served West Leonard CRC in Grand Rapids, Mich., and Zion CRC in Oshawa, Ont., and was the founding pastor of Hope Fellowship Church in Courtice, Ont. For 17 years he served as chaplain and taught Bible and history at Calvary Christian (now Avail Academy) High School in Minneapolis, Minn. He also preached often in Classis Lake Superior.

The Koppendrayers founded The Long Siding Farm, a USDA-certified organic fruit and vegetable farm. In 2017 he planted Trinity Hill Church in Chanhassen, Minn., where he served until his death. “He tended Trinity Hill Church in much the same way that he tended the crops on his hobby farm,” a tribute on the church’s website says. “He ‘enriched the soil of the church’ through his teaching and preaching so that those in the congregation would flourish as followers of Christ.”

Koppendray is survived by Susan, his wife of 36 years, three children, and nine siblings.

—Janet A. Greidanus

Canadians Meet to Discuss Leadership Structure

About 100 Canadian members of the Christian Reformed Church met virtually Saturday, Jan. 29, to talk about their continuing frustrations with the CRC's proposed new denominational leadership structure, perceived by many to set CRC ministry in Canada on an unequal footing with ministry in the U.S. The meeting was convened with four delegates from each Canadian classis, CRC staff members in Canada, and several Canadian members of the Council of Delegates.

(The Council of Delegates acts on behalf of the annual CRC synod between its meetings. Additionally, those Council delegates make up the legal entities known as the Michigan Corporation in the U.S. and the Canada Corporation north of the border.)

Richard Bodini, stated clerk of Classis Toronto and meeting chairperson, told delegates, "Anything goes today. Put it on the table." He told participants that the gathering was not a decision-making body and that no statements would be issued. "This meeting is intended to generate ideas that could be followed up on by local congregations and classes. That follow-up could include requests to Synod 2022." (Classes are regional groups of CRC churches. Requests to synod are formally called overtures.)

The new leadership structure, adopted by the Council in May 2021, includes a denominational general secretary and a chief administrative officer. Together they will make up the office of the general secretary. Canada will have an executive director who will work in partnership with that office. The general secretary and the chief administrative officer could be located in the U.S. or in Canada. Joint ministry agreements will guide the work between the two countries.



The meeting was chaired from the CRCNA's office in Burlington, Ont., where a quilt created from blocks made by 65 different Christian Reformed people from across North America served as a backdrop.

The task force that developed the structure, known as SALT (Structure and Leadership Task Force), comprised American and Canadian Council members. Synod 2022 must approve the new structure before it goes into effect, but implementation has begun. A nominee for the position of General Secretary was expected to be presented to the Council Feb. 18.

For some Canadians, this is too much like leadership structures of the past. Ray Elgersma and Bruce Adema each were delegates to the meeting and are also former Canadian ministry directors. Elgersma said the CRCNA appears binational "until things go wrong. Then it reverts to CRC-USA, and Canadian

leadership is seen as ruffling feathers if they do too much prying." He said it is an organizational culture that is used to working from one central location of power—Grand Rapids, Mich., where the CRC has its headquarters.

Adema concurred. When he was the Canadian director, he said, denominational ministries were in the hands of Grand Rapids staff, and it wasn't building up the church in Canada. "Within the CRCNA, we are seen as irritants," he said. "The structure we have and what is being proposed do not let us be the kind of church (in Canada) that we should be."

Andy deRuyter, president of the Canada Corporation, said it is not like in the past

when the Canadian director reported to an executive director in Michigan and to the Canada Corp. "Please understand that 'reporting' is not a need to get approval from the general secretary. It's not a hierarchy system where we need approval to do things." Instead, he explained, reporting is simply sharing what is happening in Canada while working out of the joint ministry agreement.

Options on the Table

After discussion in small groups, some delegates said they would just as soon see the Canadian CRC go its own way, with an ecclesiastical relationship with the U.S. church similar to the relationship the CRC has with other Reformed denominations.

Mike Borgert (Classis Southwest Ontario) questioned why parting ways would be so bad. "For many years, we've recognized that the (Canadian) church has a different cultural context, and it has grown to the point where it can manage its own affairs and raise up its own leaders and so forth," he said. "Why can't we bless each other and do ministry together where it's good and possible and necessary?"

Rita Klein-Geltink (Classis Quinte) noted that "what is missing from the SALT report is a clear case for staying together."

Others preferred to stay together, but with the U.S. church and the Canadian church both having executive directors of equal authority and with an ecclesiastical officer to bridge the two roles. That was the model that the Council supported in principle in October 2020, before SALT was appointed to flesh out how the system would work. Then, after considering multiple legal opinions, SALT presented the alternative model, which was approved.

Everett Vander Horst (Classis Hamilton) said separating from the U.S. seems like a nuclear option from which there would be no turning back. "I would endorse a

return to the structure ... that provides a partnership with the U.S. and Canadian directors," he said. "If we take that road and it doesn't work, then we can continue on toward greater autonomy."

Still others preferred to make the current proposal work better through the use of the formal joint ministry agreements (JMAs) that spell out how the two parties will work together. Acting executive director-Canada Terry Veldboom said the current JMAs are much stronger than previous ones. (New joint ministry agreements were adopted in January, separately, by the Michigan Corporation and the Canada Corporation. They have not been made public because they contain information about staff positions and salaries.)

How We Got Here

Discussions and disagreements about Canadian control over CRC ministry in Canada, sometimes called "contextualized ministry," have gone on for decades.

This latest chapter started as a question about Canadian tax law in 2019 and has grown to include Canadians' long-held desire to shape denominational ministries to fit a Canadian context without first needing approval from American staff and/or boards where Americans hold a majority. In the months since the tax question first came up, additional strains have included the February 2020 resignation of Steven Timmermans, then-executive director of the CRCNA, and the July 2021 firing of Darren Roorda, Canadian ministries director. Some also question the differences between the agreed-upon direction in October 2020 and the final SALT proposal in May 2021 and the lack of clarity as to why SALT changed course.

When delegate Harry Fernhout (Classis Toronto) asked what changed with the additional legal advice, Canada Corp spokesperson Greta Luimes said they didn't have a clear answer.

Complicating all of this is the fact that synod has not met for three years due to COVID-19. Ordinarily decisions of the Council would have to be approved by a synod before moving to implementation. Additionally, the impending retirements of several senior leaders made the matter that much more urgent.

Continue the Conversation

Bev Bandstra, vice president of Canada Corp, said after the meeting that she was encouraged. "It was a good forum and provided the Canada Corp board with a good sense of what many of our Canadian CRC members are thinking."

DeRuyter also was encouraged and hopes the delegates will go back to their churches and classes to continue the conversation. "This was a good listening session for us to hear," he told delegates. "I hope it ignites a fire in Canadian churches. We need to decide for ourselves what we want to be."

Bodini said the outcomes were about what he expected. "There is not a lot of support for SALT," he told *The Banner*. "There is a desire to relook at the previous COD-approved structure. We may never know what happened to it and why it was taken off the table. It is a very important question to be answered."

He mused that perhaps the Council and maybe some U.S. classes and denominational staff will take notice of the conversation and begin to address some of the concerns. "Overall, if I could urge anything for the denomination," Bodini said, it is "let's slow things down and look at all the options that will be beneficial and helpful for everyone."

—Gayla Postma

43 Congregations of the Reformed Church in America Released to Join New Denomination

The Banner has a subscription to republish articles from Religion News Service. This story, published on religionnews.com Jan. 7, was edited for length, to note where the first member churches come from, and to add context for the Christian Reformed Church.

Forty-three congregations of the Reformed Church in America released from their respective classes (regional groups of churches) as of Dec. 31, 2021, joined to form the Alliance of Reformed Churches on Jan. 1, 2022. The departures were anticipated after the RCA's General Synod in October when, recognizing theological differences, in part regarding same-sex marriage and the ordination of LGBTQ clergy, delegates adopted a proposal to provide "gracious separation" for congregations that petitioned to leave.

The new denomination, besides not affirming same-sex marriage or ordination of LGBTQ individuals, will have a strong emphasis on church planting and feature a flexible organizational model meant to foster theological alignment and efficient decision-making, according to ARC leaders.

"We have a passion for this remnant of believers to become a part of reformation and revival in the Northern Hemisphere," said Tim Vink, the new denomination's director of spiritual leadership and outreach. "Part of our strategic thinking is designing things for the 21st century that allow a multiplication of gospel-saturated churches and a multiplication of disciples."



The first joining congregations include churches from North and South Dakota, Iowa, and Minnesota. There are also five from Wisconsin and two from Michigan. Though ARC began organizing in May 2021, these transferred congregations from the RCA are the Alliance's first member churches.

Other conservative-leaning churches in the RCA, as well as those in the Presbyterian Church in Canada, the Christian Reformed Church in North America, and the Presbyterian Church in America, are discerning whether to join the ARC, according to Vink.

At this time congregations may not be a member of ARC and be affiliated with another denomination, said Dan Ackerman, ARC's director of organizational leadership.

Theological Conformity

A theologically and politically diverse denomination that dates to the arrival of Dutch settlers in Manhattan in the 1620s, the RCA has been debating sexuality and LGBTQ inclusion since the 1970s. In 2018, the RCA's General Synod formed a team charged with discerning whether the RCA should stay together, restructure, or separate. The team ultimately suggested a path involving all three avenues, but the meeting to vote on the team's proposals was delayed for 16 months due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the interim, roughly 15 congregational, regional, and strategic leaders from the RCA began meeting virtually to consider a future outside the denomination. Part of that future, they believed, involved theological unity on the interpretation of Scripture.

"We believe if the church is going to be successful in the 21st century, it needs to be powered by a more agile structure and it needs to be more theologically aligned than theologically diverse," said Ackerman.

Joel Baar, an ARC board member and elder at Fellowship Reformed Church in Hudsonville, Mich., which opted to join ARC by a vote of 604-9, said that theological conformity of ARC is part of what appealed to his congregation.

"As the RCA was attempting to define and clarify marriage," said Barr, "and efforts had been happening over the decades in that regard, there continued to be this tension within the RCA of whether or not the Bible was the full authority of God's Word. We started feeling at Fellowship we no longer belonged within the RCA."

But theological differences remain even within the new denomination. While the understanding of marriage as between a man and a woman is a "top tier" theological belief, Ackerman explained, the question of women's ordination is a "second

tier issue” that local leaders can address in their own contexts.

Every five years the organization and individual congregations will assess how well they are serving one another and if they should remain partners in ministry, said Ackerman.

Affiliation Decisions

The creation of ARC, paired with the RCA's decisions at General Synod, has put many RCA congregations in the position of deciding whether to stay in the RCA.

Baar says the decision to leave the RCA wasn't a simple one. “My roots in the RCA are deep,” he said, saying part of his congregants' discernment about leaving the denomination was “a grieving process.”

Faith Reformed Church in Zeeland, Mich., also took time to discern its relationship to the RCA. For now, the congregation has decided to remain in the RCA. But staying isn't easy either.

“We mourn some of the people who are no longer part of the denomination. There are churches we planted that will leave, there's children we've raised up in the church that are pastors of churches that are leaving,” said the senior pastor, Jonathan Elgersma. “We do feel there has to be space to lament.”

RCA leadership has reached out to its congregations, emphasizing the RCA's increasing diversity and new international church-planting and missional partnerships, which include its 375-year-old Global Mission organization that supports about 100 missionaries and

partners through its \$8.5 million worth of endowments.

The denomination voted at its October 2021 General Synod to form a restructuring team to plan for the RCA's future. The team will bring that plan to General Synod 2024.

Yet the RCA is also committed to allowing departing churches to leave on good terms. “We want to bless our brothers and sisters who are choosing to find another denominational family,” said Christina Tazelaar, director of communication for the RCA. She further told *The Banner*, “We're also saying hello to new partners God is bringing to us, partners that reflect the global and multicultural future that's becoming a reality in the Reformed Church in America. In this time of transition, we are watching where God is on the move, and we're leaning in to join the Holy Spirit there.”

ARC pastors say they are open to the idea of continued partnerships with the RCA. “We bless the RCA; we pray for the RCA,” said Vink.

