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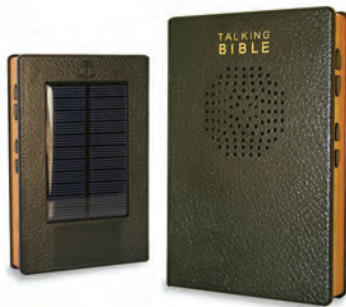
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Synod 2022

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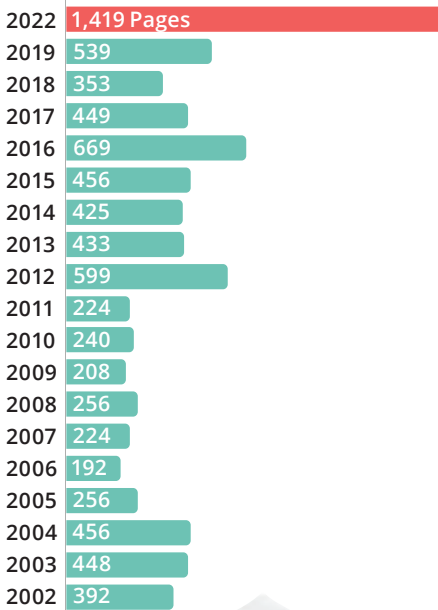
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BY THE NUMBERS

The two volumes of meeting material processed by Synod 2022 weigh (as measured by our news editor's kitchen scale) 1.75 kg, or just about 4 pounds. That's 1,316 pages (another 103 pages, in the supplement, were only provided digitally)—about double and then some of the second-longest agenda in the past 20 years.

Weighty Agendas



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: Historic California Congregation Disaffiliates from the CRC
- » News: Celebrating World Renew's 60th Anniversary at Synod
- » News: No Study of What Matters Are Ecclesiastical
- » Movie: *Top Gun: Maverick*
- » Music: *Mr. Morale & the Big Steppers*, by Kendrick Lamar
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CORRECTION

The story “Council of Delegates Agenda Included Budget, Structure, Togetherness” (June 2022, pp. 16-17) should have included one more retiring Council member who was missing from the group photo: Rev. Michelle Kool. Ten Council members retired June 30.

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BANNER

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Beware Loveless Orthodoxy

After decades of pain and lack of grace, why should anything be different now?



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.

이 기사의 한글번역은 TheBanner.org/korean에서 보실 수 있습니다.

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

WITHIN 24 HOURS of Synod 2022's declaration that its stance on homosexual sex is confessional, I started receiving emails from people lamenting this decision. I heard a lot of pain and angst in their words, some expressing their pain in anger. Friendships are fractured. Memberships are in jeopardy. Scripture says, "If one member (of the body) suffers, all suffer together with it" (1 Cor. 12:26a). Despite our disagreements, we are all still members of Christ's body. We must give grace to each other, especially to those who feel they and/or their loved ones are being harmed by this decision.

Their fear of harm is not unfounded. Synod itself lamented, "We grieve the special pain experienced by members of the LGBTQ+ community through our lack of grace." The human sexuality report admits, "It is a sad truth that the Christian community, including our Christian Reformed denomination, has failed in its calling to empathize with, love, and bear the burdens of persons who are attracted to the same sex, making it very difficult for them to live a life of holiness" (*Agenda for Synod 2022*, p. 407).

This has been ongoing for decades: "Despite repeated and strong exhortations of past study committee reports to love and care for brothers and sisters who are attracted to the same sex as equal members of the body of Christ, the church has all-too-often ostracized, shunned, or ignored such Jesus-followers" (*Agenda for Synod 2022*, p. 426). From the 1973 synodical report on homosexuality to the 2002 report on pastoral care for homosexual members to the 2016 majority report on pastoral guidance on same-sex marriage to the present human sexuality report, every one of these synodical reports have bemoaned the church's failure to authentically

love and care for our baptized LGBTQ children.

Therefore, it is fair to ask: after decades of pain and lack of grace, why should anything be different now?

It is too simplistic to frame this synod either as "Bible-believing Christians holding the line against those following cultural trends" or "self-righteous Pharisees imposing their will against loving Christ-followers." The spiritual reality is more complex than these hurtful stereotypes. There were apologies and forgiveness.

However, I also did witness a spirit of censure and distrust in this synod. One delegate referenced a risk of "loveless orthodoxy," a term from Jeffrey Weima's book *The Sermons to the Seven Churches of Revelation*.

Weima co-chaired the committee that produced the human sexuality report. In his book he describes the church of Ephesus in Revelation 2: "While its commitment to orthodoxy is a virtue for which the Ephesian church is praised by Christ, it was also apparently a vice of this congregation. What is true of people can also be true of churches: their greatest strength can paradoxically become their greatest weakness. The Ephesian church was so preoccupied with identifying wicked people, exposing false apostles, and rejecting the sinful practices of the Nicolaitans that a spirit of suspicion and mistrust permeated their fellowship, making it impossible for them to be the caring, compassionate community that they had been in the past. In short, they were a church of loveless orthodoxy" (pp. 40-41).

May we not become a church of loveless orthodoxy, lest Christ removes our lampstand (Rev. 2:5). B



Controlling Spiraling Toxic Thoughts

By Lorilee Craker

Ethan Kross, a world-renowned expert at controlling the conscious mind, found himself sinking into a hole of paranoia after receiving a handwritten letter from an angry individual who had seen him talk about his research on TV.

There was nothing controversial about his findings, but the letter writer was upset enough to threaten Kross' safety. Soon Kross found himself creeping around the house at night with a baseball bat despite having been reassured by multiple people, including police, that public figures receive empty threats all the time and he had nothing to worry about. "But that wasn't the conversation I had with myself," he writes in his 2021 book *Chatter: The Voice In Our Head, Why It Matters, and How to Harness It*. "Instead, the despairing stream of thoughts running through my head amplified itself in an endless loop."

Kross' impaired quality of life bore out his research conclusion on thoughts and behavior: so much of our quality of life hinges on the conversations we have with ourselves all day, every day.

Experts say we can think up to 4,000 thoughts per minute. Thought by thought, we can build "entire narratives that begin to take on lives of their

own, based on assumptions and our overactive imaginations—all because we attend to fears, attend to distractions, attend to worst-case scenarios," writes Jennie Allen in *Get Out of Your Head: Stopping the Spiral of Toxic Thoughts*.

Because "God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind" (2 Tim. 1:7, NKJV), there is a better, more life-giving way.

How can we stop those poisonous corkscrews that affect our mental health and even our physical well-being? How do we grab hold of that "sound mind" we have been given and not let Satan steal our joy and damage our witness?

First, we must interrupt our inner critic.

'Leave Her Alone'

We think about that rift with a loved one, or how we messed up at work or with one of our kids, and we end up flooded by bad feelings. Then we think about it on repeat. "We introspect, hoping to tap into our inner coach, but find our inner critic instead," Kross says.

Just last week I signed my daughter up for her beloved horsemanship camp only to find out the camp was full. Other years there had always been plenty of time to sign up, but apparently post-COVID, not so much. What followed

was a one-on-one bullying session with my inner critic, who said things to me I would never dream of saying to a friend. (I once heard a comedian say that if we met someone on the street who said the things we say to ourselves, we'd punch him in the face.) Some studies show that 75% of our thoughts are criticisms—of ourselves. If we let our inner critic run amok, we can fall prey to something psychologists call the automatic negative thought phenomenon, in which our mental default is almost always negative.

Is this the kind of "sound mind" fueled by the love and power Jesus wants for his beloved children? No! Thankfully, we can learn to harness our thoughts and repair our minds, leaning on Jesus' resurrection power to do so. (This is a starting point. For some, medication or professional therapy is also needed to address mental health.)

We can start by enlisting Jesus' help every time we are aware of our inner critic punching us in the face (so to speak).

Author and spiritual director Sharon Brown gave a great tip for this at a writer's conference. She asked writers to imagine Jesus saying, "Leave her alone"—"her" being the woman who broke open an alabaster jar of perfume and anointed Jesus. Some of those who were there berated her for

this act of devotion. Now, “Imagine Jesus telling our inner critic to ‘leave her alone,’” Brown said.

Shut Up, Satan

The enemy is always nearby, hissing lies into our thought streams, including his favorite, “What if ... ?”

“With those two little words,” Allen says, Satan “sets our imaginations whirling, spinning tales of the doom that lurks ahead.” A powerful interruption to the whirling and the spinning, according to Allen, is this:

“Because God”

- » What if I don’t have enough money to pay tuition? Because God loves me, I can trust it will work out in some way.
- » What if my relationship with my loved one is never mended? Because God is good, I can heal because of his goodness.
- » What if the cancer spreads? Because God promises to be with me, he will accompany and strengthen me.

The Mind of Christ

One thing we often leave on the table is the ability to ask for the mind of Christ. “Have the same mindset as Christ Jesus,” says Phillipians 2:5. (See also 1 Cor. 2:16 and Isa. 55:8.) We can ask for God’s mysterious thoughts that go far beyond what our broken, fallen minds can register. Our prayer: “Father, help me to have your mind and your thoughts about this situation.”

5 Little Habits

To help rein in our spiraling thoughts, here are five little habits that when practiced regularly, can make a big difference in the quality of our self-talk:

Reframing

Can you come up with a more generous, measured thought to counteract one that is critical or fearful? For

So much of our
quality of life
hinges on the
conversations
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ourselves all day,
every day.

example, instead of jumping straight to “This is going to be an epic failure,” try something along the lines of “I’m genuinely trying my best.” Try to reframe stressful situations as challenging rather than threatening.

Create Distance

It’s helpful to zoom out from our thoughts and gain distance.

Kross’ research showed that “using your own name, while also employing the second or third person, creates emotional distance because it makes you feel as if you are talking to another person when you are talking to yourself.”

In Kross’ case, instead of asking himself, “Why did I blow up at my coworker?” he asked, “Why did Ethan blow up at his coworker?”

My husband and I tried this on a road trip to Alabama, referring to ourselves as “the driver” and “the passenger.” Of course we laughed and felt silly, but it also worked.

Cut the “Shoulds”

“Should” is one of the most shaming, destructive words we can possibly use with others and ourselves: “I should

eat better.” “I should not feel this way.” “I should work harder at this.” “Should” statements trigger guilt and make anxious thought patterns worse. Instead of “should,” try “can”: “I can eat better, and here’s how.”

Serve Others

A surefire way for me to drive out of a mental pothole is to do something for someone else.

Realizing you have the power to make someone’s day better can keep the gloomy spin cycle from sucking you in. It also gives you something good and purposeful to focus on instead of looping and relooping thoughts.

Awe

Have you ever noticed that you feel better after worshiping in church, watching a glorious sunset, or gazing at the waves? That’s because awe is a God-given way to fix our minds on higher things. “Awe is considered a transcendent emotion in that it allows people to think and feel beyond their own needs and wants,” Kross writes.

The good news is that we can reshape and rewire our brains with intentional effort. What we think about is what our brains become, and when we partner with the one who created us, we can change fixed patterns. Our thoughts, instead of curling inward, can unfurl toward the One who wants to transform and renew us. **B**



Lorilee Craker, a native of Winnipeg, Man., lives in Grand Rapids, Mich. 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.

Where Is the CRC Going?

I believe our future will be determined by how faithfully and humbly we recognize the trends and factors we have just identified.



David R. Koll is a retired Christian Reformed pastor. He lives in Huntington Beach, Calif., and is a member of the Anaheim CRC. He was the CRCNA director of candidacy from 2008 to 2021.

WHERE IS THE CHRISTIAN Reformed Church going? It's a question many are asking. Members of the denomination young and old have concerns about our future.

I recently retired after 40 years of full-time ministry service in the CRC, the last 13 of which were spent in a denominational staff position. One of my early retirement projects was sorting through a pile of 13 issues of *The Banner*. I had the habit of saving the July issues because they review the work of synod, our denominational gathering. My review gave me an insightful reminder of how we are changing as a denomination. As most of us have found, we can best look to the future by looking to the past.

Here are five trends I noticed that seem significant:

1. The CRCNA is increasingly using those in leadership beyond "ordained ministers of the Word."

As reflected in *Banner* reports, synod deliberations often are heavily weighted with comments and speeches from ministers of the Word. Yet commissioned pastors, elders, deacons, and other church members are playing more and more roles and offering more and more significant leadership at synod and in denominational matters in general. Whereas the former Christian Reformed World Relief Committee (now World Renew) once was unique in being the only denominational ministry not led by a seminary-trained minister of the Word, now many of our ministries are led by people trained for church work in other ways. This includes our last two executive directors, our director of Pastor Church Resources, and our *Banner* editor, to name a few. I see this as a positive trend. We are actively benefiting from the gifts, skills, and

insights of people who used to be excluded from such leadership.

2. The CRCNA is experiencing continued challenges with ethnic diversity.

Among those contributing to leadership in the CRCNA, a growing number are non-white (and non-Dutch) members. *The Banner's* synod coverage recognizes this every year with photos and comments from ethnic advisers and ethnic minority delegates. In fact, more than 25% of our congregations are now majority non-white. Such congregations are growing and multiplying at a greater rate than historically white (specifically Dutch) CRC congregations. My decade review and my personal experience show that respect for ethnic diversity and inclusion continues to be a challenge for us. *The Banner's* 2010 synod issue had an article with the headline "Synod Again Disappointed with Diversity Efforts." Many of us from the majority culture are tempted to become defensive at such an expression of disappointment. We would rather point out the gains being made. What we miss in such a posture is a window into a crucial challenge that continues to be articulated by and for our minority brothers and sisters. The sad reality is that many of our ethnic minority members justifiably tire of being used as photo subjects to celebrate diversity while their voices and frustrations are not significantly engaged. Our gatherings and work at the regional and denominational levels often display a lack of healthy respect and true inclusion. This challenge will not go away without serious effort.