—Kathryn Post,
Religion News Service

IN MEMORIAM



*Rev. George John
Van Arragon*

1942-2021

Pastor and chaplain George Van Arragon was a man who made people feel welcomed, accepted, and encouraged. He loved people fiercely, especially his family. George died Dec. 27, 2021.

Born in the Netherlands, George was 7 years old when his family immigrated to Canada. Eventually, following theological studies and ordination in 1979, George pastored Alliston (Ont.) Christian Reformed Church and Talbot Street Church in London, Ont., before being called to chaplaincy. After completing several courses of Clinical Pastoral Education he became a chaplain, serving at Oshawa (Ont.) General Hospital for six years and then at Shalom Manor in Grimsby, Ont., for 11 years until his retirement in 2007.

George had a deep love of Scripture and devoted hours each day to its study. He found deep spiritual meaning in his volunteer work with Kairos Prison Ministry, which he did for over 30 years. He loved to travel, took joy in woodworking, and read extensively, always ready to learn something new. He loved art and Russian Orthodox music.

Predeceased by daughter Sara in 1981, George is survived by Freda, his wife of 48 years, four children and their spouses, and 11 grandchildren.

—Janet A. Greidanus

IN MEMORIAM

*Rev. Lammert Slofstra*

1924-2021

After a full life of ministry and a richly productive season of retirement, Lammert Slofstra, 97, died Dec. 31, 2021.

Born in Drenthe, Netherlands, Slofstra initially pursued a degree in engineering before experiencing a call to ministry. After completing seminary in 1950, he pastored in Hijaard, Friesland, and then in Hengelo, Overijssel. In 1960, he immigrated to Canada with his wife and young children.

Ordained in Canada in 1960, Slofstra then served Clinton CRC and Willowdale CRC, both in Ontario; New Westminster (B.C.) CRC; First CRC-Chatham-Kent, Ont.; and Immanuel CRC, Simcoe, Ont. He preached passionately, visited parishioners regularly, taught catechism, and was involved in denominational affairs.

At 65, Slofstra retired, living first in Ontario, then in British Columbia. He continued to be active by preaching when needed, volunteering with Stephen Ministries, and grading Bible courses for Crossroads Prison Ministries, something he did into his early 90s. He also completed two memoirs. He was an avid walker and handcrafted almost 100 birthday cards each year for family and friends.

Predeceased by his wife, Alice, in 2013, Slofstra is survived by five children, their partners, 17 grandchildren, and 50 great-grandchildren.

—Janet A. Greidanus

Leadership Transition for World Renew in Canada

Kenneth (Ken) Kim, most recently director of World Renew's International Disaster Response, is now interim director for World Renew-Canada after Ida Kaastra-Mutoigo stepped down from the position.

After serving World Renew for more than 30 years, 15 years as the director in Canada, Kaastra-Mutoigo has left to head a Christian-



Ken Kim, Ida Kaastra-Mutoigo

run ministry in New York City with the mission of helping survivors of human trafficking. The World Renew-Canada board announced her departure Jan. 3 and Kim's appointment Jan. 14.

Kaastra-Mutoigo said the move comes after a period of discernment after the death of her husband last year. "The decision to consider something different came along with that family change," she said, describing "being very open to the Spirit's leading of where might God want me in this unique stage of life."

Kaastra-Mutoigo sees a connection between the work she's moving to and the three components that have been part of World Renew. "The aspects of community development, disaster response, and injustice—all three are just really encapsulated in the story of a (trafficking) survivor. That is their story," Kaastra-Mutoigo said.

Her enthusiasm for this new chapter wasn't the only element in deciding to leave now. "Part of my discernment in this journey was to ask not just what might the Holy Spirit be compelling me to move toward—but what would I leave behind, including a dearly beloved community of people that I have been so much a part of," she said. She concluded that because of strong senior leadership, including Kim, healthy finances, and World Renew's clear future goals established in a strategic planning process over the past year, "if there ever is a time for a leader of an organization to leave, this is a good time."

Kim will work with Carol Bremer-Bennett, director-U.S., as World Renew's co-director. The World Renew-Canada board expects to complete a search for a new permanent director in Canada over the next six months.

Kim came to World Renew in 2015. "In my nearly seven years of work with World Renew with the International Disaster Response, I have learned that our work is the expression of justice, mercy, and serving Christ," he said.

Kaastra-Mutoigo's work with World Renew began with an internship shortly after college. She was then a program consultant in Uganda, a coordinator of the volunteer program Service Link, team leader for the Eastern and Southern Africa regions, and then co-director since 2006.

—Alissa Vernon,
news editor

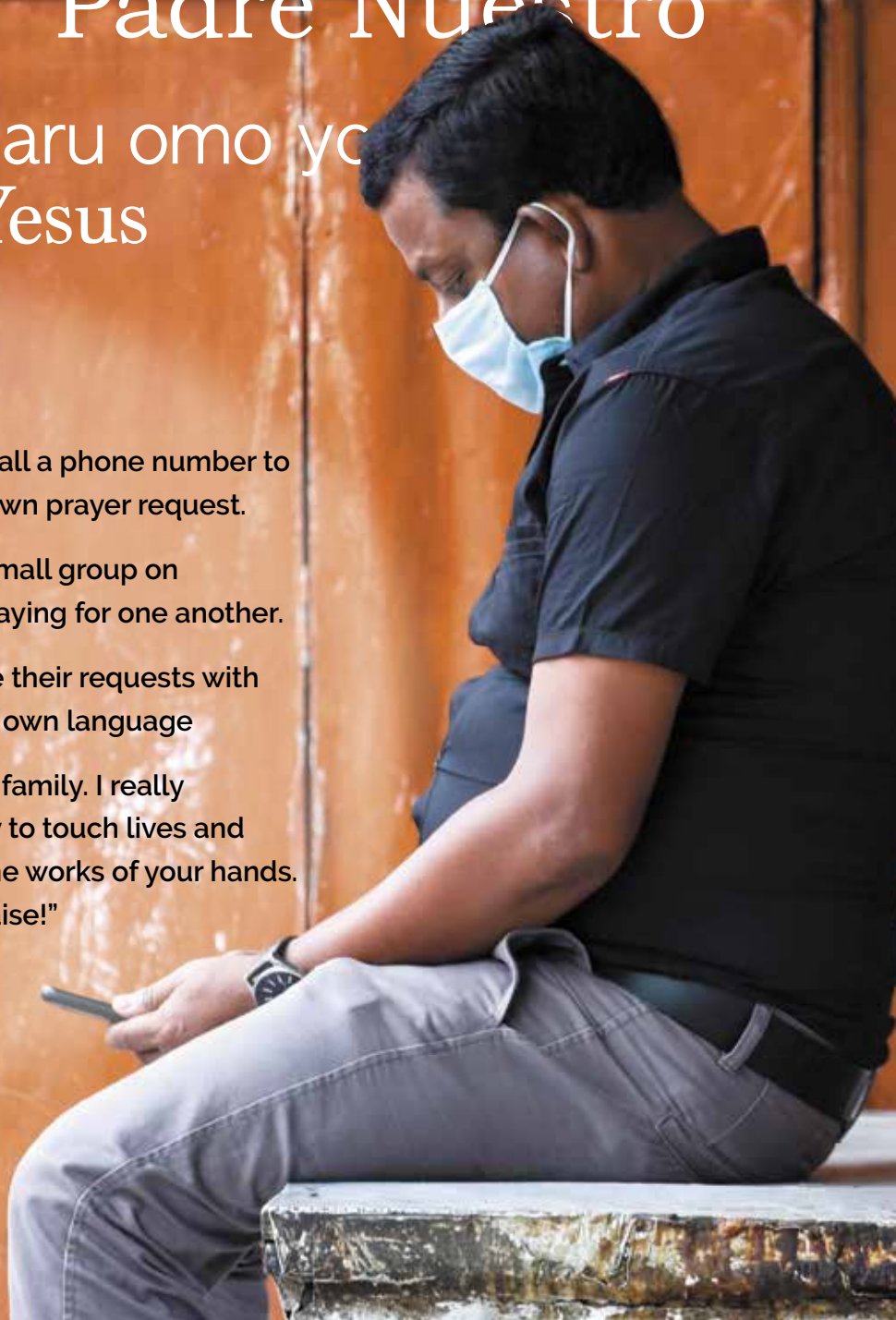
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Together Seeking God's Face

By Syd Hielema

Prayer always lies at the center of the Christian life, but there are times and seasons when this centrality takes on a deeper urgency. We can see this pattern all over the Scriptures. When King Jehoshaphat is informed that a vast army is coming to attack the small nation of Judah, for example, he gathers all the people, from the oldest to the youngest, in the temple courts, and standing before them he prays on their behalf, including these words:

“We have no power to face this vast army that is attacking us. We do not know what to do, but our eyes are on you” (2 Chron. 20:12). The rest of this chapter describes the Lord’s miraculous deliverance of his praying children.

The Christian Reformed Church is currently in a Jehoshaphat-like time—a highly unusual season of many layers in need of concentrated prayer:

1. Synods 2020 and 2021 were both canceled due to COVID. These annual synods are important gatherings, with delegates from every part of the denomination coming together to worship, reflect, deliberate, and decide. Having been unable to meet for three years has disrupted our regular community, and combining three years of materials into one means there will be a significant and heavy agenda.
2. The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly affected congregations. Weekly worship has been disrupted, hundreds of pastors and ministry staff are exhausted and discouraged, and Christians have strong and conflicting opinions concerning the best ways to respond to the pandemic.
3. The CRC’s leadership structure is being re-envisioned to include three executive positions. Currently all three are being filled by interim leaders, and search processes are underway to find the people God is preparing to take over these roles.
4. We are a binational denomination, and the structure of how we work across countries, as well as the relationship between the American and Canadian sides of our church, is being discussed and debated.
5. A report from the Committee to Articulate a Foundational Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality is a major agenda item for Synod 2022. Its recommendations have generated passionate and conflicting positions within our congregations, classes, and denomination.

Prayer can take many forms, as seen at the Calvin Symposium on Worship in 2019. (Photo courtesy of cicw.calvin.edu)

6. Racial tensions have heightened in the United States and Canada following the death of George Floyd in the U.S. and the discovery of unmarked graves of Indigenous children on the grounds of residential schools in Canada. Christian Reformed congregations have sharply differing views concerning the shape of a biblical response to racial reconciliation.

These six challenging layers are similar to the vast army that King Jehoshaphat faced. We would do well to join in Jehoshaphat’s prayer: “We have no power to face this vast army that is attacking us. We do not know what to do, but our eyes are on you.”

For this reason, the CRC’s Council of Delegates decided at its May 2021 meeting to designate the period leading up to Synod 2022 as a special year of prayer called Together Seeking God’s Face.

“My hope is that this year of prayer would not only lay a foundation for Synod 2022, but also model what synod should be all about, and that our time together at synod would erupt into one continuous prayer meeting,” said Colin Watson Sr., executive director of the CRCNA.

How Does One Shape a Year of Prayer?

In addition to Jehoshaphat’s example, two other Scripture passages have guided this prayer initiative. In Philippians 4, Paul declares words that have comforted millions of believers: “Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (vs. 6-7).

The six layers listed above are generating tremendous anxiety, and anxiety very quickly leads to anger and conflict (which Paul addresses earlier in this chapter). Paul commands us to bring our anxieties to the only place that can truly handle them: the heavenly throne room.

One can imagine that both Jehoshaphat and Paul had King David, the praying psalmist, in mind:

“Though an army besiege me, my heart will not fear; though war break out against me, even then I will be confident. ... For in the day of trouble he will keep me safe in his dwelling; he will hide me in the shelter of his sacred tent and set me high upon a rock. ... My heart says of you, ‘Seek his face!’ Your face, Lord, I will seek” (Ps. 27:3,5,8).

Did you notice the laser-like focus of David’s prayer? He does not tell God five reasons why his enemies are terrible



When candidates are approved as ministers of the Word, they are supported by a time of prayer before they begin their ministry.

and deserve to be defeated. He does not make a case for his own goodness and rightness as justification for pleading with the Lord to intervene on his behalf. He simply longs to see God's face. He longs to have his heart aligned with God's heart; he longs to walk under the declaration of the Aaronic blessing, "The Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace" (Num. 6:26).

The title of this prayer initiative, Together Seeking God's Face,

puts us on our knees together with David, Jehoshaphat, and Paul, and also together as a diverse denomination. As an anonymous pastor declared years ago, "When believers disagree, they always share the same position: coming together on their knees in prayer."

An Initiative With Many Dimensions

The Scriptures are a rich and beautiful prayer book, and they describe hundreds of ways to pray. The history of the church since Pentecost bears this out, providing us with a kaleidoscopic menu of prayer activities and styles. Prayer is simply conversation with the Lord that leads to us surrendering and aligning our hearts and minds with God's heart and mind, and there are many, many ways to engage this conversation.

With that beautiful array in mind, these initiatives have been developed to shape this year of prayer, Together Seeking God's Face.

1. Rev. Jon Hoekema of Downers Grove, Ill., convenes an hour of prayer open to all members of the CRCNA on the second Wednesday of each month at 11 a.m. Eastern time.
2. Executive director Colin Watson and other senior leaders convene a half-hour of prayer open to all pastors of the CRCNA at noon Eastern time each Wednesday.
3. Recognizing that Synod 2022 is called to carry three years of weight, synodical delegates will gather by video conference several times between March 30 and the beginning

of the in-person meetings on June 9. These video meetings will be shaped by extensive times of prayer.

4. Faith Formation Ministries is developing a 40-day prayer guide available to all CRCNA members and invites participants to join in prayer from May 1 to June 9.
5. A new webpage provides an overview of Together Seeking God's Face and provides the information needed to participate. See crcna.org/together-seeking-gods-face.
6. Discernment prayer practices are being introduced and cultivated throughout the denomination. These practices seek God's face by adopting a posture of holy indifference—that is, "Lord, I have strong opinions on matters that our denomination is dealing with, but my deepest desire is to seek your face and know your heart, so I will take distance from my strong opinions and trust that seeking your face will bring greater clarity to me and my fellow believers." In other words, discernment prayer begins with David's closing words in Psalm 139: "Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting" (vs. 23-24).

This last dimension is particularly challenging for Reformed believers. Admirably, our denomination values the right and true answers to the questions we explore together. But sometimes our commitment to a certain position makes it harder to maintain other essential commitments. We might have the right view on a topic but treat those with whom we disagree in ways that are unloving or self-serving. We might have the correct biblical interpretation but have pastoral blinders as to how inconsistently we apply that interpretation. For these reasons and more, we seek to be open to how God may want to surprise us—not in the substance of our faith or core commitments of our church, but in how we ought to live in light of those faith commitments.

Joining a Journey Well Underway

Imagine if thousands of CRC members participated in prayer in one or more ways as we prepare for synod and navigate the ongoing challenges of life after synod. In addition to personal prayer in our homes, there are so many different opportunities for participation. The Lord's promise to Solomon after the temple was dedicated extends still to us today: "If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face, ... then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land" (2 Chron. 7:14). **B**

Renewed in Ministry

MORE THAN A DECADE ago, Jerry Opiyo graduated from the University of Nairobi (Kenya) with a bachelor's degree in mechanical and manufacturing engineering and materials science. Sensing God's call to ministry, Opiyo served in a variety of roles from 2010 to 2017, including as a pastor at Mavuno Church in Nairobi and as a church planter in Kigali, Rwanda.

Then burnout set in. After seven years of important but intense and sometimes draining work, Opiyo knew he needed a change.

In 2017, Opiyo moved to Grand Rapids, Mich. with his wife, Cynthia, and his daughter, Imani, to be further equipped for their ministry. Opiyo enrolled in the Master of Divinity (MDiv) program at Calvin Theological Seminary.

After receiving a scholarship package that would support him throughout his years at the seminary, Opiyo knew that he could sustainably study at CTS without having to take on student loans.

"I came running on empty," Opiyo said. "I came to CTS on the verge of ministry burnout after a grueling seven years of church ministry and church planting."

For Opiyo, the seminary was more than just a place to grow in knowledge. "CTS became a place of healing and renewal as much as it was a place of theological instruction and doctrinal formation," he said.


While at the seminary, the Opiyo family formed relationships with fellow seminarians and members of a local church that they had first



Jerry Opiyo (left) with Calvin Theological Seminary president Jul Medenblik at graduation in 2021.

become connected with during their time in Rwanda. At this church they ministered to small groups and grew deep friendships.

Now Opiyo is again ready to minister in the midst of whatever challenges come his way. He completed his degree at CTS in the spring of 2021 and returned to his home country of Kenya with renewed hope, purpose, and resources to continue in his calling of ministry and church planting.

While he arrived at CTS feeling weary and nearly empty, Opiyo graduated with new confidence, saying, "I left filled to the brim and running over." 

—*Calvin Theological Seminary Communications*

The View from Here

The Power of Prayer

THIS MONTH will mark two years since most of us first learned about the COVID-19 pandemic. We have endured a difficult 2020 and an equally difficult 2021, and now in 2022 we continue to experience the stresses and strains of this crisis.

In many ways, life is hard. I was recently reflecting on how easy it can be to lose hope in a time like this, and yet, our hope is Christ. In him we not only have life, but we can have it to the full, even in years like 2022.

James 1:2-5 reads, "Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you."

James is the brother of our Lord Jesus Christ. He is writing less than 30 years after Christ's crucifixion, death, and resurrection. He has endured and witnessed numerous crises and persecutions that befell the early church (see the early chapters of the book of Acts), yet he still has the faith to say, "Consider it pure joy ... whenever you face trials of many kinds."

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James goes on to say that persevering in the face of difficulty has the potential to give us maturity. He adds that whatever we lack, particularly if we lack wisdom, we should ask God, and God will answer those prayers.

As the Christian Reformed Church, we endured 2020 and 2021. We have some pain and scars as a result. It doesn't feel like joy. While we have learned a lot, many of us may not yet feel as if we have grown in wisdom as a result of these trials.

And yet we pray. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, churches, classes, and denominational ministries have engaged in fervent prayer. This prayer continues as we move through 2022.

For the past year and more, we have been in a season of prayer for the denomination as we consider the weighty matters that must be addressed at Synod 2022. This synod is especially weighty because it is the first synod to take place since 2019 and thus has a voluminous agenda, and several of the agenda topics are ones that have potential to cause debate and even division.

But we serve a God who is more weighty than any agenda and of more consequence than our most consequential issue. To this God we lift our prayers and ask for wisdom.

We know that we continue to be in the midst of spiritual warfare that Peter described in 1 Peter 5:8: "Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour." And we know that prayer is a weapon that we can use in this spiritual battle. This issue of *The Banner* includes several stories about how, in the midst of overwhelming challenges, CRCNA people are turning to prayer and seeing God answer those prayers in amazing ways.

May we continue to prioritize prayer as a necessity for all of life and ministry, and may we also be able to say with Martin Luther, "I have so much to do that I shall spend the first three hours in prayer."



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

Intro Letters Establish Connections to Parliament Members in Canada

FOLLOWING EVERY CANADIAN federal election, as new ministers are being installed in their posts, the Centre for Public Dialogue sends letters of introduction.

These letters allow the Centre to begin a relationship with ministers in a positive way, building a foundation for ongoing dialogue, and they provide an opportunity to bear witness to the perspectives of those affected by issues the minister is likely to deal with.

“Intro letters are a good first step to opening conversation on important issues in a new Parliament,” Centre for Public Dialogue director Mike Hogeterp said. “Ongoing dialogue that addresses sponsorship challenges is important for refugee welcome.”

This was the context for a letter the Centre for Public Dialogue and World Renew sent to Sean Fraser, Canada’s new minister for immigration, refugees, and citizenship. The CRCNA has a long history of supporting refugees. World Renew is a sponsorship agreement holder with the government of Canada. This is the system by which churches are able to sponsor refugees directly to resettle in provinces across the country.

COVID protocols and travel restrictions have made it especially difficult for sponsored refugees to make it to Canada. Churches are experiencing months-long delays between a refugee being approved to come and finally arriving.

Throughout the pandemic, however, sponsors have proven that they can provide the resources needed to welcome newcomers safely according to local COVID guidelines. Delays are now mostly related to paperwork processing and the growing backlog in the refugee settlement system.



Centre for Public Dialogue staff show faith in action on Parliament Hill.

In the letter to Fraser, the Centre for Public Dialogue and World Renew brought up these delays alongside issues such as the increasingly complex program requirements for groups who wish to sponsor refugees. This makes it difficult for organizations with limited specialized knowledge, such as churches, to complete necessary paperwork and interpret the financial requirements.

This type of advocacy followed by letters, phone calls, and in-person visits from individual church members is an important part of Christian witness in the public sphere and the effective welcome of refugees to local communities.

—Victoria Veenstra,
Justice Communications
Team Coordinator

Prayer Blessings Go Both Ways

EVERY WEEK, more than 7,000 people are praying for anonymous requests from strangers who live all around the world.

“Our Prayer Team members faithfully pray for requests we receive,” said Emily Vanden Heuvel, prayer team coordinator for ReFrame Ministries. “Both the prayers and the requesters see God at work through this practice of lifting one another up.”

For people like Ramona, these requests fill a crucial role.

As a recovering addict, Ramona often feels selfish. “Everything about my addiction wants me to focus on my needs here and now without regard to any relationship,” Ramona said.

But she has a surprising weekly antidote: Ramona receives a prayer list every week from ReFrame’s Prayer Ministry. In these requests, she sees God’s bigger story for her and for those around her, and they bring deep purpose to her life.

“I’ve learned that service to others is a way to get out of myself,” Ramona shared in a note to ReFrame staff. “I am not defined by my addiction. I am defined by God’s love for me, and praying for others allows me to fulfill his plan for me.”

Sensing God’s Answer

The requests that Vanden Heuvel, Ramona, and thousands of others pray for every week often come from those who follow other English-language ministry programs from ReFrame. Samuel, for example, reads the *Today* devotional from his home in Nigeria and recently shared his prayer request with ReFrame’s Prayer Team.



Members of ReFrame’s Russian ministry team pray for members of a community in Moldova.

“I lost my dad, and within four years, I lost my mom and two brothers,” Samuel wrote. “I don’t know what to do, but I still believe God will bring me out through this, and he’ll do it again.”

Still others, like Mary, found ReFrame’s prayer website from an internet search when they especially felt a need for prayer.

“I truly thank you so much for your constant prayers,” Mary wrote. “My brother has been deceased now since June 2021. I didn’t know how I was going to get over my broken heart, but

you all sent prayers for my family and me, so that made me healed. Thanks for your wonderful prayers that have helped me heal from those tears and pain of my heart. God has kept my heart so safe.”

Do you have a prayer request to share? By sharing your request on ReFrame’s prayer page (reframeministries.org/prayer), you can help Ramona and people like her who desire to bless others in prayer.

—Brian Clark,
ReFrame Ministries

Sharing Hope in Partnership

THERE IS AN AFRICAN PROVERB that states, “If you want to go fast, go alone; if you want to go far, go together.”

World Renew recognizes the importance of partnerships in our mission. Through local partners, World Renew works to extend God’s justice and mercy to vulnerable communities around the world—a mission to be completed not quickly, but with careful consideration of the lives touched and with the goal of bringing sustainable hope to those living with hunger, poverty, and injustice.

Through World Renew’s Global Partnership Program, Kabale Pentecostal Assemblies of God (PAG) Central, a local church of World Renew Uganda’s partner PAG South Western, has been in a global partnership with Bethany Christian Reformed Church of Bellflower, Calif., since 2010.

In 2012, the two churches started supporting children and families affected by HIV, through the Orphans and Vulnerable Children (OVC) program in Uganda. Together the two churches have supported over 600 children and their caregivers.

One opportunity the shared program offers to vulnerable young people is vocational training and six-month apprenticeships with local artisans in a variety of trades.

Alex Nuwahereza, 15, is currently completing an apprenticeship in carpentry. “As an orphan who stays with an elderly, impoverished grandmother,” he said, “getting food has always been a challenge. But with the training there’s hope that this challenge will be overcome. ... I no longer lament about my poor family because I know I can use this skill and get money, start my own workshop, and change my story.”



Musasizi Musa works on a motorcycle.