3. The CRCNA is showing signs of stress in its leadership.

One significant issue regularly recognized at synod, at our regional gatherings, and in many of our congregations is pastoral burnout. The number of



pastors who leave ministry before retirement continues to grow each year (23 in the 1980s, 34 in the 1990s, 68 in the 2000s, and 97 in the 2010s). The past decade has seen the unhappy departure of two denominational executive directors and two Canadian ministry directors. The congregations of pastors who leave ministry find themselves shellshocked, disoriented, and in need of healing that is hard to come by. The same is true for the denomination as we share life and ministry together.

4. The CRCNA is transitioning in the way it does ministry.

Our local congregations are more diverse and distinct than ever. We do ministry differently more and more, and we contextualize our ministry more intentionally. Connected to this is congregations' changing relationship to the denomination.

In fact, at the denominational level, much effort has been expended in the past decade to adjust to the changing realities and expectations of what it means to be a denomination. One result of this was the "rebranding" of

our ministries through name changes. In the past decade our diaconal ministry, CRWRC, became World Renew, our domestic and world mission agencies merged to become Resonate Global Mission, and our media ministry changed from Back to God Ministries International to ReFrame Ministries. Our educational ministry, CRC Publications, died and was reborn as Faith Alive Christian Resources. Abuse Prevention became Safe Church Ministries. Pastor Church Relations has become Pastor Church Resources.


Our denomination's forms of governance have been reviewed and revised numerous times in recent decades. We moved from having a synodical interim committee to a Board of Trustees and now a Council of Delegates. A parade of committees and task forces have reviewed structure and culture and formed strategic plans.


The cynic might be critical of such developments, but we ought not underestimate the importance of discerning and discovering ways to be a relevant and effective denomination.

5. The CRCNA is addressing issues that plague our culture and world.

In the past decade our denomination has engaged in rigorous reflection on abuse of power, racism, the relationship of faith and science, and human sexuality. We're growing in cross-denominational actions that respect and partner with other parts of God's body. We're living into Jesus' prayer for unity among his followers in more significant ways than ever before. Yet our world is broken. In North America the general culture has increasing cynicism about the church's integrity and its ability to help. In this context, how can we continue the hard work of living out the call to be a city on a hill, light and salt to a world that has more questions and fewer reliable answers?

In the face of these challenges, one constant is our commitment to a Reformed understanding of the Word of God and an allegiance to the historical confessions of the Reformed church. At the heart of this identity is a humble commitment to be ever reforming. During Synod 2010 delegate Rev. Mark Vermaire said, "One of the great gifts of the CRC is that we have covenanted to live together in heart and truth in very diverse ways." This reflects our conviction that the Holy Spirit reveals the way forward through community and communal deliberation.

I believe our future will be determined by how faithfully and humbly we recognize the trends and factors we have just identified. May God bless us all as we live, grow, study, and serve together in the wisdom and Spirit of God. "To him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen" (Eph. 3:21). 

A woman with brown hair pulled back, wearing a purple t-shirt, stands in a field of yellow flowers. She is holding several lemons in her hands. Her t-shirt has a logo and the text "LUCHAMO RESISTIMOS AVANZAMOS".

Marta fled her home in San Salvador and struggled to make ends meet. Resonate partners were there to help her family learn new ways to support themselves through agriculture and learn how the Christian faith is in everything we do.

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Did God Order Genocide in the Old Testament?

God simply will not forsake his people or abandon his mission to redeem creation.

AS THE ISRAELITES passed through the wilderness and drew near the land promised to their ancestors (Gen. 15:18-21), God commanded them to slaughter the Canaanites who dwelt there. “You must destroy them totally,” God demanded, “and show them no mercy” (Deut. 7:2).

En route to the Promised Land, Israel had offered terms of peace to enemy nations. But total war was unleashed upon Canaan. “Do not leave alive anything that breathes,” God insisted: men, women, children, even animals—all destroyed. This was necessary so that the Canaanites and their gods would not lead Israel astray (Deut. 20:10-18).

Did God really command the genocide of the Canaanites?

It’s not surprising that critics and skeptics focus on stories like this to disparage the Bible and accuse Christianity of promoting religious intolerance, colonialism, war, and violence. Some Christians try to keep their personal faith at arm’s length from the annihilation of the Canaanites, setting a New Testament God of love against the violent, holy God of the Old Testament.

There are ways to soften the story. Archaeologists haven’t found evidence that a genocide actually happened in the manner decreed in Deuteronomy and described in Joshua. In fact, Judges 3:1-5 tells us that God left some Canaanites in the land “to test the Israelites to see whether they would obey the Lord’s commands.” Some biblical scholars suggest that the language of destruction and annihilation used in Deuteronomy and elsewhere is not unlike the sort of hyperbole we use today: “The Detroit Red Wings wiped out the Toronto Maple Leafs last night.” Theologians make the point that God, true to form, had been incredibly patient with the wicked Canaanites, waiting four centuries to fulfill the promise of land

to Abraham and Sarah because “the sin of the Amorites (Canaanites) has not yet reached its full measure” (Gen. 15:16). Finally, divine equity is at work. If God’s people repeat the immorality of the Canaanites, then the land will vomit out the Israelites just as it had its previous inhabitants (Lev. 18:28).

All these points might very well be true, but to me they feel a little pleading. They don’t remove the offense of God’s command to kill the Canaanites and destroy their culture (Deut. 7:5). I suspect most of us would prefer that this story wasn’t part of the Bible.

In his book *The Old Testament Is Dying*, Duke Divinity School professor Brent Strawn argues to this effect: tell me what you would scratch from the Old Testament, and I’ll tell you what defect there is in your faith. If Strawn’s right, what does it say about our faith that many of us would love to remove this story from the Bible?

Perhaps one thing it says about us is that we’re too sentimental about grace.

God simply will not forsake his people or abandon his mission to redeem creation, even if it requires battle against the powers that oppress his children or oppose his blessing. For good reason preacher Fleming Rutledge speaks of the “militancy of grace” in her sermons and books. It is militant grace that drowns the earth in the age of Noah in order to save it (Gen. 6) and destroys the Canaanites in order to preserve a people to bear God’s name and mission. It is militant grace that disarms Satan at the cross (Col. 2:15) and violently bursts the tomb of death to bring resurrection life. And we ourselves are able to disown violence and seek Christ’s way of peace and forgiveness because we have hope that it is God—not us—who will destroy the forces of injustice and evil at the Day of Judgment. **B**



Todd Statham is the Christian Reformed campus minister at the Okanagan campus of the University of British Columbia.

In Person, but Not Together

SYNOD NEWS

Synod 2022, the annual general assembly of the Christian Reformed Church, met June 10-16, on the campus of Calvin University in Grand Rapids, Mich. The week-long coverage requires help beyond *The Banner's* usual staff.

Special thanks to reporters Clayton Libolt, Kristen Parker, and Roxanne Van Farowe; photographers Bryan Haley and Steven Herppich; and retired news editor Gayla Postma.

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Deliberation was intense ...

For the first time in three years, the Christian Reformed Church's synod was able to meet face to face. Synod 2022 was an event covered in prayer, from devotions focused on the Lord's Prayer to frequent pauses in proceedings for more prayer. Throughout—with those prayers, tears, and apologies for harsh words—delegates strove to be gracious with each other.

But in the end, debates on the floor of synod around human sexuality showed a deeply divided denomination.

Human Sexuality and Neland Avenue CRC

Of most interest and perhaps anxiety for synod observers was what Synod 2022 would do with the report on human sexuality. The webcast of those deliberations, on a 20-minute delay, had upward of 1,050 viewers (a record for synod). Deliberation was intense and at times heated. In a rare move, one delegate was censured.

Synod did adopt almost all of the recommendations of the report, commissioned by Synod 2016. It affirmed the CRC's position that homosexual sex is inconsistent with Scripture and went a step further to declare that this position is taught in the church's confessions. Officebearers in local churches and faculty at the seminary and Calvin University are subject to church discipline if they preach or teach contrary to the confessions. "There might be one-third of the people in this room who would be subject to special discipline if this passes," said Anthony Elenbaas, Classis Hamilton.

But discussion became more intense, more personal, and more rending when synod had to decide what to do about Neland Avenue CRC, a church that ordained a deacon living in a same-sex marriage, which is not consistent with the church's position on homosexual relationships. Synod appointed a committee to help bring Neland Avenue into compliance with that position, including

immediately ending the deacon's term in office (p. 22).

Larry Louters, chair of Neland's council, told delegates that they will take it seriously, but "we're not likely to initiate discipline against this couple. ... I don't know if we'll have the stomach to do that." Blake Campbell, Classis Illiana, interrupted Louters: "We have just made a decision, and you have the gill to say that you are not going to abide by it. Please stop."



... and personal.

Even as delegates struggled inside in first-ever closed but not executive sessions, outside was a group that gathered to sing and lament the decisions of synod (p. 21).

Some had hoped Synod 2022 would declare decisions on homosexual relationships a local matter to be decided by congregations in the same way the matter of women in ecclesiastical office was settled. But 27 years after that decision, the compromise made to try to maintain unity with those two positions is wearing thin (p. 34).

For members, churches, and classes of the CRC who hoped for room to continue including LGBTQ people, including those who are married, what now? Zachary King, the CRC's new general secretary, didn't have a good answer for a delegate who asked that same question. "I recognize



Delegates strove to be gracious.

that there is a real sense of pain and loss. ... I don't have an easy answer," King said.

Fred Harvey, a commissioned pastor from Classis Hackensack, was frank about the reality facing the CRC: "Some of us are questioning if we still have a home, and some are celebrating that the defense of the Word has been accomplished."

Heresy

In another confessional matter, synod received a report from the Council of Delegates about how to recognize and when to call out heresy, urging caution without shrinking back from using the term when necessary. On the Reformed view of the work of the cross—penal substitutionary atonement—synod stopped short of calling denials of it heresy, but declared that it is a "serious deviation from the teaching of the confessions" (p. 28).

Abuse of Power

Synod 2022 did take some steps in the CRC's quest to prevent abuse of power in churches and broader church assemblies. Changes were made to how churches deal with allegations of abuse made against local church leaders, giving more latitude to the local church council, but also more accountability to classis (p. 35). At the opening of synod (as with all future synods) delegates took part in power and privilege training.

One of the recommendations made to Synod 2022 was to implement a code of conduct that all officebearers, faculty of

CRC-owned schools, and denominational employees would be required to sign. Synod 2022 decided that the churches need more time to study it, so it will come back to Synod 2023 (p. 34).

Restructuring

While it passed easily on the floor of synod, plans to change the denomination's governance and leadership structure took up a great deal of time and patience in the past three years. The changes bring the structure in line with Canadian tax rules and are hoped to help solve historical struggles over contextualizing ministry in Canada, but they have not been accomplished painlessly. Council of Delegates president Andy de Ruyter told delegates he couldn't count the sleepless nights he had. John Lee, who chaired the structure and leadership task force that drafted the basis of the new structure, said the structure alone won't accomplish what's needed. "Don't trust that this new structure will do the work that we have to do" to heal past hurts, he said (p. 32).



Synod did include times of joy.

Highlights

Synod did have times of joy—recognizing retirements, approving candidates for minister of the Word, and hearing ministry reports and greetings from ecumenical guests, though this year there were fewer visitors from afar.

Synod welcomed Yudha Thianto, appointed as professor of history of Christianity and Reformed theology, and Wilson de Angelo Cunha, appointed professor of Old Testament at Calvin Theological Seminary (p. 27). It also changed some of the academic requirements for future candidates studying at the seminary or elsewhere (p. 26).

Synod recognized the 60th anniversary of World Renew and celebrated the exemplary service of two well-loved executives: chief financial officer John Bolt and executive director Colin Watson Sr., both retiring June 30 (p. 30). And synod bade farewell to Michael Le Roy, retiring from his position as president of Calvin University, a job he's held for the past 10 years (p. 26).

Even though the CRC continues to struggle to address racism, synod took more steps toward dealing with it (p. 29). And there were historic moments. In addition to approving two non-Anglo professors to the seminary, Synod 2022 had its first-ever non-white president and a delegate, Evelyn Bennally, who is the first Native American woman to be a commissioned pastor (p. 37). Harold Caicedo, California South, told delegates, "Something historical is happening at this synod."

Despite all the turmoil of two and a half years of COVID-19 restrictions, two canceled synods, and the intense emotions at this synod, Watson told delegates the CRC needs to continue to follow God's lead into the new land into which he is taking us (p. 31).

"We have been through the valley—we have been tested—and God has continued to prove faithful," Watson said.

Indeed, God will always be faithful, but the CRC might be in the valley for quite some time.

—Alissa Vernon, News Editor
and Gayla R. Postma, retired News Editor

Starting with Prayer



Prayers of lament and grief preceded discussion of the human sexuality report.

Synod 2022 opened its discussion of the human sexuality report with a prayer of “grief and lament” for the broken ways in which the church has dealt with sexuality.

Standing at microphones scattered among the delegates, members of Committee Eight, the advisory committee assigned to the report, read out a litany they had prepared.

“There has been a little bit of crying in Committee Eight, these past few days,” said Tim Kuperus, committee chair.

Some of the prayers included:

“We grieve the special pain experienced by members of the LGBTQ+ community through our lack of grace.”

“We lament when we have used truth as a weapon and grace as an excuse.”

“We grieve that churches have caused people of all ages who bear the image of God to believe that they are excluded from that identity.”

“We lament our confusion, fear, and misunderstanding over changes in culture with regard to sexuality.”

“Help! Help us!” the prayer concluded. “Each of us practices hypocrisies we do not ourselves recognize. Help us as we listen and speak. Amen.”

—Clayton Libolt and Roxanne Van Farowe

Synod Recommends Sexuality Report, Upholds Traditional Stance

With a 74% majority vote, Synod 2022 recommended the 2020 Report of the Committee to Articulate a Foundation-laying Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality to Christian Reformed churches as a “useful summary of biblical teaching” on human sexuality. Part of that teaching is that “homosexual acts of any kind are sinful and not in agreement with God’s will for his covenant people,” but the report also recognizes “that the experience of attraction to the same sex is not sinful in itself,” maintaining the distinction of the CRC’s 1973 position on homosexuality.

The report addressed a range of human sexual experience, including premarital sex, extramarital sex, adultery, polyamory, and pornography.

Clarity Desired

Many delegates praised the human sexuality report, saying it would help CRC churches do ministry. They also praised its biblical exegesis.

“The young people in our denomination are looking at us, and they need this clarity,” said Trevor Mouw, Classis Iakota.

“I urge us to think about our young pastors and the foundation that they are going to need in our society, which is going to question them,” said David Dykstra, Classis Red Mesa.

“Nobody wants to talk about sin,” said Harold Caicedo, Classis California South, speaking in favor of the report. “Sin is defined by the same Lord who had mercy and grace on us. ... The best way to love each other is to say the truth.”

During discussion, an ethnic adviser connected to the Korean CRC Council and a delegate with Consejo Latino indicated that both groups have endorsed the human sexuality report.

Stephen Terpstra, Classis Zeeland, said this support showed that recommending the report fits with the CRC’s goal



Peter Rockhold, Classis Alberta North: We all need to sacrifice together to support each other.

of increasing diversity. “If we deviate from this report, we will in fact be far less diverse than we would otherwise be,” he said.

Caution Expressed

Other delegates cautioned that adopting the human sexuality report would cause harm.

“If we adopt this, we’re going to take on a much more difficult task in ministering to the LGBTQ community,” said Larry Louters, Classis Grand Rapids East. “You’re going to invite them into church with the preface that they are fundamentally sinning.”

“The younger generation is watching to see how we handle this,” said Janice Kostelyk, Classis B.C. South-East. “They may walk away if they don’t see a grace-filled approach.”

Delegate Alice Jooose, Classis Alberta North, said the human sexuality report ignores alternate interpretations of Scripture passages about homosexuality. Anthony Elenbaas, Classis Hamilton, challenged the way the report interprets the first three chapters of Genesis, calling it an oversexualized view.



Janice Kostelyk, Classis B.C. South-East: The younger generation might walk away if they don't see a grace-filled approach.

Jeffrey Weima, a Calvin Theological Seminary professor and co-chair of the committee that wrote the report, said the committee did investigate alternative interpretations in great detail but reported on them more concisely.

Peter Rockhold, Classis Alberta North, wants the church to understand that the traditional stance needs to come with support. "I am somebody who is attracted to the same sex (and) committed to celibacy," he told delegates. "I had to make a lot of sacrifices for my theological commitments, and I hear a lot of loud voices on this matter without the same sacrifices being made to support those commitments. We all need to sacrifice together to support each other."

Dire Consequences?

Some delegates warned of dire consequences if the report passed. Dominic Palacios, Classis Rocky Mountain, said, "Churches like mine, which are divided 50-50 on this issue, are most at risk," he said. "I can't find common ground because there is none."

Dwayne Nienhuis, Classis Holland, spoke in support of the report. "Our denomination has open wounds," he said. "The



Larry Louters, Classis Grand Rapids East: If we adopt this, we're going to take on a much more difficult task in ministering to the LGBTQ community.

more we discuss this (topic), the more it festers. We would probably be better off if we each went our separate way."

A Starting Point

Synod 2022 found common ground on many of the facets of human sexuality touched on in the report. It recommended the report's pastoral care sections as offering sound guidance to the churches and "strongly encouraged continuing conversations" about "how to faithfully implement these practices in the life of the church."

Synod "solemnly took note of the pervasive sin of pornography and its harm," committing to lead member churches "into repentance and healing."

Synod declined to appoint a new committee to study human sexuality as several churches and classes (regional groups of churches) had requested.

Sixteen delegates registered a negative vote against recommending the report, which means that their names will be recorded in *Acts of Synod 2022* as standing against the decision.

—Roxanne Van Farowe

Closed Doors

While Synod 2022's discussions on matters of sexuality were highly anticipated, guests and observers were not welcome to watch those deliberations in person. For the first time, synod employed the use of closed sessions. Doors to Calvin University's Fine Arts Center, where synod was meeting, were locked. (Designated staff including *Banner* reporters and those producing the webcast—which was on a 20 minute delay—were permitted to be present.)

Delegate Dan Hoogland, Classis Eastern Canada, objected, but he was ruled out of order. The officers of Synod 2022 said the recommendation to employ closed sessions was made by the program committee (officers of the previous synod), and the program committee's report had already been adopted. Additionally, faculty adviser Kathy Smith, who also served as synodical parliamentarian, said the officers did have the role to set out the rules of the session, and they had been set for good reasons, such as setting up a good climate for discussion and keeping the integrity of the intention of the delayed webcast.

The Banner heard mixed responses to the decision ahead of the discussion.

Ken Krause, Classis Muskegon, said, "It's unprecedented, but we are in unprecedented times." He expected the move would limit distractions and "allow people to be more open."

Dave Bosscher, Classis Thornapple Valley, said his biggest concern was transparency. "Though the gallery is empty, I'm satisfied the livestream is up," he said.

Trish Borgdorff, Classis Grand Rapids East, said, "I understand the good reasoning, but I think the good reasoning may cause more harm than good. ... It's my prayer that, at this time in the church, we would have enough grace and love to engage in conversation with one another."

—Kristen Parker

Minority View Not Debated

When synod deliberated over the human sexuality report, two views of how to deal with the report were presented: one from a minority group of the committee that dealt with the report, and one from the majority. The minority view was not debated because the majority held sway unless synod voted to set it aside; that vote did not carry.

Synod did hear the minority group's reporter, Lynette van de Hoef Myers, read the group's reflections and recommendations.

Among them: "Through the emphasis on special revelation as 'readable' and 'primary,' without the properly Reformed humility of recognizing one's own fallibility, the human sexuality report is at danger of equating (its) theological perspective on Scripture with Scripture itself."

—Alissa Vernon



Lynette van de Hoef Myers, Classis Ontario Southwest, read a minority report view on the human sexuality report; it was not debated.

Synod Declares Stance on Homosexual Sex 'Confessional'



Migael Randall, Classis Central Plains: This is going to do irreparable harm.

Synod 2022 affirmed that the Heidelberg Catechism's definition of unchastity includes homosexual sex, along with adultery, premarital sex, extramarital sex, polyamory, and pornography, and declared that "this interpretation has confessional status." The vote had a 69% majority. However, synod declined to add a footnote to the Heidelberg Catechism to clarify the interpretation (synod voted 89 to 85, with five abstaining, that it would not initiate a process to add the note).

During deliberation, many acknowledged that declaring confessional status would have serious, far-reaching implications for the Christian Reformed Church because all officebearers and faculty at the seminary and Calvin University could be subject to church discipline if they preach or teach contrary to the confessions.

"There might be one-third of the people in this room who would be subject to special discipline if this passes," said Anthony Elenbaas, Classis Hamilton. "Those of us who are in the minority in this place will have a much harder job to do. Please don't put the walls up any higher. Please allow room for us."

"This ties the hands of the denomination in a significant way," said Larry Louters, Classis Grand Rapids East, who is also a chemistry professor at Calvin University. "A whole host of people will be affected and their future work in the CRC will be nullified."

"Since 1973, there have been officebearers who disagree with (the church's stance that homosexual practice is a sin)," said Michael Le Roy, outgoing president of Calvin University. "For officebearers who have written or spoken in opposition to this, there would be cause for church discipline. Consider the implication for officers of the church."

"We will make a decision here, and then we will turn to the Church Order to guide us in those next steps," responded Doug Fakkema, reporter for the advisory committee that recommended confessional status.

"I speak in favor, even though I know that this will probably tear us apart," said Robert Van Zanen, Classis Thornapple Valley. "I know the deep personal implications. ... It is hard to make this decision, and it sucks, and yet we have to make it because we have to stand up for the gospel. We have to recognize truth even as we recognize grace, and these have to be held hand in hand. They can't be separated."

"This has been a position that has been in our denomination for almost 50 years," said Chris Cassis, Classis Southeast U.S. "We are coming in line with what we've already said."

"The word 'unchastity' in our confessions has to have meaning," said Craig Hoekema, Classis Eastern Canada. "I understand the implications of this. I don't delight in that, but I believe we need to stand."

Emotions ran high during the deliberation. "When God provides a partner for lifelong service, that is not a sin," said Janet deWinter, Classis Toronto, holding back tears.

"I'm truly grieving right now," said Migael Randall, Classis Central Plains. "This is going to do irreparable harm."

Following the vote, 26 delegates registered a negative vote.

Synod president Jose Rayas prayed, "We pray that the actions we have taken would be actions not to tear apart but to build up and edify your church."

—Roxanne Van Farowe

Delegates Debate Convening Church Choice for Synod 2023

A recommendation from the Christian Reformed Church's Council of Delegates to name Church of the Servant as the convening church for Synod 2023 elicited debate rather than the usual perfunctory approval at Synod 2022.

Synods often appoint churches celebrating significant anniversaries to host the next synod. The convening church is responsible to open synod and conduct the synod worship service along with other mostly ceremonial duties. Church of the Servant, a congregation in Grand Rapids, Mich., located not far from the Calvin University campus where most synods meet, will celebrate its 50th anniversary in 2023.

Cedric Parsels, Classis Grandville, objected, suggesting that having Church of the Servant as the convening church would make some delegates uncomfortable. Church of the Servant is part of Classis Grand Rapids East, a classis that includes and has supported Neland Avenue CRC when it elected a deacon in a same-sex marriage.



Cedric Parsels, Classis Grandville: Last night, I said some words on the floor of synod that I deeply regret. I ask your forgiveness.

Parsels said, "I think it needs to be clear that the convening church can support the confessions." William Delleman, Classis British Columbia North-West, supported accepting the invitation, pointing out that "no charge has been made against Church of the Servant." The next morning, Parsels came before synod with an apology. "Last night, I said

some words on the floor of synod that I deeply regret. They were not kind. They were not merciful. I ask your forgiveness."

Joshua Van Drunen, Grand Rapids South, said appointing Church of the Servant as the convening church "demonstrates to Grand Rapids East that we love them. They are part of us and we are part of them."

Synod voted 139-25 (with 10 abstentions) to name Church of the Servant as the convening church for Synod 2023.

—Clayton Libolt

Group Gathers to Sing, Pray, Lament



Over 200 LGBTQ allies sang and waved flags outside Calvin University's Covenant Fine Arts Center, where Synod 2022 was meeting.

When the doors of Synod 2022 were closed to observers during the human sexuality discussions, a large group of LGBTQ people and allies gathered just outside the meeting on the campus of Calvin University. About 250 people attended the first day, dressed in colorful clothing, waving rainbow flags, and raising their arms as they sang songs including "Jesus Loves Me" and "The Benediction." The following day, more than 50 people dressed in black held up cardboard letters to spell "LAMENT."

Alicia Mannes was part of organizing the first event. She said the goal of the gathering was "to be seen, to be heard, and for delegates to realize the impact their decisions make."

Tom Hoeksema Sr., a member at Grace Christian Reformed Church in Grand Rapids, Mich., said he attended the gathering as a testimony to God's love. "I want the CRC to know that God's story is one of embrace and welcome."

Byron Elzinga got up at 5 a.m. to drive from Toronto, Ont., to Grand Rapids. "We recognize our presence likely won't change the outcome (of synod discussions)," Elzinga said, but also "I know a lot of people are concerned if they'll have a place in the CRC. LGBT members like myself wonder where we'll belong."

Ruth Boven, a pastor recently retired from LaGrave Avenue CRC in Grand Rapids, Mich., who previously served at Neland Avenue CRC, said she came on the second day "just to lament decisions that are proving to be very divisive." She said she watched some of the proceedings on the webcast but couldn't watch very much because she found them "very sad, heart-wrenching, and painful."

—Kristen Parker and Alissa Vernon

Neland Avenue CRC Ordered to Comply with Denominational Position

Synod 2022 put in place a committee *in loco*, which is empowered to act on behalf of synod, to see that Neland Avenue Christian Reformed Church, a congregation in Grand Rapids, Mich., complies with the denomination's position on same-sex marriage. It also instructed Neland to rescind its appointment of a deacon in violation of that position.

In May 2020, Neland elected a person in a same-sex marriage to the office of deacon. Several councils and classes sent communications to the Neland council, most asking Neland to depose the deacon. Officebearers are meant to uphold the confessions and teachings of the church. Since 1973 the CRC's position on homosexuality has been that homosexual sex, but not the orientation, is incompatible with God's will as revealed in Scripture. Neland said the position was based on pastoral advice to the churches and that its council was within the bounds of orthodoxy to appoint a deacon of its choosing, as guided by discernment.

Communications also were sent to Classis Grand Rapids East, the classis of which Neland is a member, for not bringing Neland back into covenant. When Grand Rapids East took no action, other classes and councils asked synod to step in.

Many delegates supported synod taking direct action.

David Bosscher, Classis Thornapple Valley, asked whether synodical actions were "preferences or positions." If they are only preferences, he said, then the churches can do as they please; if they are positions, churches must be held to account.

William Wilton, Classis Columbia, said the need for "biblical mutual accountability" requires making judgments: "We do judgment at every level, and we should."

Should Synod Step In?

Synods rarely step into the affairs of local congregations. A basic principle of Reformed church order is that local



David Bosscher, Classis Thornapple Valley: If church positions are more than preferences, churches must be held to account.

councils have original authority, which they delegate to broader assemblies like synods and classes. Local councils have freedom to act as they believe wise for their ministry, but what to do when a church council breaks covenant with the denomination? What should synods do?

Synod 2022 found a precedent for bringing Neland Avenue into compliance by citing an action of Synod 2005, which appointed a committee *in loco* to enforce compliance by the council of First CRC in Toronto when it announced it intended to ordain actively gay members of their congregation to church office. Faced with the synodical action, the First CRC Toronto council decided to rescind its decision.