Participant Musasizi Musa is the fourth in a family of eight children. “Life has always been a struggle—especially during school times,” he said. “It wasn’t easy to pay tuition, and we missed a lot of classes. ... I finally sat for my high school exams but performed poorly.”

After failing the exams, Musa worried about how he would earn a living. Through the OVC program he was able to attend motorcycle repair training and has found employment in the field. Musa said, “I have mastered the skill. ... I have started saving money. ... I have started paying tuition for my younger siblings. I hope to one day open my own motorbike spare parts shop and (train) other vulnerable children.”

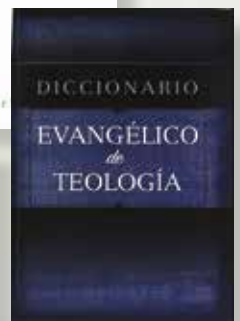
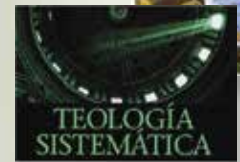
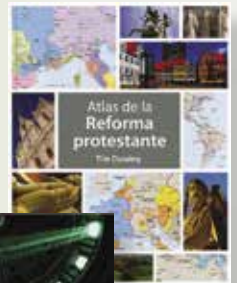
But seeing transformations like Nuwahereza’s and Musa’s—seeing families grow from poverty to food security and income stability—is not the greatest accomplishment of World Renew’s partnerships.

The greatest accomplishment is seeing participants in programs like OVC grow in faith. Musa said, “I loved the children’s meetings because I learned about God’s Word. That has helped me keep strong in the Lord to this day.”

—Laurisa O’Brien,
World Renew

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Underground Adventures

HAVE YOU EVER WONDERED what it would be like to explore an underground cave? There are thousands of caves around the world, and many more are formed each day!

What Is a Cave?

A cave is a hollow space underground with a large opening. Caves can be narrow passages or huge tunnels that stretch for miles. Very large caves are also called caverns.

How Are Caves Formed?

Caves form in different ways. Most caves are solution caves, which form from limestone, a soft rock that breaks down easily in water. When water flows through small cracks in limestone, the rock dissolves, and the cracks get bigger. Over time these cracks become holes large enough for people to walk through! Ocean waves can also form sea caves.

What Animals Live in Caves?

You may have heard of bats living in caves, but lots of other animals do too. These cave creatures are called troglobites. Because there's little or no light in a cave, many of these animals are blind. Troglobites include some species of spiders, beetles, fish, millipedes, and salamanders.

Make Your Own Cave Crystals!

Have you ever heard of stalactites? They look like big icicles hanging from the ceiling of some caves. As water drips from the ceiling, mineral deposits are left behind to form these amazing creations. Stalagmites are similar to stalactites but form on cave floors underneath dripping water. Take a look at the activity below to make your own cave creations!

What you will need:

- » a plastic container large enough to hold two jars
- » aluminum foil

- » two small glass jars
- » baking soda
- » food coloring (optional)
- » paper towels
- » a spoon

1. Line the plastic container with aluminum foil and place the two jars in the container.
2. Fill the two jars with very hot water. (Ask an adult for help.)
3. Add five or six spoonfuls of baking soda to each jar. Stir well. Add more baking soda until no more can dissolve in the water.
4. (Optional) Add a few drops of food coloring to each jar.
5. Cut two strips of paper towel about half an inch wide. Dip the ends of the strips into each jar so that the paper towel forms a bridge between the jars. (You could also use a thick piece of yarn or string instead.)
6. Make sure that the liquid in the jars soaks into the paper towel bridges. It's OK if the liquid drips into the container. Check your cave crystals over the next few days to see how they form!

Caves in the Bible

Did you know that caves are mentioned in the Bible? People in biblical times used caves as hiding places or shelters. David stayed in the cave of Adullam when he was hiding from King Saul (1 Sam. 22:1-2). This cave was large enough for him, his family, and 400 other men! Sometimes David wrote psalms to God while he was in the cave. Here is an example from Psalm 142:1: "I cry aloud to the Lord; I lift up my voice to the Lord for mercy."

Whether you are exploring a cave, playing in your backyard, or resting in your bedroom, remember that God is always with you and that God hears your prayers! **B**



Christin Baker is a full-time stay-at-home mom who also writes for Faith Alive. She is a member of Resurrection Fellowship Church in Grand Rapids, Mich.



What Causes Our Polarization?

By Andrew Hanauer

Editor's note: This article is the second in our series, "Seeking Shalom in the Midst of Polarization." Read more online at TheBanner.org.

When people ask me where polarization comes from, I have to stop them to clarify something. Polarization per se is not the problem. The better question is, "Where did toxic polarization come from?"

When the organization I run, the One America Movement, first started talking about toxic polarization, we usually had to explain it. Toxic polarization, we would say, is different from just "normal" polarization. There's always going to be some polarization in human society—and that's a good thing! When it's healthy, conflict makes us stronger. It strengthens marriages and families and

friendships, leads to better public policy, and, yes, even helps churches grow and thrive. (I know, church conflict is usually not fun. But that's because it's often not healthy!)

Think about it this way: Elections, where each side gets about 50% of the vote, are often contentious and can lead to real problems. But would you rather live in a country where the president wins with 99.9% of the vote? That's usually a society with even more significant problems. Healthy conflict is good.

Unhealthy Conflict

But toxic polarization—well, that's different. That's unhealthy conflict. That's conflict in which winning becomes the goal, often at any cost. In toxic conflict, the other side becomes unfathomable, strange, alien—dehumanized. Yet the conflict itself is utterly predictable. Someone hurts us, so we hurt them back. And then it gets worse. We view the other person

with contempt, so they view us with contempt back. And then it gets even worse. We come to see the entire world through a new lens: we are the good guys, they are the bad guys, and we are the heroes of our own Hollywood story.

Making this distinction between healthy conflict and toxic conflict is essential. But I hardly need to mention it these days. When we talk about toxic polarization today, we usually get a quick, knowing look. "Ah," that look says, "you mean what we've been living through essentially non-stop since 2020?"

Yes. That.

So how did we get here?

There are many causes, and they all could merit their own article: talk radio, cable news, and social media. Geographic sorting. Secularization. Foreign interference in our political system. How our brains are wired.

Fixating on the causes can feel helpful. After all, if we know what causes toxic polarization, we can figure out how to fix it. But that same logic can often lead us to search for silver-bullet solutions that don't exist. The past five years are littered with examples of ideas and initiatives designed to fix toxic polarization that don't work for that very reason: there is no silver bullet.

The Cycle

The critical point is this: toxic polarization is a cycle. It's a negative feedback loop, a downward spiral that sucks us in and drags us down. Multiple, overlaid dynamics feed each other, making the problem worse and worse. And as it gets worse, the idea that we can solve toxic polarization seems increasingly naive. Those trapped in the conflict double down on the same behaviors and language that fuel that conflict in the first place because they see winning as the only way out.

Toxic polarization is a cycle. Here's how it works:

Toxic polarization feeds on the idea that there are essentially two "teams," and the entirety of our identity is wrapped up in our team membership. Human beings are wired for belonging and connection, and our membership in groups is critical for us. Our brain processes exclusion in the same way it processes physical pain. Being left out feels like being punched. Being lonely feels like dying.

Being part of a group is healthy and good. For 2,000 years, Christians have organized themselves in communities or churches where they can worship together and support each other regardless of their differences. People belong to families, bowling leagues, clubs, schools, and other groups. These groups are the building blocks of society.

Toxic polarization
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drags us down.

The problem is that when groups come into conflict, it can jump-start a negative cycle. A few important things begin to happen once we are in this us vs. them mindset.

First, we cling closer to our own group for protection from "them." Now the stakes for being accepted in or rejected from our group are higher. We must belong at all costs—not just to protect us from our enemies, but because we have nowhere else to go. In political terms, if you are a moderate conservative or liberal and the other party is also reasonably moderate, being kicked out of your party wouldn't be a catastrophe. But when both parties are dominated by extremes, joining the other party seems unfathomable.

Second, because retaining our membership is so important, we stop acting in ways that might appeal to the other group and double down on behaving in ways that allow us to maintain membership in our group. There are always true zealots, but for many group members this is simply performance. We say what we know will win us applause or applaud when we believe we are supposed to. Criticizing your own group's actions

becomes difficult or even dangerous. It becomes harder to make decisions, and extremism increases.

Finally, because of that dynamic, lots of people become silent. People who don't belong to either group fall silent or silently choose the lesser of two evils rather than be left out to dry somewhere in the middle. People who belong to one of the two groups fall silent when they hear the extreme rhetoric of their side lest they be kicked out of their group for insufficient loyalty to the cause.

The Price of Silence

In many ways, it's helpful to think of groups in this atmosphere as having 10 members: two are loudly divisive and hostile, seven are silent, and one is willing to speak out against their own side's harmful speech. That one person is often quickly kicked out of the group for heresy. But what about the seven silent people? What do they believe?

Their silence makes it impossible to tell. This does two things.

First, it causes the other silent people to try to guess what the members of their group are thinking. Speaking out is clearly dangerous, but it would have a tangible impact if the seven spoke out together. But they can't speak out together if they don't know if anyone else will have their back.

Second, their silence makes the entire group seem monolithic to the other side. To a liberal, conservatives who are silent about the actions of the most extreme conservative are equivalent to agreeing with those extreme voices—and vice versa. And what's the point of making peace or constructively engaging with a group of people who are all extreme?

All of this causes a few things to happen to us.

First, we get worse at understanding the world around us. The reconciliation group Beyond Conflict found that “Americans incorrectly believe that members of the other party dehumanize, dislike, and disagree with them about twice as much as they actually do.” In short, we believe we’re more polarized than we are—and that misperception can drive us even further apart. This makes us worse at solving problems, worse at assessing the claims we see on cable news and social media, and worse at working with people different from us, all of which further fuel the cycle of toxic division.

Second, because disagreement generally becomes unhelpful and even painful, we actively seek places where we will not encounter any. The church world knows this all too well. Pastors speak about a particular topic and then watch as congregants walk out the door and find a church where the pastor thinks as they do. Churches require masks or don’t require masks, attracting people who want or don’t want masks while losing those who feel differently.

Finally, we become consumed. Toxic polarization creates an environment where a particular worldview demands our total allegiance. From a Christian perspective, of course, this is a form of idolatry. And because a pessimistic, partisan worldview does not offer the best parts of religion, redemption, hope, and love, we are left to be consumed by outrage, contempt, and self-righteousness, fed by a voracious 24-hour news cycle and social media algorithms.

Another Way

It doesn’t have to be this way. When we understand how our brains, time, hearts, and souls are being manipulated and activated for and by toxic division, we can start to chart a path

in a different direction. For Christians, group membership has always meant being in a community of people who care for you and love you, for whom your unity in Jesus stands above political disagreements. That’s still possible. Maybe this crisis of toxic polarization is the opportunity we’ve been waiting for, the opportunity for the church to be the church in countries grappling with significant challenges.

At One America, we often talk about how our goal is not to have people quit their group and join a different one. We’re not trying to make Democrats more conservative or Republicans more liberal or anybody more moderate. Instead, we believe that overcoming toxic polarization means everybody becomes the best version of themselves. We want Democrats to be the best version of Democrats, Republicans to be the best version of Republicans, Christians to be the best versions of Christians, and so on.

For Christians, this can start with simply following Jesus’ teachings at their most basic level.

First, if your pastor says something you disagree with, talk to him or her about it. Ask questions. Start a conversation instead of “canceling” them and immediately looking for a new pastor who more closely agrees with your political or social views.


Second, keep in mind that most Americans (and Canadians too, for that matter) are not at the extremes, and the media portrayal of any side is usually not representative of where most people are. So stay curious. Cultivate a relationship with one person who is different from you.

Finally, ask yourself whether you want your church to look like Congress or like a beacon of light. Toxic polarization thrives on the predictability of conflict, on each side doubling down

at every turn. Whether your church is dealing with polarization internally or seems to be at odds with other parts of your community, you can untangle destructive conflict by doing the thing everybody least expects you to do.

Befriend the person with whom you are at odds and listen to them. Reach out to a community that might not have favorable views of Christianity. To paraphrase Maya Angelou, people rarely remember what other people say, but they remember what other people do and how other people make them feel.