Anthony Elenbaas, Classis Hamilton, said in the case of First CRC of Toronto, Synod 2005 appointed an *in loco* committee because someone in Classis Toronto had appealed to synod. In the Neland Avenue case, synod is taking direct action without an appeal. He said, "This is not how we want to do church in the future."

After a deliberation that was passionate and emotional, Synod 2022 voted to appoint the committee *in loco* and empower it to begin conversations with the Neland council and Classis Grand



Larry Louters, Classis Grand Rapids East: We need you, but you also need us.

Rapids East, 134-43, with one abstention. Nineteen delegates registered a negative vote. The vote to instruct Neland to rescind its deacon's appointment passed 134-44; 12 delegates registered a negative vote.

Controversy Not Over

Synod was not yet done with the matter. After the vote had been taken, synod president Jose Rayas granted Larry Louters, delegate from Classis Grand Rapids East and the chair of the Neland council, time to address synod. Louters expressed gratitude to the delegates for the grace they had shown him and others at synod—a grace he said was not always found in the written communications they had received before synod. He also expressed the determination of Neland to remain in conversation with the other churches of the denomination. He said, "We need you, but you also need us."

He then reflected on how this decision would play out at Neland. He said the deacon in the same-sex marriage had received strong support from the congregation. The couple, he said, are regarded at Neland as members in good standing. "We're going to take this seriously," he said. They will have hard conversations as

Delegate Loses Right to Speak

a council, but “we’re not likely to initiate discipline against this couple. ... I don’t know if we’ll have the stomach to do that.”

As he was saying this, Blake Campbell, Classis Illiana, called for a point of order and said to Louters, “We have just made a decision, and you have the gall to say that you are not going to abide by it. Please stop.”

Louters did stop, and after looking to synod president Rayas for direction, was allowed to finish his speech.

Afterward, Rayas, with a trembling voice, said, “If I have offended anyone, I ask forgiveness.” He continued, “This has been one of the most difficult synods I have been part of,” and he asked for the delegates’ patience before asking executive director Colin Watson Sr. to pray.

When Watson had concluded his prayer, Chad Werkhoven, Classis Minnkota, stood and “with sorrow” asked that disciplinary proceedings against Louters be started. Naming Louters is itself a violation of confidentiality rules for any matters of church discipline. His motion was ruled out of order.

—Clayton Libolt

In an extremely rare move Dominic Palacios, Classis Rocky Mountain, was not allowed to speak during the deliberation about Neland Avenue CRC. Upon getting in the queue, Palacios learned that comments from a previous session, judged to have broken decorum, had caused him to lose the privilege to speak unless he rescinded. He declined to do that.

During deliberation of the human sexuality report, Palacios spoke against it and its conclusion that homosexual sex constitutes “unchastity,” which has been the CRC’s traditional position since 1973. “What is the fruit of the ‘73 report?” he asked passionately. “It’s suicides, it’s people feeling excluded from the fellowship—and those will continue. I believe our theology around this issue has caused there to be blood on our hands, and there will continue to be blood on our hands because of it.”

Derek Buikema, the synod vice president who was chairing the deliberation, said that Palacios’ “blood on our hands” comment violated the rules of decorum and requested that he rescind it if he wanted to continue talking. The censure was still in effect the next day.

The Banner asked synod president Jose Rayas why the delegate was prevented



Dominic Palacios, Classis Rocky Mountain, refused to rescind a remark deemed to violate decorum.

from speaking. He simply said, “According to the synodical rules and the decorum, he (Palacios) was out of order.”

Palacios confirmed that he could continue to vote, but not speak on the floor unless he rescinded what he said. Palacios told *The Banner*, “I stand by what I said.” Though disappointed, Palacios recognized “it is in the rules of order (that) they can make these decisions, and I’ll abide by those rules.”

—Kristen Parker

Vote counts are only given if a delegate asks. It was requested many times at this synod. Here are the counts that were called for:

| | | | |
|---|---------|-------|------------|
| Recommend the human sexuality report to the churches | 131 yes | 45 no | 2 abstain |
| The conclusions of the human sexuality report are interpretation of a confession | 123 yes | 53 no | 2 abstain |
| Add a footnote to Q&A 108 of the Heidelberg Catechism with regard to “unchastity” | 85 yes | 89 no | 5 abstain |
| Accept Church of the Servant as Synod 2023’s Host Church | 139 yes | 25 no | 10 abstain |
| Delay Code of Conduct One Year | 122 yes | 52 no | |
| Instruct Neland to rescind deacon appointment | 134 yes | 44 no | |
| Appoint in loco committee for Neland | 134 yes | 43 no | 1 abstain |
| Appoint a Committee to Study What Matters are “Ecclesiastical” | 79 yes | 92 no | 1 abstain |

Many delegates on many different votes registered opposition. A total of 87 negative votes were registered, which means that those delegates’ names will be recorded in the Acts of Synod as standing against the decision for which they registered their vote.

Seeking God’s Face at Synod 2022



Jon Hoekema, prayer shepherd, prays with synod president Jose Rayas.

Prayer had a prominent place at this year’s synod. “We’re not just praying requests and petitions. We are seeking God’s face,” said Christian Reformed Church prayer shepherd Jon Hoekema, who led optional early-morning prayer sessions each day. “When people pray together, regardless of whether we agree or disagree, God does something.”

Additionally, a team of eight volunteers staffed a blue-curtained “prayer tabernacle” in the front foyer of the Covenant Fine Arts Center, where synod met at Calvin University. They greeted delegates each day and offered to pray for any needs.

“Prayer is very important to me,” said Jim Boldenow, who organized the on-site prayer team on behalf of synod’s host church, Encounter Church of Kentwood, Mich.

“Even if it had been a quiet year at synod, I would have still taken the task. I need prayer to stay sane,” Boldenow said.

The “prayer tabernacle” was the idea of Dirk VanEyck, Encounter Church’s pastor, who noticed that the prayer room at previous synods was hidden away in the back of the building and resembled a cave.

“Dirk wanted to bring prayer right into the middle of things,” said Boldenow, who was development leader with the CRC’s World Relief Committee (now World Renew) in Central America from 1975 to 2000.

CRC’s Worship Ministries also had a hand in putting prayer front and center, helping to coordinate the opening worship liturgies that focused on a different aspect of the Lord’s Prayer each day.

—Roxanne Van Farowe

Synod 2022 Worship Highlights Surrender

In Sunday evening worship, ahead of the heavy discussions to come, delegates of Synod 2022, along with denominational staff and others from the community, gathered in the Calvin University chapel to praise God and reflect on their task.

Synod 2022’s host church, Encounter Church of Kentwood, Mich., brought its worship musicians and upbeat style to the service. They led the delegates in a service of praise, highlighting the Elevation Worship song “Same God.”

Encounter pastor Dirk vanEyck focused his message on surrender to God. He began with his own experience of learning from his father how to ride a bicycle. Part of the secret of learning to ride a bicycle is to surrender the desire to be in control and to trust that the bicycle will stay upright. It’s this lesson, vanEyck said, that we must absorb into our spiritual lives.

He based his message on the Matthew version of the Lord’s Prayer (Matt. 6:9-13), which was offered in Spanish and English by Jose Rayas, the president of synod. VanEyck said that in this prayer Jesus taught the church not only how to pray, but how to live the Christian life. The prayer teaches us, he said, to pray for the kingdom and for the will of God to be done, not for what we want—what he called “gimme prayers.”



Elaine May, women’s leadership developer, led the communion liturgy.

“We learn,” vanEyck said, “to stop resisting, stop insisting. The purpose of prayer is to surrender my will, not to impose it.”

As has become the practice at synods, the worship service ended with the Lord’s Supper. The communion liturgy was led by Elaine May, women’s leadership developer in the office of Pastor Church Resources. The congregation filing forward to receive the sacrament—a company comprising a host of races and ethnic groups, women and men—made a powerful visual testimony to the church of Jesus Christ, a church of every people and nation.

—Clayton Libolt

Synod Celebrates New Candidates for Ministry



Eleven of the 23 individuals approved as candidates for minister of the Word in the Christian Reformed Church were present at Synod 2022.

In what is always a celebratory moment during synod, the latest crop of candidates for ministry was introduced to Synod 2022. Susan LaClear, director of the Christian Reformed Church’s Candidacy Committee, said this year’s group of candidates was “a bit leaner” than in other years—11 candidates were present at synod, and there are just 23 in total. LaClear noted that some candidates, discouraged by online learning and other consequences of the pandemic, put their candidacy on hold. Those who persisted, LaClear said, “have learned to lean on God, and God has shaped them through refining fires.”

In his address to the candidates, Calvin Theological Seminary president Jul Medenblik focused on the way the candidates embody Christ, citing the words of Jesus in John 20:21: “As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.” Medenblik said the task set before the candidates is “to encourage lives that respond to the Lord.” This, he added, “is a hope that outlasts any pandemic.”

Delegates, along with friends and family in attendance, gathered around the candidates while Jose Rayas, president of synod, led the body in prayer.

—Clayton Libolt

1,070

Number of days the program committee (officers of Synod 2019) served

Officers of Synod 2022: Resting in God’s Sovereignty



Pastors Aaron Vriesman, Jose Rayas, Derek Buikema, and deacon Luann Sankey served as officers of Synod 2022.

Synod 2022 was exceptionally heavy, fraught with emotions and charged deliberations. Perhaps it was most difficult for the officers who had to lead it.

It was the 14th synod for pastor Jose Rayas, synod’s first-ever Latino president. He told synod delegates it was also his hardest.

Pastor Derek Buikema, who had attended one previous synod, served as vice president. He presided over synod’s discussions of the human sexuality report because Rayas served on the committee that produced that report. Delegates expressed their appreciation for his work in helping to navigate parliamentary procedure, always making it clear what it was delegates were voting on, and doing his best to allow delegates to express themselves despite a three-minute (and later two-minute) length allowed for speeches.

Buikema said, “I don’t know that I’ll have overall impressions of this synod until a week or a month afterwards. It feels like a harder synod than any other I can remember to know where we go after this. But we will be resting in God’s sovereignty.”

Pastor Aaron Vriesman, first clerk, said he witnessed “a lot of cool moments” where love between delegates was evident. He said he felt restored to another member after saying to him, “I appreciate what you said and how you said it,” even though Vriesman didn’t agree with the sentiment. Vriesman said, “He then apologized to me for things he’d said after an article I’d written. We shook hands. There were two or three other moments like that.”

Luann Sankey, a first-time deacon delegate from Classis Central California, was second clerk. “It was really important that we began way back in March to pray and just bathed this entire meeting in prayer,” Sankey said.

—Alissa Vernon

Synod Bids Farewell to Calvin President



Michael Le Roy

Synod 2022 delegates thanked Calvin University president Michael Le Roy for his 10 years in the role and prayed for the transition as he retires.

Pastor Rebecca Jordan Heys, Classis Grand Rapids East, thanked God for Le Roy's gifts of leadership and "gracious way of being in this community."

She asked the Holy Spirit to "be at work in the hearts of each student and faculty" and asked God's blessing on incoming president Weibe Boer.

Le Roy announced his intended retirement last June. Boer's inauguration as Calvin's 11th president will take place in the fall. He was introduced to synod delegates by video link from Lagos, Nigeria, where he has worked since 2017 as chief executive officer of Shell—All On, a renewable energy investment company.

—Alissa Vernon

54

Average age of delegates

Synod Accepts Changes to Ministerial Training

After a lively debate, Synod 2022 agreed to changes in academic requirements for those training for ministry in the Christian Reformed Church.

Calvin Theological Seminary, the official seminary of the CRC, has made some changes to its curriculum. Anthony Elenbaas, Classis Hamilton, said that seminaries broadly are moving from "heavy academic training" to a more vocational model, and changes in the requirements for biblical languages and preaching at Calvin are consistent with this trend.

The denomination's Candidacy Committee proposed modifications to its requirements for ministerial candidates to reflect the seminary curriculum's changes.

In the revised seminary curriculum, two tracks are offered for students training to become pastors. One requires six credits of Hebrew and six of Greek, as has been the case for years. The other requires less time in the classroom and focuses on preparing students to use digital tools for handling the original texts of the Bible.

The seminary also modified how it trains preachers. The training is competency based, not classroom based. Depending on the skills the student brings to the pulpit, they are assigned to various supplemental classes or other training outside the classroom.

Stephen Terpstra, Classis Zeeland, objected, saying that currently "ministry context is more challenging, not less challenging," and for that reason the seminary and the Candidacy Committee should "seriously consider increasing (their) requirements."

Susan LaClear, new director of the Candidacy Committee, answered by saying that she did not "believe the changes are a diminishment," adding, "what may seem like less is actually more."

The changes come as part of a long-term movement toward diversification of training for ministers in the CRC. Synod took



Susan LaClear, director of the Candidacy Committee: The changes are not a diminishment. What may seem like less is actually more.

another step in that direction when it recognized an existing practice to ease the passage of ministers from other denominations into the CRC (Church Order Art. 8).

Before congregations are permitted to call ministers from other denominations, they must prove that they have made a thorough search for ministers in the CRC and the Reformed Church in America. In the Church Order, this is referred to as the establishment of "need."

But often congregations prefer candidates from outside of the two denominations and do not wish to establish "need." Recognizing this, the Candidacy Committee has for several years permitted congregations to call ministers from outside the the two denominations provided these ministers take certain classes from Calvin Theological Seminary and follow the process specified by Candidacy.

Synod officially recognized this work-around for the "need" provision by requiring a modified curriculum to make it easier for congregations to call ministers from outside the denomination.

—Clayton Libolt

Synod Appoints Thianto, Cunha as Seminary Professors

Synod 2022 appointed Yudha Thianto as professor of history of Christianity and Reformed theology and Wilson de Angelo Cunha as professor of Old Testament at Calvin Theological Seminary.

Cunha, born in Brazil, began his studies in the Old Testament at José Manoel da Conceição Presbyterian Theological Seminary. Recruited by a visiting Calvin Seminary professor, he moved to Calvin and then did doctoral work in the Netherlands at Leiden University. For the past several years he has been teaching at LeTourneau University in Longview, Texas.

Cunha said he loves the Old Testament because it “addresses life gone wrong.” It presents a God who is “all-powerful but also involved in our lives.” Its essential message, he said, is “wait for the Lord”—God will come, and has already come in Jesus Christ.

Thianto, who is of Chinese descent, was born in Indonesia, the country with the world’s largest Muslim population. “Being a Chinese and a Christian in Indonesia, I have always been a double minority everywhere I go,” he said. “I learned how to receive God’s love through other people, and I also learned how to extend God’s love to other people regardless of their faith, belief, religion, and backgrounds. It is a privilege and joy—even though it’s difficult.”

In 2003, Thianto earned his Ph.D. from Calvin Seminary with a research focus on baptism and has taught as a professor of theology at Trinity Christian College for over 20 years. Thianto told delegates the importance of learning about church history is to understand our practices—“who we are and how we got there.” More than dates, it “is to learn of God’s providence.” Thianto is the author of the recent book *An Explorer’s Guide to John Calvin*.

—Clayton Libolt
and Kristen Parker

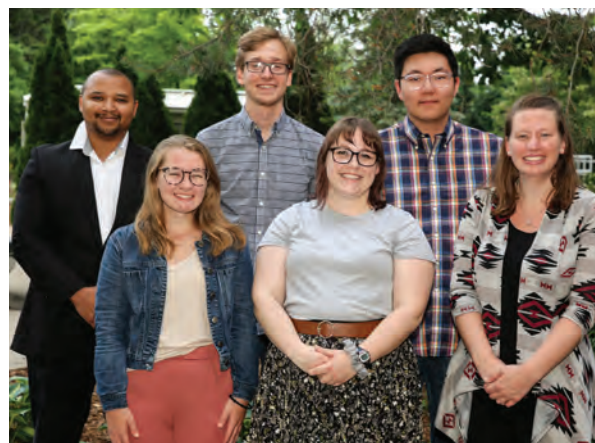


Yudha Thianto



Wilson de Angelo Cunha

Young Adult Reps Excited to Be at Synod



Willy Krahnke, Leah Sweetman, David Vandokkumburg, Rebecca Bokma, Daniel Choi, and Hope Zigterman

The Christian Reformed Church has welcomed young adult representatives to its synod since 2010. This year Daniel Choi, Leah Sweetman, David VanDokkumburg, and Hope Zigterman attended synod for the first time, and Rebecca Bokma and William Krahnke returned for their second synod.

“Like in 2019, I’m noticing how much our voices as young adult representatives matter,” said Bokma. “Delegates want to hear our thoughts on what is being discussed, and they want our input.”

Krahnke was most attentive to deliberations on the human sexuality report, penal substitution, and church discipline.

Choi said, “There is an eagerness to listen and ask God for wisdom and discernment. ... I am sure what will happen is God’s will.”

“I recognize the significance that this (in-person synod) holds after years of pause and desire to see thoughtful resolutions to each area of the agenda,” said Sweetman. “The human sexuality report is critical for the shaping of the future of our denomination.”

VanDokkumburg agreed. “The results of this discussion are sure to impact the lives of young people in our congregations,” he said.

Zigterman said she appreciated “the intentionality and deep thinking that undergirds every aspect of the Christian Reformed Church.”

—Kristen Parker

Synod Affirms Penal Substitutionary Atonement, Does Not Call Denial Heresy

Synod 2022 walked up to the edge of declaring the denial of the doctrine of penal substitutionary atonement a heresy, but instead chose to call it “a serious deviation from the teachings of the confessions of the Christian Reformed Church.” For an officebearer in the CRC to teach or preach that denial would be subject to special discipline, including being suspended or deposed.

What Is It?

“Penal substitutionary atonement” describes how Reformed Christians understand the theology of the cross. That Jesus died for us is a fundamental and perhaps universal Christian affirmation. The question is how to understand that central Christian teaching.

Most Christians also affirm that Jesus’ death was substitutionary. To say that Jesus died for us means that the death of Jesus substituted for our own deaths.

The question is about the word “penal,” which refers to punishment. We still use the word when talking about prisons, calling them “penal institutions.” In penal substitutionary atonement, the death of Jesus is understood as a punishment for human sin visited by the Father on the Son. It puts an emphasis on the wrath of God.

This understanding of the cross is taught in the 16th- and 17th-century Reformed confessions. The Heidelberg Catechism, one of the CRC’s three confessions, asks in Q&A 10, “Does God permit (human) disobedience and rebellion to go unpunished?” The answer: “Certainly not. God is terribly angry with the sin we are born with as well as the sins we personally commit.”



Mary Vandenberg, professor of systematic theology at Calvin Theological Seminary: Our confessions are clear about teaching penal substitutionary atonement.

Mary Vandenberg, professor of systematic theology at Calvin Theological Seminary, told delegates, “Our confessions are clear and somewhat monolithic” about teaching penal substitutionary atonement.

But she also lamented that the confessions are so monolithic with respect to this doctrine because, she said, penal substitutionary atonement is by no means the only way to understand the cross of Jesus Christ either in Scripture or in the broad Christian tradition. She mentioned prominent Christian understandings of atonement known as the “victory of Christ” and “moral influence.” She named biblical themes such as ransom, liberation, and reconciliation. And she said that all of these, not just penal substitutionary atonement, should be proclaimed in the churches.

Should Denial of Penal Substitutionary Atonement Be a Heresy?

Classis Illiana (a regional body of churches) asked synod to declare that any



Matthew Borst, Classis Pacific Northwest: Denial is a serious deviation from the teachings of the confessions of the Christian Reformed Church.

denial of penal substitutionary atonement is a heresy.

The definition of heresy adopted by this year’s synod offers a set of nine characteristics of heresy rather than a single definition. A given heresy might not exhibit all of the characteristics that the study listed but will have many of them. The writers of the study also warned that the term “heresy” is to be used with caution.

So should the denial of penal substitutionary atonement be called a heresy? Synod said no. Matthew Borst, Classis Pacific Northwest, said that calling the denial of substitutionary atonement a heresy runs the risk of offending large groups of Christians who teach other ways of understanding the cross of Jesus Christ. He mentioned Orthodox Christians as an example. He said, “The church does not consider every deviation from the Reformed confessions to be a heresy.”

Acknowledging that there are other ways to understand the cross in the broader church, Borst said this particular understanding of the cross, rooted in the

More Steps Toward Racial Justice

Reformed confessions, “is dear to us as a church.” As such, teaching or preaching that denial is “a serious deviation from the teachings of the confessions of the Christian Reformed Church.”

Why take this up now? Some delegates wondered whether taking this action was related to an isolated example because Classis Illiana cited the sermons of a single pastor. Leo Jonker, Classis Quinte, was not convinced it was a problem.

But others said that it was an important action to take even if there is only one person who denies the doctrine. Rob Toornstra, of Classis Columbia said, “Even if it is only one person, we need to speak to it.”

—Clayton Libolt

183

total delegates

17%

31 female delegates

10%

18 ethnic minority delegates

Synod 2022 took a few steps to further racial justice work in Christian Reformed congregations, prompted by a request from Classis Greater Los Angeles.

Although gender and sexuality issues took first priority at this synod, delegates discussed racial justice for more than an hour. They worked through a series of proposals as a response to the request that synod “oppose white supremacy and systemic racism.”

“White supremacy is real. It’s as real as apple pie,” said Wayne Coleman, Classis Hackensack. “I wish we had more passion for racial unity. We’ve been talking about it for too long. ... We need to make this practical somehow.”

Jeffery Hough, Classis Muskegon, said white people need to do the work. “We have to realize that when people in the CRC start having conversations (on racism) when there are no minorities around, that is when change happens.”

Synod 2022:

- » Asked Calvin Seminary to report on how they teach a Reformed perspective on race and justice issues
- » Encouraged church leaders to question candidates for ministry on their commitment to racial justice
- » Reminded CRC churches that elders should defend biblical justice and that deacons should seek justice and work to change “exploitative structures or indifferent systems”
- » Encouraged the CRC to continue producing materials to help churches work in this area
- » Asked the general secretary to report back to Synod 2023 with “praise reports of positive progress and prayer requests for challenges and concerns”

“As a woman, a minority, now an elder, I have faced many types of discrimination,” said Darlene Silversmith, an ethnic



Wayne Coleman, Classis Hackensack: White supremacy is as real as apple pie. We’ve been talking about it for too long. ... We need to make this practical somehow.

adviser to Synod 2022. “I do try to preach justice, even if I only have a license to exhort.”

Ethnic adviser Hyung-Jun Kim, who lives in British Columbia, said he appreciated the proposals “although I don’t feel this is comprehensive enough.” He added that the Canadian and American contexts and issues around racial justice need to be interpreted differently.

Mary Rupke, Classis Lake Erie, said she takes seriously the instruction for elders to defend biblical justice. “In the church, things that happen at synod often do not filter down,” she said. “Our conversations here were hard, honest, and helpful. If we can help that to happen (in our home churches) then I hope we take that seriously.”

—Roxanne Van Farowe

Colin Watson, John Bolt Retire

Colin Watson Sr., the CRC's executive director, and John Bolt, deputy executive director and chief financial officer, are both retiring June 30. Synod 2022 thanked the two executives for their work and prayed for them, and delegates got to their feet to applaud them both.

Watson served as the denomination's director of ministries and administration since 2015 and was appointed as executive director after the 2020 resignation of Steven Timmermans, becoming the first Black person to hold that position in the CRCNA. He'd originally intended to retire in 2021 but delayed in order to help lead the denomination through another year without synod meeting. (Synods 2020 and 2021 were canceled due to the COVID-19 pandemic.)

Watson, 70, is a commissioned pastor in the CRC. (His classis, Grand Rapids East, granted him emeritus status at its May 19 meeting.) Watson and his wife, Freida, are members of Madison Church—Square Campus in Grand Rapids, Mich. He told *The Banner*, "Retirement for me will be an opportunity to focus on my family, children, and grandchild, and being available to them as they live into what God has planned for their lives."

Watson also plans to complete his doctorate of ministry through Calvin Theological Seminary. He began that work with Calvin seminary's first cohort of D.Min. students in May 2020. He intends to graduate from the program within the next two years, focusing his doctoral paper on leadership in multicultural institutions. He also hopes to write more personally. "I look forward to reflecting on what I have learned in my journeys and hopefully documenting the same for the benefit of others," Watson said.

Watson was a business executive in telecommunications and energy sectors before serving in ministry. Raised in British Guiana (now called Guyana), Watson came to the U.S. at age 18 to



Colin Watson (left) and John Bolt both retire June 30, 2022.

go to college. He has a master's degree in statistics and is also a graduate of the executive programs of Columbia University and the University of Virginia.

The executive director position is not being filled. Instead synod adopted a new leadership model that includes a general secretary. That position will be filled by Zachary King, former director of Resonate Global Mission (p. 33).

Bolt Wraps Up After Nearly Two Decades

Bolt, 69, has worked for the denomination for 19 years, serving first with the title of director of finance and administration and more recently as chief financial officer and deputy executive director. Like Watson, Bolt delayed his expected date of retirement and even intends to continue one aspect of his former job: oversight of the U.S. ministers pension plan. He will become a denominational trustee July 1. "I have managed pensions of all sizes since 1976 and find it to be very much fun," Bolt said.

He and his wife, Ruth, are members of Alger Park CRC in Grand Rapids, Mich.

"Importantly, I look forward to spending time with my wife visiting our children and grandchildren, boating and fishing, and playing golf," Bolt said. "I am also eager to see what God has in store for me that just has not crossed my path yet."

Currently there is no plan for a new CFO. Bolt said under the new structure many of the functions of chief financial officer will be filled by the chief administrative officer. Synod authorized the Council of Delegates to search for and appoint the CAO.

Peter Hoytema, Classis Ontario Southwest, prayed for Bolt and Watson, thanking God "for their good work—their long work that they extended beyond what they intended" and asked "that they enjoy a time of rest and opportunities to serve you in new and important ways."

—Alissa Vernon

Pledge System Eases Finance Work at Synod



Synod's financial matters advisory committee, meeting at Synod 2022.

Changing to a pledge system for denominational ministry share income has left little for the Christian Reformed Church's annual synod to do on the finance front.

The new Ministry Shares Reimagined system invites churches to pledge the amount they can give to support denominational ministries instead of

paying what previous synods asked for in a per-member amount. That system, which had been in place since 1862, was almost like a bill to be paid. But that assessment was a hardship to some churches, and in recent years only about 60% of shares were paid.

Now, once pledge amounts are received, the ministry agencies develop the budget, and finally the Council of Delegates approves the budget. The new system was approved by Synod 2019 and ratified by the Council of Delegates in 2020.

The result? "There's not a lot for (synod's financial matters advisory committee) to do with the budget," said John Bolt, retiring chief financial officer. "Synod's only role is to invite the churches to make their pledges."

That makes sense to Bolt, who envisioned the change. "The churches are at the beginning of the financial process instead of at the end," he said.

Pledged ministry shares "provide about 29 percent of the budgets for our mission agencies, 27 percent of the budget for Calvin Theological Seminary and an average of 62 percent for various ministries that support CRC congregations," according to crcna.org.

—Roxanne Van Farowe

44

34 ministers of the Word and 10 commissioned pastors retired in 2021 and 2022.

Colin Watson Sees Hope for Multiracial Church



Colin Watson Sr.: Are we on the road to dying out? Not if we follow God's lead into the new land into which he is taking us.

"Hopeful, promising, and at a crossroads" is how executive director Colin Watson Sr. described the Christian Reformed Church to the delegates of Synod 2022.