Toxic polarization is a nasty, vicious cycle. We can’t control what politicians or media figures say or do. But we can manage our own participation in that cycle.

We can decide to be part of the problem, or we can model the teaching of Jesus in the world and be a beacon of light in our country, our communities, and in our church pews. 



Andrew Hanauer is president and CEO of the One America Movement (oneamericamovement.org), a national nonprofit confronting toxic polarization in our society by equipping faith communities to confront division and work together across political, racial, and religious divides to solve problems that matter.

1. In your own words, describe the difference between healthy conflict and toxic conflict.
2. Do you see yourself caught up in the cycle of toxic polarization? How and why?

READ MORE ONLINE

The Everyday Grit of Hospital Chaplaincy

It is a ministry
that bears
witness to both
creation and the
mysteries of death.



Hannah D. Olson is a staff chaplain at a hospital in Minnesota. She is an approved candidate for ordination in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and a graduate of St. Olaf College, Princeton Theological Seminary, and Luther Seminary.

MY MORNING COMMUTE is a short one—approximately a five-minute walk followed by a 10-minute shuttle ride. It’s just enough time to wonder what I might encounter that day: perhaps a crisis of faith following a heart attack or a prayer request for a bowel movement. My vocation as a hospital chaplain brings me up close and personal with all of the grittiness that makes up our everyday lives—and our spirituality.

Spirituality tends to become heightened in the hospital environment. There are, of course, moments of spiritual lament. A sudden accident leading to the tragic loss of a life can shock loved ones into asking, “Where is God?” or leave family members begging for prayers of miraculous intervention. Some patients lie in the intensive care unit, their breath slowly being stolen by COVID while chaplains pray with their family members via Zoom.

There are also joys in the halls of the hospital. There are smiles of thanks to God as a patient who hasn’t walked for two months takes her first steps in rehab. The birth of a new life in the labor and delivery unit can bring tears of praise for a Creator who ushers life into the world. Peace fills the rooms where I bring communion to patients who find comfort in taking part in this sacred meal together.

My own hospital has spaces designated for meditation or worship. We have an ornate, awe-inspiring Catholic chapel, a meditation room with stained glass that faces Mecca, and a labyrinth for quiet reflection. But spiritual vibrancy creates holy spaces all over the hospital, sanctifying spaces regularly used for collecting blood, stool samples, or various other bodily fluids.

It is not always easy to envision God at work in a hospital. The pace can seem

too fast, the language less sacred and too scientific, and the environment entirely too sterile. It can be challenging to find God’s presence in situations that feel hopeless or terribly sad. But it is an immense gift to be able to sit alongside people as they use their spirituality to traverse tough diagnoses or long roads to recovery. It’s striking to see examples every day of the ways in which our spirituality becomes integral in moments of crisis or calm. It can be even more moving to realize the ways in which these hospital moments clarify the ways we use our faith.

This is the sacred gift of being called to hospital ministry: knowing that I will witness prayers of lament and joy inextricably woven together. It is a ministry that bears witness to both creation and the mysteries of death—sometimes in the span of a single workday. There is no way to predict the questions or people that God will place in my path during any given day. Perhaps this is the ultimate gift of such a vocation: learning that the Spirit of God is present in ways that are surprising and unpredictable.

It reminds me that we are all called to be present to the Spirit in one another daily. Each day as I make my way to work and prepare to enter the uncertainties of the hospital, I think about how God accompanies me as I meet patients right where they are, in the grittiness of it all. We are called to recognize and affirm that God is in our midst in times of joy, anxiety, fear, happiness, or anger. God is present for all of it—and what a gift to have a Creator who wades into the grit of life alongside us. **B**

Editor’s note: The Christian Reformed Church has more than 182 chaplains serving in hospitals, military settings, prisons, and other places around the world. Please continue to pray for them.

Slow Down and Take It In

When you don't take the time to process ideas and decide how, if, or when you will implement them ... it becomes a problem.

IN 2019 I CONSUMED 25 audiobooks, over 900 podcasts, and somewhere around 110 sermons. Not unlike other 18- to 32-year-old males, I spend a lot of time listening. All of that content I listened to covered topics such as finances, leadership development, spiritual growth, physical fitness, mental toughness, emotional intelligence, professional development, and so much more. Very little of it was what I would call "light" reading. Almost none of it was fiction.

Now if you're thinking, "How on earth does anyone have time for that? Does this guy have a job?" The answer is yes, I have a job, but I listen to everything sped up during my commute, dog walks, days off, household chores, gym visits, and outdoor runs.

Very efficient—for consumption, that is.

It is not efficient for processing, though. It is certainly not efficient for implementation.

I'm all for personal growth and development, but unprocessed ideas without any implementation have begun to cause a problem for me. For example, I listened to the audiobook *Strengthening the Soul of Your Leadership*, by Ruth Haley Barton. I rushed through this book about deep rest and reflection at 1.5x speed. Does anyone see the problem?



Corey Van Huizen is the pastor of The Gathering, a church plant in Caledonia, Mich. He and his wife, Alanna, love all things on, in, or near water.

Deeper than my ironic rushing through a book on rest is a powerfully problematic word that has emerged in my subconscious and regularly makes its way out of my mouth and into my mental framework: *should*.

I should be more disciplined. I should be more active. I should be a better leader. I should be leading a bigger organization. I should be a better husband. I should be a better father. I should be able to handle that. I should be ... I should be ... I should be ...

Who is this person that I've concocted, the one to whom I constantly compare myself? He's the man of my inputs, the cacophony of all the ideas I've been consuming over the past 12 months at a breakneck pace. You see, when you don't take the time to process ideas and decide how, if, or when you will implement them, but instead just keep flooding your head with the new, or old, or current way you should lead, parent, exercise, schedule, or grow spiritually, it becomes a problem.

Someone wise once said, "Experience is life's best teacher." Someone wiser said, "It is not experience alone that is the best teacher, but reflection on your experience that is the best teacher." Without reflection there is little retained learning. This has left me with a hodgepodge of uninterpreted and unimplemented ideas forming a nebulous shadow of who I think I should be.

Drowning the Fear

As a pastor I have the privilege of walking alongside all sorts of people, but I've noticed the stalling out of a particular demographic: mine. Young men aged 18 to 35. We've got ideas on how life could go and what we could or should be, but we end up paralyzed by our fear of failure. None of us likes to feel or dwell on those fears, so what do we do? We drown out that fearful voice with other voices—more books, more podcasts, more sermons. More ideas without implementation to cover the fear that I'll never be who I think I should be. And listen, I'm all for personal growth and development. I'm all for the restlessness of who I am that drives me to become who I'd like to be. But the answer to that restlessness is not found in continuing to consume ideas without implementation. Without reflection there will be no retained learning.



In fact, continuous consumption might be exacerbating the problem.

There will always be new ideas to consume. There will always be “life-changing hacks” for time management, leadership, money, parenting, or exercise, just as there will always be more work to be done. But working only for gain, only for progress, only for growth is a meaningless, discontented life. The wise teacher in Ecclesiastes repeatedly calls it “chasing after the wind” (Eccles. 1:14). Not only is it meaningless, but it is at the same time foolish, even stupid. Who in their right mind would try to chase and grasp the wind?

So what’s the fix for the fear and discontent that comes from our chasing ideals? According to the wise teacher, the answer is to eat, drink, and find satisfaction in one’s work (Eccles. 2:24)—in other words, enjoy your work, enjoy your gain, enjoy your progress. Enjoy your food. Enjoy your drinks.

But here’s the thing about enjoyment: it’s a slower process. You don’t enjoy food by continually cramming more in your mouth. To be satisfied requires digestion. It takes time. Satisfaction is slow. You significantly hamper your ability to enjoy life when, rather than living it, you listen to or read about what it should be like—and do so at 1.5x speed.

I think Jesus understood this. Maybe that’s why he walked everywhere, was often seen eating and drinking, and frequently encouraged his disciples to “come ... to a quiet place and get some rest” (Mark 6:31). Jesus was the one who said that his yoke is easy and his burden is light (Matt. 11:29-30). A yoke here refers to a rabbi’s expectation of how life ought to be lived. Jesus was saying that his way of life was easy and light. Would you describe your life that way? Don’t you wish you could?


Perhaps you’re like me, thinking, “If I don’t keep up on all the latest ideas, I’ll fall behind. I’ll miss out!” Here’s the truth: You will. But that’s OK. It was also the writer of Ecclesiastes who said “there is nothing new under the sun” (Eccles. 1:9).

Because of that, here’s what I’ve decided:

I will not let the fear of falling behind drive me to create a version of myself that I think I should be but constantly fear I never will be.

No, I want a life of satisfaction. I want to do a little more enjoying. A little more reflecting. A little more implementation.

I think that means I’m going to take in a little less, listen a little more slowly, and try a yoke that’s a little lighter.

Slow down. Learn to enjoy. Don’t consume so much that you undermine your own contentment. Perhaps you will find yourself living the lighter and easier life Jesus is inviting you to (Matt. 11:28). 

1. How might people fall into the problem of “unprocessed ideas without any implementation”? Have you ever had that problem?
2. Have you ever been tyrannized by the word “should”? How and why did that happen?
3. How can we avoid being paralyzed by our fear of failure?

[READ MORE](#) [ONLINE](#)

Mothers, Sisters, Empresses, and Queens

HISTORIAN AND AUTHOR Anneke Stasson grew up in the Christian Reformed Church in Olympia, Wash. For Women's History Month, we talked to her about her new book, *Women in the Mission of the Church* (co-authored by Leanne M. Dzubinski). The book is a historian's portrait of how women have participated in the church's mission from the first century through the 20th.

Who were some of the women in the Bible who set a precedent for women serving in the mission of the church?

In the Old Testament, you have Deborah, Miriam, and Esther. In the New Testament, you have Mary. Mary was Christ's first teacher and his first follower; she urged him to do his first miracle. Women were the first witnesses of the resurrection. Lydia started a church in Philippi. Priscilla and her husband, Aquila, started three churches.

Who inspired you most among the mothers, sisters, empresses, and queens dating back to the 300s?

When I became a mom I searched in vain for mom saints. When my Eastern Orthodox friends pointed me to the Three Holy Mothers of the Three Hierarchs—Nonna (305?-374), the mother of Gregory of Nazianzus, Emmelia (d. 375), the mother of Basil, and Anthusa (324/334-?), the mother of John Chrysostom—I was really excited. These were women of prayer. They raised their children in the faith, and their children all gave them credit for teaching them to come to know and love God. Emmelia had 10 kids, five of whom became saints.

You say in your book that Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179) is "one of the most gifted humans to ever live." What should we know about her?

She was incredibly smart. Hildegard wrote medical textbooks and a play, she composed music, and she was



a theologian. An abbess of a convent, she was a mystic. She got these visions from God and shared them with people through images and text. She was made a doctor of the church, an authoritative teacher of church doctrine alongside Augustine and Aquinas. I love that she went out on horseback in her 60s to preach because priests were not giving their congregations sermons with strong enough doctrine.

There is a clear pattern in your book of women in the church rising in leadership but being limited because of their gender. How did women deal with pushback?

Catherine of Siena (1347-80) is a fascinating example, she was such an ascetic and only lived to age 33. She had such a deep relationship with Jesus. Living during the time of the Black Death, she was taking care of people who were ill, both male and female. She was criticized for mingling with men. Catherine prayed about

it and heard from God, who told her "With me, there is no male or female." She realized she just needed to please God and no one else.

Was there a shift in gender roles with the Protestant Reformation (1517-1648) and especially with Luther's influence in the church?

The big shift is that the church went from affirming celibacy as the highest Christian calling to affirming marriage as the highest Christian calling. Luther highly valued

marriage and parenthood, which was good because wives and mothers could see their own lives as honoring God. But Luther took this to the point where he actually said that celi-

bacy was "a papal innovation contrary to God's word." Celibacy became so denigrated, and that was devastating for women who were single. Nuns were physically attacked. Single Protestant women had no place in the church until the women's missionary movement of the 19th century.

Who stood out to you as an early 20th-century woman who led the way in establishing social justice ministries?