"We find ourselves here—at Synod 2022—with a lot of anxiety and a lot of pressure. We feel the amplified needs of the church. ... We wonder how much more this journey can throw at us and

how much longer we can endure," Watson said.

At the same time, he noted the promising ways that churches are reaching the Our Journey 2025 goals of prayer and spiritual disciplines, intergenerational ministry, diversity and unity, and sharing faith.

After losing hope while working on diversity efforts in the CRC in the 1980s, he said that now he's "moved from doubt to hope—hope that God will enable us to move from a monocultural denomination to a fully multiracial, multicultural—and potentially global—denomination."

Watson displayed a graph showing the decline in CRC membership, emphasizing that the decline is connected to the denomination's white, upwardly mobile demographics. But he cited with encouragement the recent growth among CRC churches and groups with Korean, Venezuelan, and Southeast Asian ethnicities. He believes such initiatives hold the future of the CRC. "God is bringing the world together and enabling the interconnection of ministries from everywhere to everywhere," he said. "It is my prayer that we as the CRC lean into this new reality and create a partnership—a family of churches, ministries, and institutions that are really on mission to go and make disciples worldwide."

"Over the last few years the question has been raised: as we look at the decline in membership of the denomination, are we on the road to dying out?" he said. "My answer today is certainly not—not if we follow God's lead into the new land into which he is taking us."

Watson closed by sharing several Scripture passages. "We have been through the valley—we have been tested—and God has continued to prove faithful," he told synod.

—Roxanne Van Farowe

Commemorating 25 Years of Women in Ecclesiastical Office



Women pastors in the auditorium applauded the 25th anniversary of women's ordination in the Christian Reformed Church.

Synod 2022 commemorated 25 years of the participation of women in church offices in the denomination. It actually has been 27 years, but the commemoration was delayed by the two years of canceled synods.

Elaine May, the CRC's women's leadership developer, framed the history that led to opening the offices to women and to what has happened since.

Twenty-seven years ago, in 1995, after a long back-and-forth discussion on whether Scripture barred women from holding church offices, synod came up with an innovative solution, May said: "to recognize that there are two different perspectives on this issue, both honoring Scripture." Classes and eventually congregations were given permission to ordain women in all the church offices, including the offices of deacon, elder, commissioned pastor, and minister of the Word.

May cited statistics showing that more churches are accepting women in church office: 73.5% of Christian Reformed churches now have women serving as deacons while 52% ordain both women and men as elders.

And more women are entering the ministry. In the five-year period from 1996 to

2000, 14 women were approved as candidates for ministry; from 2016 to 2020, 66 were approved.

May acknowledged that despite the increase in women's participation in the various offices, living with two perspectives on this issue has been challenging for the denomination (p. 34). She said, "This anniversary is ours. It belongs to all of us. We have all been participants in one way or another, and we have remained together. Whether you grieve or celebrate this milestone, we arrive at this day together."

At the end of her remarks, May played a video. Over "The Blessing," by Elevation Worship, the names of the 200 women who have been ordained to ministry since 1995 scrolled slowly up the screen. Many of the names were accompanied by pictures. Several of those named were gathered in the back of the auditorium. Others were on the floor of the synod.

As the last of the names came up, most of the delegates and others in the auditorium gave a standing ovation. Others, heads down, did not participate in the commemoration.

—Clayton Libolt

Structure Changes Adopted

With little discussion, Synod 2022 adopted a new governance and leadership structure for the Christian Reformed Church, ratifying what the CRC's Council of Delegates has already put into action.

The new structure, outlined in the Structure and Leadership Taskforce Report, was prompted by issues of compliance with Canadian tax rules for nonprofit organizations. Leaders also hope the new structure will ameliorate an ongoing struggle over how much autonomy Canadians have in directing CRC ministries in Canada.

The significant changes "without the ordinary engagement with churches and classes" were necessary because coming into compliance with the tax rules couldn't wait for synod to convene, a report to synod said.

The new structure includes a general secretary whose office will manage all the ecclesiastical affairs of the church, including ecumenical activities and the committees that report directly to synod. That person is also responsible to work in collaboration with the top executives in the U.S. and Canada.

The general secretary is accountable to the Council and ultimately to synod. Synod 2022 appointed Zachary King to the job.

Canadian delegates on the Council make up the Canada Corporation, and the U.S. delegates make up the U.S. Corporation of the CRC. They are the legal entities that govern the various ministry agencies of the binational denomination and supervise their top executives. In Canada, that post is the executive director—Canada, which is being filled for a two-year transition period by Al Postma. The U.S. Corporation appointed Joel Huyser as director of U.S. ministries and operations in addition to his role as interim director of Resonate Global Mission.

The corporations supervise the ministries of the CRC in their respective countries

Synod Appoints New General Secretary, Asks Tough Questions



John Lee, who served as chair of the Structure and Leadership Taskforce: Don't trust that this new structure will do the work that we have to do to heal past hurts.

with joint ministry agreements that are intended to define the separate roles of the CRC in each country.

A top priority of the executive director-Canada will be “looking at the culture, rebuilding relationships, and rebuilding trust,” said Andy de Ruyter, chair of the Council of Delegates. De Ruyter, who is also president of the Canada Corporation, recalled that at Synod 2019 he was just realizing that “we had to make a major change. There were sleepless nights I cannot begin to count.”

De Ruyter praised the new structure plan, saying it “speaks volumes about the good work that was done by so many.”

John Lee, Classis Iakota, who served as chair of the Structure and Leadership Taskforce, noted how quickly synod moved through the structure recommendations. He cautioned, “I want to acknowledge that there is pain that we haven't dealt with” connected to previous structure decisions. He urged that simply implementing a new structure will not be enough. “Don't trust that this new structure will do the work that we have to do” to heal past hurts, Lee said.

—Roxanne Van Farowe

Synod 2022 appointed Zachary King as the new general secretary of the Christian Reformed Church, but not before asking him some tough questions.

Interviewed by Paul VanderKlay, Classis Central California, King talked about leadership that involves mentorship and the building of a godly culture. “There's so little we can accomplish individually,” he said. “But as a group walking together in the Spirit, the sky is the limit.”

King had been serving as director of Resonate Global Mission. VanderKlay asked why he left the mission field in 2017 to take that role.

“God moved me from resistance to obedience and submission,” King answered. “I had a sense that this was God's call.” Through leading Resonate, “I learned to be seriously engaged with the Spirit in prayer. ... I learned to prioritize God in all of this work.”

Following VanderKlay's interview, other delegates were given the chance to ask questions. Blake Campbell, Classis Illiana, asked King how he will implement the decisions synod made in response to Neland Avenue CRC. King's home church, Fuller Avenue CRC, is part of Classis Grand Rapids East along with Neland.

“I will with integrity, honesty, grace, and Christ's love implement the decisions of our synodical delegates,” King answered. “It's difficult because of the relationship and history involved. ... My understanding of Scripture is that God has shown us a model for human sexuality of marriage between a man and a woman. I fully support the decisions of the CRC on this matter. I believe what the Scripture says, and I acknowledge that the confessions support it.”

Ingrid Beck, Classis Niagara, asked the hardest question of the night: “Can you speak some hope to how I go home tomorrow to a gay daughter, trans friends, and a same-sex-attraction marriage in my church?” she asked. “How do I untie my hands?”

“I recognize that there is a real sense of pain and loss,” said King. “A lot of people are experiencing this decision as one that undercuts their identity as a human being. The CRC and its decisions affirm that all human beings—all groups and constituencies—are objects of Christ's love. I know that Jesus Christ suffers with his people wherever they are.

“I encourage all of us to speak of God's unapologetic love for his people in difficult times with humility and measured tones,” he added. “I don't have an easy answer to (your question).”

—Roxanne Van Farowe



Zachary King, newly appointed general secretary of the CRC: All human beings—all groups and constituencies—are objects of Christ's love.

Can We Still Live With Differences Regarding Women in Office?

When Synod 2022 commemorated 25 years of ordaining women to church office, not everyone was delighted.

Among those less than delighted was the delegation from Classis Minnkota, a regional body of churches located mostly in the southwest corner of Minnesota along with some scattered churches from other regions that hold a complementarian position.

Classis Minnkota annually attaches a note to its delegates' synod credentials that is read aloud at synod, noting, "They wish to make clear that their protest is not against women or against using the gifts of women, but they wish to uphold their understanding of Scripture's teaching regarding the roles of women and men."

The classis also periodically sends a communication to synod to offer a fuller explanation of its convictions, noting that "even though Synod 1995 declared that both complementarian and egalitarian views are faithful interpretations of the Word of God, synodical practice since that time has become markedly egalitarian, making it difficult for complementarians to participate in good conscience."

This year, when the credential note was read, one of the delegates, Ingrid Beck, new to synod, was shocked and saddened.

Beck reached out to others who told her that it was within the rights of Minnkota to protest, but she believes Minnkota and the synod can do better. She told *The Banner* that the Minnkota statement "is aggressive in nature" and "makes my very presence objectionable."

She suggests that Minnkota "explain the complementarian position (the idea that women and men have different and complementary roles) and take responsibility over the choice that was made to stay in the denomination." (*Agenda for Synod 2000*, starting on page 355, cites biblical-theological argumentation for both perspectives on women in ecclesiastical offices.)



Elaine May is the women's leadership developer for the office of Pastor Church Resources.

Beck said that if voiced differently the Minnkota protest could serve as a model of giving voice to differences but not breaking unity with each other.

Roger Sparks, an 11-time Minnkota delegate to synod, might agree. Asked about the annual Minnkota protest statements, he wondered if it was time to stop the practice, noting that you still end up living with the tension between being part of something you don't fully agree with or not being part of it. But, he said, "It allows some people who are complementarians to participate."

Elaine May, women's leadership developer for the office of Pastor Church Resources, said that what happened to Beck should not happen again. Women who serve at synod should be warned ahead of time about such protests and given a context in which to hear them.

"We have agreed," May said, "to live in this tension with each other." The problem comes when one side says it is right and the other side is wrong. Submitting to the rule of the church, she noted, means agreeing to live together with each other.

—Clayton Libolt

Code of Conduct Awaits Feedback

Synod 2022 decided it wanted a year for member churches to review a code of conduct before implementing it.

The code, which had been recommended to Synod 2022 by the Council of Delegates, is a list of behavior guidelines for ministry leaders and was developed by the denomination as part of its effort to prevent abuse of power. Amanda Benckhuysen, the CRC's director of Safe Church Ministry, said the goal is to begin to see "change (in) the culture of the CRC so we set higher expectations for ourselves. ... It's a way to educate ourselves again in what we're called to be as ministry leaders."

Robert Toornstra, Classis Columbia, said, "We recognize the gravity out of which this code of conduct arose. The cases of abuse are real, and churches deal with this and need to take appropriate steps to respond and mitigate abuse."

However, Toornstra said, his committee struggled over "the best means to get a document that all churches can stand behind and buy into."

Anthony Elenbaas, Classis Hamilton, said he was at Synod 2018 when the conversation began. Concerned that the extra year would delay implementation even longer, Elenbaas said, "Synod 2023 could always bump it down the road further."

The implementation of the conduct is a "pressing, urgent matter," said Willem Delleman, Classis B.C. North-West. Richard Admiraal, Classis Central Plains said, "I just don't think we can afford to wait another year."

Stephen Terpstra, Classis Zeeland, said the extra year doesn't mean that abuse of power shouldn't be taken seriously. "We're saying, let's think deeply and long enough to be effective."

Benjamin Gandy, Classis Grand Rapids North, believes churches need to take time to walk through the code. "Putting this off for a year does not mean that

Synod 2022 Strengthens Abuse Response Process



Eric Van Dyken, Classis Minnkota: A phrase like “creating a safe environment” is pretty vague.



Benjamin Gandy, Classis Grand Rapids North: Churches could adopt the code of conduct as it is being studied.

churches in which we serve cannot adopt the whole code of conduct.”

Chad Werkhoven, Classis Minnkota, was entirely against the need for a code of conduct because there are already legal requirements and the Covenant for Officebearers, a commitment that all officebearers and Calvin University and Seminary professors are required to sign to signal their agreement to the official creeds. Werkhoven said there should be more emphasis on the importance of the covenant that officebearers sign.

Synod delegates decided they wanted to be careful with what it asked of all ministry leaders. “Some language wasn’t always clear,” Toornstra said. Now the churches and classes have a year to discuss this to give input on it.

Eric Van Dyken, Classis Minnkota, said the language of the code makes him nervous. “When I make an oath, I need to know what I’m swearing to. When I see a phrase like ‘creating a safe environment,’ the word ‘safety’ is pretty vague.”

Synod added a sentence under the “Spiritual” heading of the code: “I will teach, admonish, or discipline in ways that are biblical, Christlike, and seek other people’s well-being. (Matt. 18; Col. 1:28; 3:16).” It voted 122-52 to let the implementation come back to Synod 2023.

—Kristen Parker



Safe Church Ministry Director Amanda Benckhuysen: The revised guidelines give church councils leeway and build in accountability to classis.

Synod 2022 has revised and strengthened the guidelines for how church councils handle allegations of abuse against church leaders.

The revised guidelines provide more leeway for local churches to decide how best to handle abuse allegations but also provide additional classis oversight from the start of the process, according to Amanda Benckhuysen, director of the CRC’s Safe Church Ministry. Under the new guidelines, classis will appoint church visitors who will participate in the abuse response from the start, providing advice, encouragement, and support.

When a congregation responds ineffectively to an abuse allegation, the matter may be appealed to classis and then even to synod. Such appeals, Benckhuysen said, are likely to retraumatize the victim by widening the circle of people with knowledge of the incident.

“When someone accused of abuse is close to us, it’s always hard for us to believe, and it’s hard to know how to go forward,” said Benckhuysen. “These changes give churches a little more space, and they also build in accountability for actually doing something in response to the abuse.”