Women have always been involved in healing work and caring for people on the margins of society. Women who felt this call to go out into society and



address its problems led the way. Ida B. Wells was the foremost anti-lynching activist. We don't hear about her in the church, but it was her faith in God that led her to do this work and gave her comfort when all seemed for naught. **B**

Anneke Stasson has fond memories of attending Olympia CRC in Olympia, Wash., with her parents and brothers. She is a graduate of Calvin College (now University) and Regent College in Vancouver, B.C., and has a doctorate from Boston University. *Women in the Mission of the Church* is her first book. Stasson lives with her husband, Steve, and their four children on a small farm in Marion, Ind. She is an associate professor of humanities and history in the John Wesley Honors College at Indiana Wesleyan University. Email her at anneke.stasson@indwes.edu.



Lorilee Craker, a native of Winnipeg, Man., 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.



Encanto

Reviewed by Lorilee Craker

Encanto is inspired by the classic book *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and its story of a family enchanted with magical abilities living in a magical house.

Mirabel (Stephanie Beatriz) is the anti-Disney princess, an ordinary girl with glasses who doesn't need a prince to wake her up to her shifting surroundings. The magic in her family is cracking somehow, and it seems to be connected to her exiled Uncle Bruno.

Mirabel and Uncle Bruno are relatable to anyone who feels as if they can't measure up to their family's expectations. It's gratifying to watch this family come to terms with who they really are as love and grace win the day. With catchy tunes by Lin-Manuel Miranda, this brightly colored gem shines. (PG, Disney+)



When Grey Came to Stay

By Amber Kuipers,
illustrated by Linda
Yolanda Kloosterhof

Reviewed by Mary Ma

Julie and her parents loved each other, but then an accident changed her life forever: "Julie's dad never came home. But Grey did." This uninvited new friend, "Grey," appeared in Julie's world like a hovering dark cloud. "Grey was big, dark, and overwhelming. He took up a lot of room at Julie's house. He seemed to fill up every corner."

With empathy and sensitivity, this story depicts the complicated emotions a child goes through after bereavement and offers good coping strategies. It also helps parents and family members understand what grief feels like to children. Both the author and the illustrator describe personal encounters with loss in their words of dedication at the front of the book. (Alanna Rusnak Publishing)



Let Me Fix You a Plate: A Tale of Two Kitchens

By Elizabeth Lilly

Reviewed by Sonya
VanderVeen Feddema

Once a year, a young girl's family travels a long distance from their home in a city to a mountain in West Virginia where Mamaw and Papaw, the young girl's paternal grandparents, live. Mamaw greets them at the door and says, "Let me fix you a plate." Then they travel to Florida to visit Abuela and Abuelo, the girl's maternal grandparents. When they arrive, Abuela says, "There's food inside. Come and eat."

As the girl and her family return to the city, she reflects on all the things she will miss: "Salsa / sausage / toast / tostones / ants / aunts / arepas / Abuela / naranjas / bananas / mountains / Mamaw / cats / and fog / and / scratchy grass." She envisions Mamaw and Abuela shaking hands, a bridge of love across cultures. (Neal Porter Books)

Why Doesn't God Answer My Prayers?

Prayer is living
before God in
moment-by-
moment gratitude
for nothing
more than
God's covenant
faithfulness to
us in Jesus.



Michael Wagenman is the Christian Reformed campus minister and a professor of theology at Western University in London, Ont., and part-time New Testament instructor at Redeemer University College. He attends Forest City Community Church.

WHY DOESN'T GOD ANSWER my prayers? This is a tough question—but not so much theologically or biblically. The New Testament makes clear that the God who has come among us in Jesus Christ has a “yes” orientation toward us as his beloved creation (2 Cor. 1:19-20). This is the nature of who God is: God relates to us with radical openness, hospitality, welcome, grace, and life. In Jesus, God answers every prayer with his personal presence and precious promises (2 Pet. 1:4).

No, this is a tough question because it's so intimately personal. “Heal my sister's cancer.” “Help my brother stop drinking.” “Give my son a job.” These are the kinds of prayers that make us wonder if God is listening, or powerful, or loving. What this question is really asking is something like, “Why doesn't it seem to me right now as if God answers my prayers?”

This is a helpful clarification. And there are all kinds of possible answers. It might not seem as if God answers our prayers because we might not recognize God's answer. We might not like God's answer. We might not prefer the timing of God's answer. You catch my drift: we might ask this question because we don't like God's ways, which are not our ways (Isa. 55:8-9).

Of course, we might be asking for the wrong thing, or a foolish thing—or just something that in the bigger picture doesn't make sense (and God knows it) but from our limited perspective seems reasonable or obvious. We might just be going through the motions of prayer with our hearts, minds, and wills not really in it. Sometimes, if we're honest, we're really relying on our affluence, influence, or ability to get us through.

Sometimes we pray as a way of avoiding our responsibilities. We'd rather push what needs to be done onto

God instead of rolling up our own sleeves and getting our hands dirty. Sometimes we treat God like a genie in a bottle, turning to God and wanting enough of God to get his involvement only where and when we need it.

But we might also feel as if God is not answering our prayers because we have a limited or faulty view of what prayer really is. We live in a powerfully technological world. But God isn't a technology or a technique to manipulate the universe to fit our desires or visions. God isn't a cosmic vending machine where, if we just put in the right currency (right beliefs, right behaviors, right intentions, etc.), we get what we want.

Prayer isn't the way for us to get stuff from God or to get God to act like a waiter in a nice restaurant. Prayer isn't giving God our shopping list or to-do list. Conceiving of prayer as “We bring questions; God brings answers” mistakenly assumes God is some sort of divine Google. Sometimes Google answers our questions, sometimes not. This isn't prayer.

At its most basic, prayer is the shape that life with God takes. Prayer is mindful communion with God, who is always more present to us than we are to ourselves (St. Augustine). Or, in words shaped by the Heidelberg Catechism, prayer is living before God in moment-by-moment gratitude for nothing more than God's covenant faithfulness to us in Jesus.

Prayer has moments in which life stops and all of one's attention is focused. But more often prayer is a life being lived out of and through a living encounter with God at the core of our being. This is why Paul says that Jesus' Spirit is a seal and a guarantee of God's eternal faithfulness to his every promise to us as his beloved creation (2 Cor. 1:22). **B**

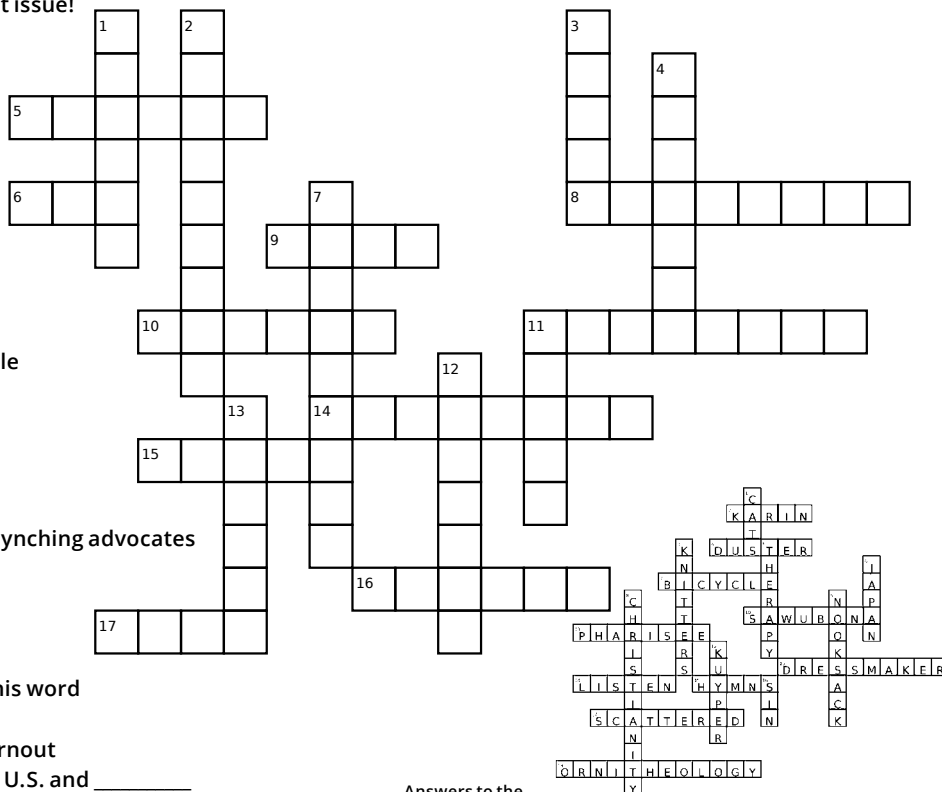
Find the answers to the crossword clues in this issue of *The Banner*. See the solution in the next issue!

Down

1. Resonate _____ Mission
2. _____ of Bingen, "one of the most gifted humans to ever live"
3. This kind of polarization is the real problem
4. _____ is inspired by the classic *One Hundred Years of Solitude*
7. A soft rock many caves are made from
11. Biblical prostitute who used a red cord to signal the Israelites
12. Officebearers called to prepare God's people for works of service
13. "The Silenced _____"

Across

5. Van Huizen's powerfully problematic word
6. _____ B. Wells, one of the foremost anti-lynching advocates
8. A hospital _____ often sees creation and death in the same day
9. Prairie Grass _____ Challenge
10. It lies at the center of the Christian life
11. The CRC, the RCA, and the new ARC share this word
14. "If you want to go far, go _____"
15. He came to CTS on the verge of ministry burnout
16. The CRCNA comprises congregations in the U.S. and _____
17. Every January thousands gather for the March for _____



Answers to the February 2022 puzzle

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Congregational Announcements

BRADENTON CRC WELCOMES WINTER VISITORS AND VACATIONERS! Our Florida church is diverse in ages and interests but united in passionate service to our Savior. Sunday services at 10 A.M. and 5 P.M. Weekly Bible studies are available in person or on Zoom. We also offer various other events and gatherings. www.bradentoncrc.org

Denominational Announcements

AGENDA FOR SYNOD 2022 Synod has established the following deadlines for materials to be received by the office of the executive director of the CRCNA for the synodical agenda: a. Overtures, communications, and appeals to synod are due no later than March 15, and must first be processed through the local council and the classis. b. Names and addresses of delegates to synod on the Credentials for Synod form, as well as the completed information form for each synodical delegate, are to be submitted by stated clerks of classes and the appointed delegates as soon as possible, but no later than March 15. Materials will be included in the Agenda for Synod if received before the synodically established deadlines. Colin P. Watson, Sr., Executive Director of the CRCNA

ANNUAL DAY OF PRAYER Synod has designated the second Wednesday in March (March 9, 2022) as the Annual Day of Prayer. All CRC congregations are requested to take this opportunity to ask for God's blessing upon the world, our nations and communities, crops and industry, and the church worldwide. U.S. Councils, if it is judged that the observance of the Annual Day of Prayer can be more meaningfully observed in conjunction with the National Day of Prayer (U.S.), you have the right to change the date of a special service accordingly (Acts of Synod 1996, p. 578). The National Day of Prayer (U.S.) is Thursday, May 5, 2022. Colin P. Watson, Sr., Executive Director of the CRCNA

Church Positions Available

1ST CRC DEMOTTE INDIANA SEEKS FULL TIME YOUTH DIRECTOR Job description and contact information are on our website: www.1stcrcdemotte.org under the About tab.

ASSOCIATE PASTOR Appleton, Wisconsin, Covenant Christian Reformed Church is a growing, family-oriented, multi-generational congregation of over 120 regular attendees. We seek to add to our staff a full-time Associate Pastor to lead our youth ministries, organize and equip

our discipleship ministries, and occasionally preach. A job description and church profile are available by contacting Mike at 920-410-1459 or email mikeivy4@gmail.com.

CAMPUS CHAPLAIN Ottawa Campus Chaplaincy seeks a full-time campus chaplain based at the University of Ottawa, in Canada's national capital. Candidates must be committed to the Reformed faith, have pastoral experience with young adults, be an articulate Christian in multiple contexts, and have a relevant advanced academic degree. French language ability is an asset. For more submission and other job details, email board@ottawacampuschaplaincy.org. See also ottawacampuschaplaincy.org. Application deadline: March 15, 2022.

CONGREGATIONAL CARE Cascade Fellowship, in Grand Rapids, MI, seeks a person to serve part-time meeting the needs of the church community. This role will be part of a team making hospital calls, serving those with long-term illness, and providing grief counseling. Visit cascadefellowship.org/jobs or email jobs@cascadefellowship.org for details.

FULL-TIME TEACHING PASTOR Hope Fellowship Christian Reformed Church in Courtice, Ontario, is actively seeking a full-time Teaching Pastor passionate about preaching God's word within dynamic worship, with a focus on cross-generational shepherding and discipleship and a passion for engaging the next generation. Hope Fellowship embraces and lives out God's redemptive plan by inviting people to believe in Jesus, belong to God's family and bless every neighbor. Send questions and resumes to Search@hopefellowship.ca

HOPE CRC IN RIVERSIDE CALIFORNIA, is prayerfully seeking a Pastor to lead our congregation. We desire a pastor who is faith-centered, compassionate, engaging, has a heart for evangelism and an ability to successfully reach out to our diverse community. Our Church is located in sunny Riverside California and has the distinction of being 45 minutes away from the mountains, the desert and the ocean. Parsonage is available if desired. To learn more about us, visit our website at: <http://www.hopecommunitycrc.com/> Please email your resume or inquiries to: hopecrcsearchcommittee@gmail.com

LEAD PASTOR - Aylmer CRC is prayerfully seeking a Lead Pastor to join our ministry team. The Lead Pastor we are seeking would ideally be self-motivated, compassionate, devoted to providing engaging preaching, passionate

about nurturing spiritual growth, and able to equip us for community outreach. If you would like to live and work in the beautiful, thriving town of Aylmer, Ontario, conveniently located near the shores of Lake Erie and close to larger urban centers, we would like 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. Housing is available if needed.

PASTER OF EDUCATION Fellowship Christian Reformed Church in Brighton, ON is seeking a qualified, spirit filled man to be our full-time Pastor of Education to lead the educational ministries of our church with a special focus on the younger generation. Please visit brigh-toncrc.org for the current job description. Application deadline is March 31, 2022.

SONLIGHT CRC (LYNDEN, WA) SEEKS SENIOR PASTOR gifted in preaching, leadership and pastoral care of a congregation. To learn more about Sonlight and the Senior Pastor position, visit <https://www.sonlightchurch.com/senior-pastor-job-opportunity>.

Birthdays

BIRTHDAY 100 YEARS



Gertrude Van Haitsma, with gratitude to God for His faithfulness Gertrude Van Haitsma hopes to celebrate her 100th birthday on March 9, 2022. An open house is planned for that day at Bethel CRC, 515 E. Main, Zeeland, MI at 2-4pm.

BIRTHDAY 90 YEARS

GERTRUDE J. (BONNIE BONNEMA) VAN DER SLIK and her family express thanks and praise to God for her 90th birthday on March 27. With her husband, Jack, she has three married children: Franci (Rickie) Meredith, Gary (Julie) and Randy (Denise) Van Der Slik, as well as six grandchildren. Grateful for a rewarding life as teacher, realtor and church volunteer, she joyfully celebrates this milestone in God's loving care. Address: 5-A Westlake Dr., Orange City, FL 32763

JOHN VANDERHOEK of Surrey, B.C. celebrated his 90th birthday with his wife Lucy, on January 31. His children Greta (Doug-deceased) (Milt), Frances (John), and Ed (Darla), 8 grandchildren, and 16 great grandchildren thank the Lord for all his blessings on his long life and faithfulness.

Anniversary

WEDDING ANNIVERSARY 65 YEARS

LANGVELD, Art and Fran Langeveld along with their children and grandchildren are giving thanks to God for 65 years of marriage on March 7.

VANDER PLAATS, Al and Evelyn (Van Dellen) will celebrate their 65th wedding anniversary on March 29, 2022. We and our children Scott, Jeffery (deceased) and Amy (Bill VanderVelde) praise God for His love and many blessings. Greetings can be sent to 2402 Stockinger Dr. St. Cloud, MN 56303

WEDDING ANNIVERSARY 60 YEARS



GRIFFIOEN, Roger and Marguerite (Vogel) celebrated their 60th wedding anniversary on December 27, 2021. God's blessings include 5 children with their spouses and 8 grandchildren. Greetings can be emailed to griff60rm@gmail.com.

Obituaries



KROS, Frances E. nee Kingma, 83, moved to her heavenly home on January 17, 2022. 10461 W 1100 N, DeMotte IN 46310. She leaves behind her loving husband Richard Kros, several grandchildren, and five children: Karen Kros of Portage, MI; Kathy (Kevin) Daane of Escondido, CA; Kim (Tom) Cope of Highland, IN; Tim (Diane) Kros of Fair Oaks, IN; and Kori (Glen) VanderKooi of Byron Center, MI.

LANING, Jennie Deckinga, age 102, of Westmont, went home to be with her LORD on January 23rd, 2022. 1500 S. Euclid Ave, Villa Park, IL 60181. Beloved wife of the late Clarence Laning Sr.; loving step-mother of Nelva (Jim) Heinking, Ken (Trudy) Laning, Dave (the late Kim) Laning, the late Joann (the late Bernie) Huizenga, the late Sharon (the late Harvey) Weiss, and the late Clarence Laning Jr.; devoted step-grandmother of 19; step-great-grandmother of 49; and step-great-great-grandmother of 24; dear sister of Ida (the late Ray) Boss, Arthur (Lorraine) Deckinga, Derk (Jan & the late Marge) Deckinga, Marilyn (Bill) Van Howe, the late Claus (the late Alice) Deckinga, the late Peter (Yvonne) Deckinga, the late Henry (Dena) Deckinga, and the late Tracy (the late Peter) Herlein, and the late John (Marilyn) Deckinga; aunt of many nieces and nephews. Memorials to Lombard Christian Reformed Church, 2020 S. Meyers Rd, Lombard, IL 60148.

NAGEL, Douglas J., age 89 of Grand Rapids, MI ran into the arms of Jesus on December 2, 2021. He was the devoted husband of Lois (DeHaan) Nagel for 67 years. He was the loving father to Julie Nagel, Joni (Tom) DeFouw,

Jim (Deb) Nagel and Jan (Peter) Malek and cherished Grandpa/Oppa to 15 grandchildren and 13 great-grandchildren (predeceased by Kaitlyn Nagel). Doug graduated from Grand Rapids Christian High (1950) and Calvin College (1954). He was a long time member of Seymour CRC (Grand Rapids, MI) and Sunlight Community Church (Port St. Lucie, FL). Doug was involved with several Christian ministries both locally and globally and had a big heart for furthering God's Kingdom. "God loves a cheerful giver" (2 Cor.9:7) and "Well done good and faithful servant" (Matt.25:23).

NAWYN, Esther (Bouma), age 89, of Grand Rapids, MI, went to be with her Lord on October 11, 2021. She was preceded in death by her beloved husband of 50 years, William; son, Steven; and grandson, Tyler. She will be dearly missed by daughter Barb (Greg) Bay and grandchildren Mckenzi, Dylan, Lexi, and Emily Bay; daughter Kathy Nawyn; sisters Marion Tiemeyer, Bea Bloemhof, Carol Koekkoek, Anita Schoonveld, and Rayda Bouma; and many in-laws, nieces, and nephews. See: zaagman.com.



OUWINGA, Marilyn Wilma (Boven), age 91, of Marion, MI, passed peacefully at her home on January 22, 2022. She was a loving wife to former Michigan State Representative, Sidney Ouwinga, who preceded her in death on July 17, 1991.

She was a lifelong member of Highland CRC, serving in various capacities, including organist, Sunday school teacher, Ladies Aid, Booster Club, and youth group. She is remembered as a loving mother to Carl (Mary) Ouwinga, Dale (Karen) Ouwinga, Kathy Ouwinga-Martin, and Robert (Susan) Ouwinga. Marilyn leaves a legacy of grandchildren and great-grandchildren, whom she delighted in.



STRONKS, William John, November 12, 1933- January 9, 2022. William (Bill) Stronks was born in Aalten, a town in eastern Netherlands. Bill went to Calvin College in Grand Rapids, MI, where he met Gloria Goris. They married and had two

children. After earning a PhD from Vanderbilt University, he began a teaching career at Trinity Christian College in Palos Heights, IL. He taught languages including Dutch and German. One of Bill's passions was exposing students to life abroad. Bill was an early proponent of study abroad. Over fifty years ago he developed a semester-long study abroad program in the Netherlands that was adapted and used by different colleges. Bill is survived by his children Julia (Charles Zandbergen) Stronks, and Bill (Amy Wilson-Stronks) Stronks, his grandson Matthew (Jasmine Emiko Spencer Zandbergen) Zandbergen, and seven siblings - Dick (Wilma), John (Wilma), Ernie (Rie), Joyce Visser (John), Trudy Reitsma (Martin), Hank (Rosario), and Jack (Georgy).



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May 4 – May 17 | *Johannes & Lynda Witte*

**PAUL'S MISSIONARY JOURNEYS
IN TURKEY**
May 23 – Jun 4 | *Dr. Jeffrey Weima*

IRELAND PAST AND PRESENT
Jun 16 – Jun 25 | *Debra Freeberg*

EUROPEAN HANDBELL FESTIVAL
Jun 18 - Jun 29 | *Deborah Rice & Keith Cole*

PILGRIMAGE TO THE HOLY LAND
Jun 20 - Jul 2 | *Bill & Lyn Vanden Bosch*
\$ Refundable Deposit \$

THE CANADIAN ROCKIES
Aug 20 - Aug 28 | *Bruce Buursma*
\$ Refundable Deposit \$

**FROM ARLES TO LYON:
BIKE & BARGE TOUR OF
SOUTHERN FRANCE**
Sep 16 – Sep 24 | *Bruce & Judy Buursma*

**ORGAN STUDY TOUR
OF THE UNITED KINGDOM**
Sep 20 – Sep 30 | *Dr. Faythe Freese*

ROME AND THE AMALFI COAST
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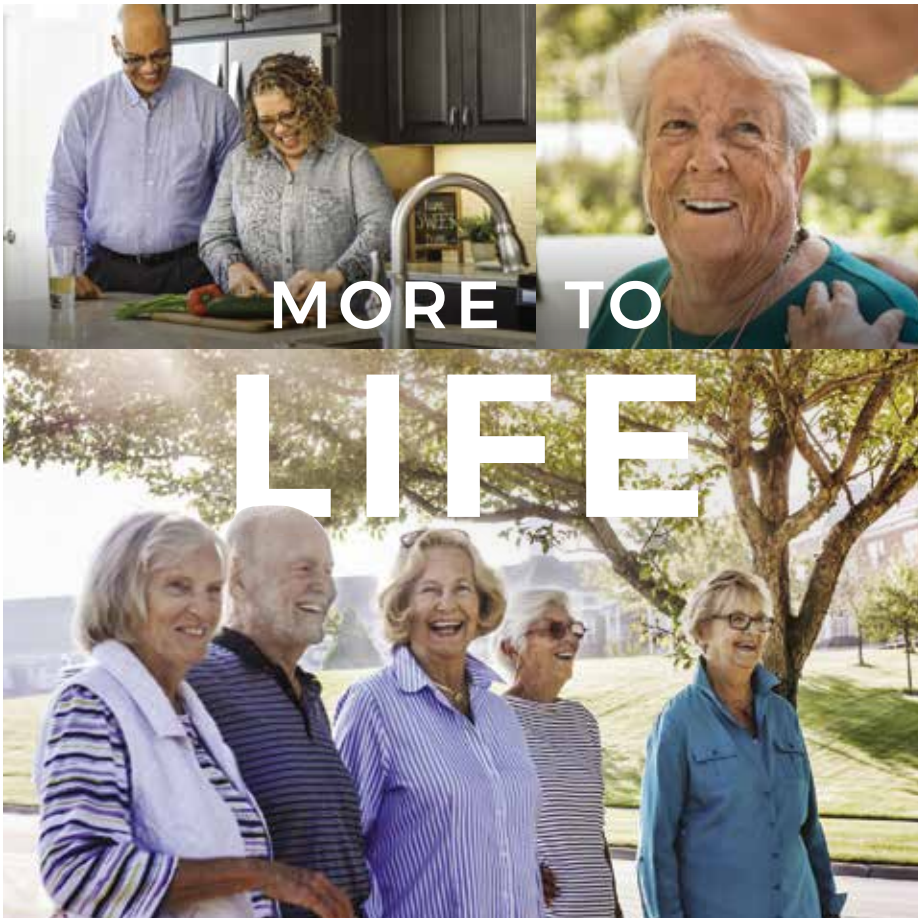
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VAN ANDEL, Phyllis DenBraber, age 95, passed away peacefully to her heavenly home on December 10, 2021. She was preceded in death by her husband of 56 years, John VanAndel, her brothers Carl (Dorothy) DenBraber