Church leaders responding to alleged abuse will be required to watch a 60-minute Safe Church training and orientation video. And when a case does come to synod, more of the work will be handled privately by advisory committee members who also receive the video training.

—Roxanne Van Farowe

What Else Happened at Synod 2022?

Synod gave a number of assignments to the Christian Reformed Church's new general secretary, Zachary King, and to the Council of Delegates. It also passed on several matters to the next synod.

Assignments for the General Secretary

- » Instruct the churches to seek and keep unity "in ways that are consistent with biblical principles, Reformed confessions, and ecumenical charter" and "to gather best practices on pursuing unity from various classes and share these with the church."
- » Update the CRCNA's governance documents to reflect a change in Calvin University's bylaws that allow the university's board to search for and appoint its own president.
- » Curate human resources-related best practices and templates, including for congregational short-term disability insurance; study possible denominational and classical benevolence funds for congregations facing short-term disability needs.
- » Review and clarify the use of the terms "agency," "board," "office," "ministry," and similar names for CRCNA entities.

Assignments for the Council of Delegates

- » Review the implications of the church-planting activities in Classis Arizona and recommend any needed Church Order changes to help collaborative (Reformed Church in America and CRC) church plants find expression in both denominations.
- » Examine congregational responses to the ministry share pledge system, asking why contributions are declining, especially in the U.S.
- » With Pastor Church Resources, review Church Order Articles related to the transition of pastors (Arts. 8, 12, 13, 14, 16, and 17) and bring an interim report to Synod 2023.
- » Authority to act on the appointment of a chief administrative officer and all senior-level staff within the Office of General Secretary.

Passed On to Synod 2023

- » A request to clarify distinctions in categories of "synodical pronouncements, decisions, reports, positions, and advice and the extent to which they



Harold Caicedo, president of Consejo Latino: Something historical is happening at this synod.

- bind the churches" (Overture 3, from *Deferred Agendas for Synods 2020-2021*).
- » A request to appoint a task force to develop Church Order procedures to discipline officebearers, including disaffiliation initiated by a major assembly (Overture 11, from *Agenda for Synod 2022*); the task force should also consider adopting an additional supplement to the articles related to church discipline (Overture 7, deferred from 2020).
- » Amend Church Order Article 45 to give classes more leeway in formulating delegations to synod (changes in italics): each classis shall *ordinarily* delegate one minister, one elder, one deacon and one other officebearer. A *classis may only send up to two delegates of the same office.*



Director of diversity, Reggie Smith, co-lead the power and privilege training: Be aware of the voices that need to be heard.

Other Things Synod Did

- » Participated in a half-hour “power and privilege training” that will be standard for synods going forward, as mandated by Synod 2019
- » Solemnly took note of the pervasive sin of pornography and its harm, and agreed to lead member churches into repentance and healing
- » Approved a revised mandate for the historical committee, which is responsible for the CRC’s archives
- » Amended the supplement to Church Order Article 40-a to formally allow campus ministers to serve as delegates to classis
- » Finalized changes to the Church Order to remove an expectation for two Sunday services
- » Recognized Kingdom Network, USA, as a church in dialogue
- » Heard that the Ecumenical Interchurch Relations Committee endorsed a continued conversation between Consejo Latino and the CRC in Venezuela, where several churches would like to be affiliated with the CRCNA
- » Received a review of *The New City Catechism* from the CRC’s Faith Formation Ministries
- » Thanked Dee Recker for her years of service; she will retire as director of synodical services before the convening of the next synod
- » Adopted the use of a consent agenda—matters that would be taken up in a single motion, without debate, unless requested—in future synods
- » Did not sustain a personal appeal from Rev. Dr. D. Roorda



Dee Recker, director of synodical services, was elated to have completed her final synod.

Two Red Mesa Commissioned Pastors Delegated to Synod 2022



Debra Chee (left) and Evelyn Bennally

Evelyn Bennally and Debra Chee, the first two women to be ordained as commissioned pastors through the Christian Reformed Church’s Red Mesa Classis Leadership Development Network program, were delegated to Synod 2022.

Bennally, 69, was ordained in Sanostee, N.M., and

is proud to be the first Navajo woman ordained as a commissioned pastor in the CRC. “I’ve always had a desire to do this,” said Bennally. She came to faith through a vacation Bible school as a child, and as a young adult she led religious instruction classes.

Bennally is a native Navajo speaker and preaches in Navajo and English. She was a schoolteacher for 40 years, and after retiring she heard God’s call to be a pastor. During the pandemic, she completed a three-year training program in biblical/theological knowledge, ministry skills, and spiritual formation with Red Mesa’s Leadership Development Network.

“The books I read were an inspiration that gave me strength and kept me going during the pandemic,” Bennally said.

COVID-19 hit the Navajo Nation very hard. Bennally was called on to preside at 12 burials of people who had died from COVID. Because of strict protocols, no funeral services took place, and only five people were permitted at the gravesides. “It was a hurtful time in our community, and people came to our church for help and comfort,” Bennally said. At the request of people in the community, she prayed and sang in Navajo over Zoom with their loved ones who were in the hospital. She also invited these people to give their lives to the Lord.

Bennally’s friend Debra Chee, 68, became a commissioned pastor through the same program in 2017. She pastors Fort Wingate (N.M.) CRC, a tiny congregation about 90 miles (145 km) from Bennally’s church.

Chee’s husband is Navajo, and she also taught in the school system for many years. She has lived in the Navajo region for 37 years. Working as a female pastor in an area where churches are far apart and most pastors are male has been challenging, she said.

—Roxanne Van Farowe

IN MEMORIAM



Rev. John de Vries Jr.

1944-2022

Ever since his days in seminary, John de Vries was compelled by Christ's call to reach out to "the least of these" (Matt. 25:35-40). Remembered as a man with a positive, friendly, supportive, open-minded, and grateful attitude, John died April 11, eight months after being diagnosed with leukemia. He was 77.

A graduate of Calvin College (now University) and Seminary, John was ordained in 1972 and pastored Sonlight Christian Reformed Church in Regina, Sask., before serving as chaplain at a federal penitentiary in Laval, Que. He then pastored Fruitland CRC in Stoney Creek, Ont. In 1983, John returned to chaplaincy work, serving at St. Thomas (Ont.) Psychiatric Hospital, as chaplain coordinator for northern Ontario, as chaplain at the Guelph (Ont.) Detention Centre, and at the Chatham-Kent (Ont.) Health Alliance. John also was instrumental in helping shape the burgeoning restorative justice movement across Canada.

At the age of 46 John took up running. Over the next 30 years he ran 50 marathons—including running the Boston Marathon 20 times. He and his wife traveled extensively in retirement.

John is survived by Elly, his wife of 54 years, three sons and their spouses, and eight grandchildren.

—Janet A. Greidanus

IN MEMORIAM



*Rev. James Alvin
Molenbeek*

1949-2022

Compassionate and caring, Jim Molenbeek had a soft-spoken presence that calmed the people around him. He dedicated his life to ministry and continued to minister to family and caregivers up to his final hours. Jim, 73, died April 20, a year after a cancer diagnosis.

After graduation from Calvin College (now University) and Seminary and ordination in 1975, Jim served the following congregations: Luctor Christian Reformed Church, Prairie View, Kan.; First CRC, Salt Lake City, Utah; Pine Grove Community Church, Howard City, Mich.; East Muskegon (Mich.) CRC; and Plymouth Heights CRC, Grand Rapids, Mich. He also served as chaplain at Sunset Senior Communities in Jenison, Mich., and at Emmanuel Hospice in Grand Rapids, Mich. During worship, Jim would often lead the singing or sing a solo, with his wife accompanying him on the piano.

Creative and funny, with an insatiable love for learning, Jim enjoyed geology, art history, jewelry making, woodworking, stained glass, pottery, gardening, and planning travel to new places. In 2021 he published a devotional book, *Wilderness Survival: Sustained for 40 Days in Faith, Hope, and Love*.

Jim is survived by Sue, his wife of 53 years; four children and their spouses; and eight grandchildren.

—Janet A. Greidanus

Classis Watch: Late Spring 2022

Christian Reformed classes (regional groups of churches) meet two to three times a year, acting on matters with the guidance of the CRC's Church Order, the rules that member churches agree together to follow. Articles of Church Order are noted here for actions taken by classes in the past several months. Quotations come from classis minutes.

Those **welcomed into ministry in the Christian Reformed Church** (arts. 6 and 10) include candidates Travis Jamieson, Ram Aryal, and David Bouma.

Those welcomed into ministry in the CRC **from other denominations**: Rev. Brandon Smith (Art. 8-b); Revs. Insoo Oh, Jeremy Rhodes (Art. 8-c).

Ministers released from a congregation (Art. 17-a): Revs. Jeff Janssens from Heartland Fellowship in Chilliwack, B.C., Ed Gerber from Willoughby CRC in Langley, B.C., and Jonathan Fischer from New Hope CRC in Bangor, Maine.

Bill Weber (previously ordained in the CRC) was declared **eligible for call** (Art. 14-e).

Leaving Ministry in the CRC

Classes may end a pastor's ordained ministry status, guided by Church Order articles 14 and 17. In the case of Article 14, designations of release reflect the manner and spirit in which the minister acted during the time leading up to and including resignation from office.

Shannon Jammal-Hollemans, Shu-Min Cheng, Jeffrey Funk, and George Keulen were **honorably released**. Glenn Gerdes and Matthew A. Riddle were **released**. Garrett Saul was released to seek ordination in the Anglican denomination. Jonathan Owens was dismissed (Art. 14-c).

Ministers retiring (granted emeritus status) (Art. 18): Revs. Steve Elzinga, Lyle Bierma, Mike VanderKwaak, Sheldon Starkenburg, and Bart Velthuisen (effective Aug. 22).

Commissioned Pastors

Approved as **commissioned pastors called to specific roles within their classes** (Art. 23): Danny Vera (Classis Southeast U.S.), Youngja Yun Kim (Northcentral Iowa), Jon Pollnow (Classis Ontario Southwest), Evelyn Bennally (Classis Red Mesa), Frances Griffith (Classis Greater Los Angeles), and Miguel Nava (Classis Greater Los Angeles).

Eric Graef (Classis Central California) was **released** and Ben Buckley (Classis Northern Cascades) was **honorably released** from ministry as a commissioned pastor (Art. 24-d).

Commissioned pastor emeritus status (Art. 24-e) was granted to JoAnn Swart (Classis Grand Rapids East), Colin Watson Sr. (Classis Grand Rapids East), Mike Collins (Classis Niagara), and Alvern Boetsma (effective Aug. 31, Classis Central Plains).

New Ministries and Ministry Changes

An emerging church does not have its own council and is under the care of the council of a neighboring CRC (Art. 38).

Seed Church in Queens, N.Y. (Classis Hudson) was recognized as **emerging**.

First CRC in Ripon, Calif., **disaffiliated** from the CRC (Art. 38-f). (See online article "Historic California Congregation Disaffiliates From the CRC.")

Middleville (Mich.) CRC **changed its name** to Restoration CRC.

—Alissa Vernon

The Banner Wins With 2021 Work



This spring *The Banner* received the **Award of Excellence for denominational (digital) publication from the Evangelical Press Association** and an **honorable mention for meeting coverage from the Associated Church Press**. Pictured are (clockwise from top left) Kristen deRoo VanderBerg, Our Shared Ministry editor; Alissa Vernon, news editor; Pete Euwema, designer; Dean Heetderks, art director; Sarah Heth Sundt, associate editor; Lorilee Craker, Mixed Media editor; and Shiao Chong, editor. *The Banner* also earned two fifth-place recognitions in the EPA's Higher Goals awards: "The Blue Tarp," by Beth Rinsema (July/August 2021), in the evangelism article category and "The Agony of a Son," by Habib Steele (March 5, 2021), in the poetry category.

IN MEMORIAM



Rev. Fred VanderBerg

1952-2022

Pastor and servant leader Fred VanderBerg was kind, thoughtful, gentle, and sometimes stubborn, and he had a unique sense of humor. He tried consistently to follow God, embrace others, create community, and be there for his family. Fred, 69, died May 3, 10 weeks after a diagnosis of pancreatic cancer.

A lifelong learner, Fred recently completed an M.A. in philosophy at the Institute for Christian Studies in Toronto, Ont., graduating posthumously at ICS's June convocation.

Fred followed God's call into ministry at age 35 after operating a siding company for many years. He graduated from Calvin Seminary, was ordained in 1992, then served Hebron Community Christian Reformed Church in Renfrew, Ont.; Westmount CRC in Strathroy, Ont.; and Mountainview CRC in Grimsby, Ont. He also was chaplain at Shalom Manor and Gardens in Grimsby. Fred's sermons were thoughtful and thought provoking. His way of pastoring was quiet and caring.

Fred enjoyed reading and camping. Cycling was a passion. In retirement he and his wife began volunteering at the Welcome Inn Community Centre in Hamilton, Ont.—work that was cut short by his illness.

Fred is survived by Nelli, his partner for almost 50 years; four children and their spouses; and 11 grandchildren.

—Janet A. Greidanus

IN MEMORIAM



Rev. Michiel (Mike) M.

De Berdt

1930-2022

More than anything, Mike De Berdt worked to point others to Jesus. It filled him with much joy to see the churches he planted in Japan grow, mature, and become integrated into the Reformed Church in Japan. De Berdt, 91, died May 14.

De Berdt started ministry as a Catholic missionary priest in Japan before he converted to the Reformed faith. He graduated from Calvin Theological Seminary in 1962, was ordained, then served in Japan with Christian Reformed World Missions (now part of Resonate Global Mission). He planted new churches in eight locations and helped complete the work started by other missionaries in four other places.

After retirement in 1995 De Berdt served a Japanese congregation in the Netherlands for three years. The De Berdts then settled for a few years in Grand Rapids, Mich. He served on the CRC Interchurch Relations Committee and as an elder at Neland Avenue CRC. In 2012 he received a distinguished alumni award from Calvin Theological Seminary. The De Berdts eventually settled in Winchester, Ky.