and Bob (Evie) DenBraber, and her brother-in-law Clare Wuerfel. She is survived by her sister Joann Wuerfel, her children Bob (Peg) VanAndel, Kurt (Dorothy) Frisch, and Joe (Muffie) VanAndel, two grandchildren Kurt (Kayt) Frisch and Sarah Frisch (Chris Embree), two great-grandchildren Peter and Anika Frisch, many nieces and nephews, and many friends. Phyllis was born in Grand Rapids, MI to Henry and Josephine DenBraber and graduated from Grand Rapids Christian High School. In 1947, she was the first speech major to graduate from Calvin College. Phyllis had a lifelong interest in learning. She was active in organizing the CALL program, and, at an advanced age, taught a CALL program herself to the wives and mothers of four U.S. presidents. She was a patron of the arts, supporting organizations such as GRAM, Meijer Gardens, and the Calvin Alumni Choir. She sang with a strong voice in the choir of Woodlawn CRC for many years, retiring from that role at age 90. She was a beloved presence at Woodlawn CRC, both morning and evening services, for her 22 years of independent living at Raybrook (through 2018). She also cultivated lifelong interests in flower-arranging, reading, book clubs, Bible study groups, writing, and traveling, including numerous Road Scholar trips. The Celebration of Life will be held April 22, 2022 at 1 p.m. in the Chapel of Calvin University. Memorial gifts may be given to one of Phyllis's scholarships at Calvin University (the Henry VanAndel Memorial Scholarship <https://calvin.academicworks.com/opportunities/20117> or the Phyllis DenBraber VanAndel CAS Scholarship <https://calvin.academicworks.com/opportunities/19612>) or to Woodlawn CRC, 3190 Burton St. SE, Grand Rapids, MI 49546.



VAN KOOTEN, Delmer L., age 88, of Pella, IA passed away on January 3, 2022. He is survived by his wife of 64 years Wilma (Wimp), his four children: Cindy (Pastor Phil) Boender of Mason City, IA, Dan (Andi) of Pella, IA, Myrna (Greg)

Haagsma of Gilbert, AZ, and Dr. Karna (Chris) Walter of Tucson, AZ, twelve grandchildren (six married), and two great-grandchildren. Delmer will be remembered as a loving husband, father, grandfather, and great-grandfather. Proverbs 3:5-6.

The Benefits of Gathering Together Often

I think there are benefits not just to evening services, but to meeting together as often as we can.

I'VE BEEN A PART of several churches in my 23 years of life. Some of them had two services on Sundays. Others had only one. Some were more contemporary. Others sang more hymns. Some had almost 1,000 members. Others had fewer than 100. But all, at one time or another, had dealt with decreasing attendance, especially at the evening worship service and at church events. Each time it led to a discussion of which activities should be cut, and the evening service usually was the main candidate.

In some ways I understand. If there aren't a lot of people, it doesn't make sense to have the pastor do the extra work of preparing another sermon. However, I think there are benefits not just to evening services, but to meeting together as often as we can.

While there aren't any specific Scripture verses saying churches should have a certain number of worship services, there are some principles we can find. In Acts, we find that the early church met together every chance they got. They met in each other's homes, in the temple courts, and in other public places (Acts 2:42-47). As their numbers grew, they split into smaller groups similar to a Bible study or Sunday school. One could even use this passage to make a case for church potlucks. I wouldn't complain.

In fact, fellowship has been one of the best parts of my church experience. When I was 3 or 4 years old, my family started going every Saturday to a group prayer breakfast in the home of elderly twin sisters. We'd start out gathering around their table for a meal, usually coffee cake or a similar dish. Afterward we'd go to their living room and take turns praying for the needs of our church and our community. Those are still some of my fondest memories from when I was little.

I've found that evening worship services fill a similar role. Evening

services tend to be more informal. It's a time when church members can share their joys and concerns with the congregation. The sermon often will be on a shorter passage of Scripture or one of the creeds, confessions, or catechism questions.

In one church I attended, the pastor would set up a small lectern halfway from the front. In reality, he did it because the congregation liked to sit toward the back in the evenings, but it also added to the laid-back feel of the service. The pastor took hymn requests in the evening instead of choosing songs beforehand.

As I grew older and started attending different churches, I found that the pattern stayed about the same. The church I attended in college had a smaller evening service, which gave me the opportunity to visit with members I didn't always see in the morning. Sometimes they'd have small get-togethers after the service as well. Some of my classmates would go to the evening service if they accidentally missed the morning service.

After I graduated I moved to a new place, which meant finding a new church. This congregation takes attendance seriously. In fact, they still count how many members are present and publish the numbers in the sanctuary. Even so, they prefer quality over quantity. Moments of fellowship, prayer, and encouragement are built into both services, and the members participate eagerly.

That's perhaps the most important part of attending church: receiving encouragement from fellow believers. The sermons, the singing, the fellowship, and even the potlucks all contribute to that. And with the difficulties being a follower of Christ can bring, who wouldn't want to be encouraged as often as they can? The best way to do that is to meet with fellow Christians. **B**



Benjamin Boersma is an English major at Dordt University in Sioux Center, Iowa. He is a member of Dispatch Christian Reformed Church in Cawker City, Kan.

Seeing Clearly

I don't want
to live a life of
ignorance, one
with blinders on.

WEARING GLASSES can be an interesting exercise in choosing what to see. As someone who needs glasses to see far away, I often take mine off when I'm reading. When I pull out a book, it's become automatic for me to put my glasses on top of my head.

When I go about other activities and forget to put my glasses back on, the world suddenly goes blurry, and nothing is clear. Everything farther than a couple feet away from my face is absent of details.

Sometimes it's a nice perk. Dust seems to disappear from the baseboards, and the crumbs on the counter seem to vanish. But I'm afraid I sometimes have this selective vision in other aspects of my life as well.

I take off my metaphorical glasses so I can't see the problem areas in my life and the world around me. I avoid bank statements and the scale. I choose which news I consume so I don't have to see the injustices going on in the world. It can all feel too real, too messy, too heartbreaking—just too much.

I've tried not to see clearly so I don't have to see the hard, messy truth.

But God sees through the mess of who I am and what I've done, and he loves me anyway.



Courtney Westerhof is a writer and communications professional. She lives in Grimsby, Ont., and is a member of Ancaster Christian Reformed Church. Follow her on Twitter @cmwesterhof.

Hagar called God “the God who sees me” (Gen. 16:13), and how right she was.


God saw me when I was still in my mother's womb (Ps. 139:13). God sees my every step (Job 34:21) and knows the secrets of my heart (Ps. 44:21).

God loves me because of and in spite of my mess. He doesn't need to take off any metaphorical glasses so I look a little less grubby. God sees me clearly—more clearly than I see myself. It's a scary idea at first, but it's also extremely comforting. God loves me

even with all the aspects of myself I hide and wish I could change.

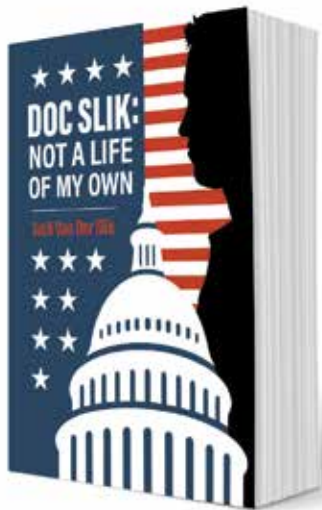
The perfect 20/20 vision that God has is what I want to have too. I don't want to live a life of ignorance, one with blinders on. I want to clearly see God, myself, and the world around me. Taking off my real or metaphorical glasses doesn't change reality. The mess and dirt are still there. And that's OK. So I pray the words of Psalm 119:18: “Open my eyes that I may see.”

Seeing clearly is a gift. And maybe real beauty can be truly seen and appreciated only when it is seen alongside the dark and the ugly. Maybe you need to see the bad in order to really appreciate what is positive and wonderful. You can't see the rainbow, the promise of God's covenant, without first going through the storm. You can't see God's gift of salvation without first seeing Christ's sacrifice on the cross.

So I'm putting my glasses back on. I don't want to miss out on really seeing for one more minute. 

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VOS, Arthur J. Jr., Age 89, went to be home with his Lord on January 10, 2022. 13701 Lauerman St. #58, Cedar Lake, IN, 46303 formerly of Naples, FL and Oak Brook, IL. Proud Army and Korean War Veteran, Owner and Operator of Best Scavenger Services and Green Valley Disposal until his retirement. Beloved husband of his wife of 68 years, Joanne Vos, nee Groenboom; loving father of Loretta (Dennis Sr.) Keizer, Ruth (David Sr.) Buikema, Ardythe (Henry Jr.) Iwema, and the late Arthur (Kristen) Vos III; cherished grandpa of 10; cherished gramps of 19. Memorials to Cedar Lake Ministries, Esophageal Cancer Action Network or to the Honor Flight are appreciated.

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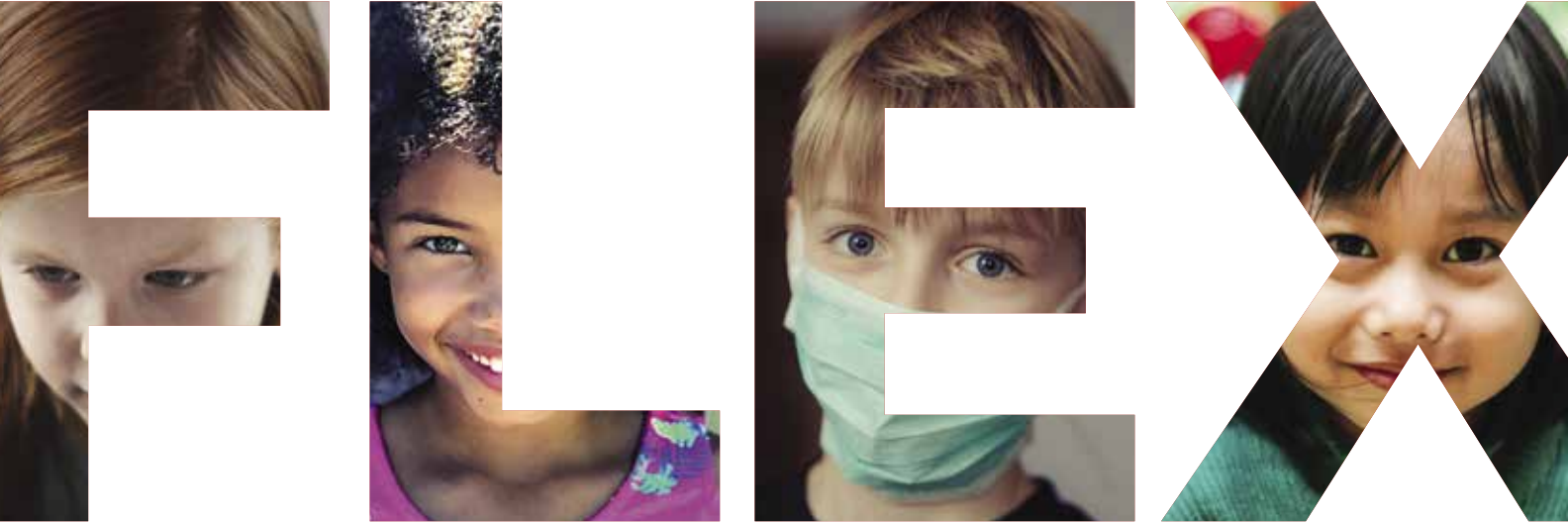
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