He is survived by his wife, Trudy; four children and their spouses; eight grandchildren; and four great-grandchildren.

—Janet A. Greidanus



HELLO
NEIGHBOR
COME ON IN

Church, Can We Talk About Hospitality?

By David K. Ryden

“When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and elders.” —Acts 15:4

“**H**ere we go again,” I thought to myself. Sunday morning worship had just concluded at the church I was visiting recently with three of our teenagers. My spouse, a chaplain of discipleship at our local college, was filling the pulpit elsewhere, so we were on our own. As the couple hundred people in attendance gradually filtered out of the sanctuary into the fellowship hall, I filled my coffee cup, grabbed a cookie, and positioned myself with my girls in a fairly prominent spot in the middle

of the room. The room was soon abuzz with the hum of conversation as the regulars easily mixed and gathered in small circles. But none of it involved us. One or two people gave us a tentative smile or nod as they walked by, but they kept moving. After 10 or 15 minutes, we eased out of the building, having met precisely zero people.

As a kid growing up in a Methodist church in small-town northern Minnesota, I distinctly recall my mom inevitably making a beeline to any visitor to our church to engage them in conversation before they could make it to the exit. Years later, when a young professional couple invited me to lunch following my first Sunday visit to their small church, that

church became my spiritual lifeline through the years of law school and an unhappy law practice. As an introvert who craves in-depth spiritual friendship, I can witness to the fact that every meaningful relationship with church in my long adult life has been rooted in an almost immediate and palpable sense of that church’s enthusiastic embrace of my being among them.

But more recently, I’ve encountered something different. Since my spouse traded in her pastorate of a small, local church for a campus ministries position several years ago, our family search for a church home has taken us to more than a few area congregations. In the course of our wanderings,

we have heard thoughtful, challenging, scripturally anchored preaching and participated in rich and varied styles of worship. But among the most notable phenomena we have encountered across those churches we visited was a conspicuous absence of hospitality. Certainly not always; we have met plenty of folks whose warm welcome has been a balm as we struggle to find a more permanent church home for our family. But more often than not we would find ourselves on the drive home commenting on how few people truly engaged us in conversation or extended to us much more than a perfunctory greeting. I love church. I love the church. But this too-common experience has left me wondering if the church, in fact, loves me.

I have wondered if it was just me, if I am the one to blame. As an introvert, lingering in the foyer surrounded by strangers can for me be excruciating. I've wondered if I give off a vibe. I know the corners of my mouth naturally turn down rather than up. Perhaps I have been subconsciously emitting signals that I want to be left alone. But I don't go to church by myself. How then to explain my wife's comparable experience? While hardly objective, I assure you that anyone who meets my beloved would have to concede that she is utterly delightful—outgoing and vivacious, curious about others, charming and inviting in her manner. We typically are accompanied by a gaggle of children who are (relatively) fresh-scrubbed and have been drilled by their parents to put on a happy face. I wonder about a church of people who are not drawn to my wife and kids on first encounter.

I fear that I am likely to come across here as rather judgmental. I realize it isn't easy striking up a conversation with complete strangers. In today's age, it isn't unreasonable to conclude that the visitor might not wish to talk, that

I simply don't know how we can effectively share the good news of Christ if we can't even welcome the stranger into our church family.

they would even prefer to be left alone and to escape the building unscathed. Nevertheless, I feel compelled to raise the subject of hospitality as what has been for me a simmering resentment is hardening into something closer to a bitterness toward Christ's church.

Fair or not, how I am received on a Sunday morning by the people in the pews has for me become something of a default measure of that church's spiritual health. Even if that is uncharitable on my part the question still merits attention. If I am feeling this way, what about the unchurched person who has finally screwed up the courage to enter a house of worship? What are they likely to conclude about Christians and the church? I simply don't know how we can effectively share the good news of Christ if we can't even welcome the stranger into our church family as we gather in the very presence of God. So let me offer a layperson's ill-formed thoughts that might spark a broader discussion on the importance of hospitality to the outsider.

Why is it so important to greet the stranger in our midst? I don't know if we really need to ask this question.

But let's be sure we understand why welcoming the stranger matters.

First, we are commanded to. Scripture is clear. Romans 12:13 exhorts us to "extend hospitality to strangers" (NRSVA). Or, as Jesus rhetorically asked in Matthew 5:47, "And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others?"

Second, we might actually be in the presence of Christ himself or his angels. In the famous passage of Matthew 25:35, Christ reveals that when his followers invited the stranger in, they were in fact doing it to him. Similarly, in Hebrews 13:1-3, we are warned not to neglect showing hospitality to strangers lest we be entertaining angels unawares. Who is it we are ignoring on Sunday morning when we overlook the visitor?

Third, it is among the ways we demonstrate love for our neighbor. In Matthew 25, Jesus puts inviting in the stranger on par with feeding the hungry and giving a drink to the thirsty, clothing those who need it, caring for the sick, and visiting the prisoner.

Fourth, it is one more way in which we glorify God. In Romans 15:7, we "welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God" (ESV).

In view of these clear scriptural imperatives, let me raise a few practical questions for the church.

How do we cultivate the habit of hospitality? It would be nice if we didn't have to think about this, if we could simply count on the church to organically extend hospitality to the visitor. Perhaps it is one more casualty of the ubiquity of the smartphone, but I fear the practice of making conversation with someone we don't know is something of a lost art. As someone who has spent a lifetime

working to overcome his Scandinavian reserve, I can attest to the discomfort that often accompanies that initial encounter with a guest or visitor. It strikes me that a church that is intentional about being welcoming to the stranger should be intentional first about reminding the congregants to keep an eye out for the visitor and second about providing the occasional workshop or set of pointers on how to go about naturally extending that welcome.

Is Sunday post-worship fellowship hour the primary focus of your congregation's cultivation of community? I have always cherished the time of fellowship that comes on the heels of Sunday morning worship. It is when I get to hear the latest from my besties, check in with the senior saints, touch base with those who might be on the fringes of our church family, and catch up with those I otherwise don't normally see. That sweet time of fellowship can be when the church really feels the most like the church. So I get it when people ask when else they are supposed to connect with their Christian brothers and sisters. Isn't this when we do the very important work of building up the body of believers in our local congregation?

But I wonder if too much emphasis on Sunday-morning socializing is really a subtle sign of too little fellowship at other times in the week. The midweek potluck, the Bible studies and reading clubs, the men's and women's and young adult groups, the co-ed softball teams—these are not mere vestiges of the traditional ways of doing church. They are where a genuine deeper Christian community is built beyond the few minutes of casual conversation that happen after worship. Might we not be freer to devote time on Sunday to extend a greeting to the stranger in our midst if our bonds of Christian friendship were being

forged in stronger ways apart from the fellowship hour?

Is your church too big? I can hear the protestations already. How are we supposed to know when someone is visiting our church on a Sunday morning? At the risk of challenging the conventional mindset of judging a church's health by its numbers, this one strikes me as straightforward. If the folks who belong to a church are unaware there is a stranger in their midst, then it probably means that the church is too large. (Discuss!)

Does this mean we still need those old-fashioned greeters in the back of church? Though this incident happened a number of years ago, I recall it as if it was yesterday: Our family had decided to visit the "it" church in town. The word on the street was that this was the place to be and to be seen. After worshipping there that Sunday morning, we could understand why. The music leadership was professional and Spirit-led; the preaching was excellent and insightful. It was an undeniably rich worship experience. Yet it was overshadowed by our not being seen when we walked in the door. Not a single person acknowledged our presence. No one offered even a simple "Hello." Even though the church was packed, there was no one to slip us a bulletin, direct us to a place to sit, or otherwise offer assistance. We were left to fend for ourselves.

A couple of thoughts on greeters: Yes, we still need them. If we want someone to feel comfortable in our midst, they must be welcomed in. There is nothing quite like the invitation of a warm reception, a genuine smile, a firm (pre- or post-COVID) handshake. As at home, hospitality begins at the door. Moreover, the first point of contact with the stranger should be staffed by people who genuinely like people.

A confession: Our family has a hard time getting to church on time (actually, we have trouble getting anywhere on time). Too often we find ourselves scurrying into church in the midst of a call to worship or during the reading of the announcements. But I have lost count of the times we've been met by the stern usher whose unspoken condemnation of our tardy ways makes me momentarily consider reversing my steps and heading back to the parking lot. Churches should be intentional about having greeters, about whom to have as greeters, and about training them up in the art of hospitality.

The headlines on the church and religion aren't good. Fewer and fewer people regularly attend. Affiliation with a faith tradition or denomination is plummeting as people opt for a spirituality of their own making. For those of us who believe that the church has something to offer the world, the idea of evangelizing is intimidating, even overwhelming. But let me suggest two simple steps that might be a good start: Let's get back to inviting people to church. And when they come, let's demonstrate Christ's love for them through genuine hospitality. 



David Ryden teaches political science at Hope College in Holland, Mich. He writes on matters of religion and politics, with a special focus on religious liberty.

1. When was the last time you talked to a stranger or visitor at church? How was the experience?
2. How does your local church practice hospitality, especially to visitors and newcomers?

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Following, Step by Step

A disciple eventually must surrender to a childlike trust in God to design and provide for the future.

“Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be.” —John 12:26

I’VE ONLY USED A TRAVEL AGENT to plan a vacation once in my life, and it was a delightful experience. But there was something about the itineraries that felt like an awkward fit in the picture of my real life, which has always looked more like an off-road adventure to places I wouldn’t have chosen than a sensibly planned journey toward a dream destination. In real life, I find myself moving forward with just enough information for the next step, communicated through unexpected people, quiet internal nudges, and occasional frustrating roadblocks.

One thing that’s certain about the life of faith is that it’s full of uncertainty. We step into a plan we haven’t designed, not knowing what’s around the corner. Perhaps that’s because serving (as Jesus explains in John 12:26) entails following. The Greek word *diakonos*, translated “serve,” actually has connotations of “kicking up dust” because you’re on the move. There is motion to a life of service that can’t be contained within the boundaries of any career or vocation. It’s not mapped out for us ahead of time, but discovered incrementally through each daily advance.

I’ve been asked at times how these candidates for ministry managed to commit themselves to leadership in the Christian Reformed Church in such a time of uncertainty. I believe it’s because they have gotten used to uncertainty. It’s the posture they’ve learned ever since they first became disciples of Jesus. Despite the strong desire to know exactly what’s coming next, a disciple eventually must surrender to a childlike trust in God to design and provide for the future. A vision for accomplishing great things gradually gives way to a willingness to let God use us in our weaknesses.

When the apostle Peter claimed he loved Jesus more than anyone else, Jesus told him he would be led to a place he did not want to go (John 21:18). He was indicating his death, but I think he also was describing a plan for Peter’s life that Peter never would have designed for himself—servant leadership of a highly persecuted, divided, troubled new church.

When I hear these candidates’ stories, I notice many contain themes of Jesus leading them where they did not want to go. Most struggled against their calls, choosing other careers first, declining invitations to lead because of obstacles and limitations. Even upon being declared candidates, some of them still struggle to imagine themselves fitting into the typical pastoral role. They don’t know what ministry will look like in their lives or how they will navigate its challenges. They just know they were led to take this step and that God will be faithful through each continued step.

I suppose when we find ourselves moving confidently and efficiently toward our goals, we might do well to stop and consider whether we are following Jesus or taking the lead. And when we face unwanted detours or unplanned suffering, when our next step forward doesn’t quite make sense in our mind but feels right in our hearts, then it’s very likely following squarely behind Jesus.

My prayer for these candidates—and for the church—is that God fills each one with the courage and trust to keep following Jesus. **B**



Susan LaClear lives in Hudsonville, Mich., and currently serves as the director of candidacy for the Christian Reformed Church. Alive Ministries in Jenison, Mich., is her calling church.



Sheri Admiraal



Brad Bootsma



Kristy Bootsma



Tricia Bosma



Stewart deJong



Mark Elffers



Ryan Farrell



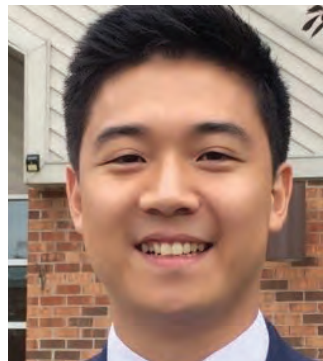
Matthew Guichelaar



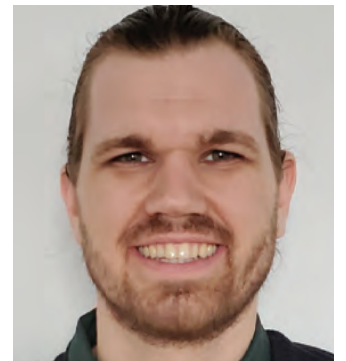
Rebecca Hall



Carol Hulin



Minho Jeong



Jelle Koersen



Aleah Marsden



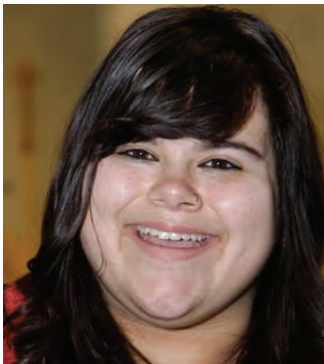
Jacob Patton



Mario Perez



Micah Ringelberg



Nicole Romero



Joe Steenholdt



Zachary Toth



Anthony VanderSchaaf



Jodi VanWingerden



Wendy Werkman



Ben Wimmers

Reaching the Next Leaders of Brazilian Churches

God is at work in churches across Brazil through his people. Still, many people who lead Sunday services do not have any formal biblical training due to a lack of access to education.

That's why ReFrame Ministries, the CRC's media ministry, offers online courses for pastors and church leaders in Brazil for a minimal cost.

Walbene Graça:

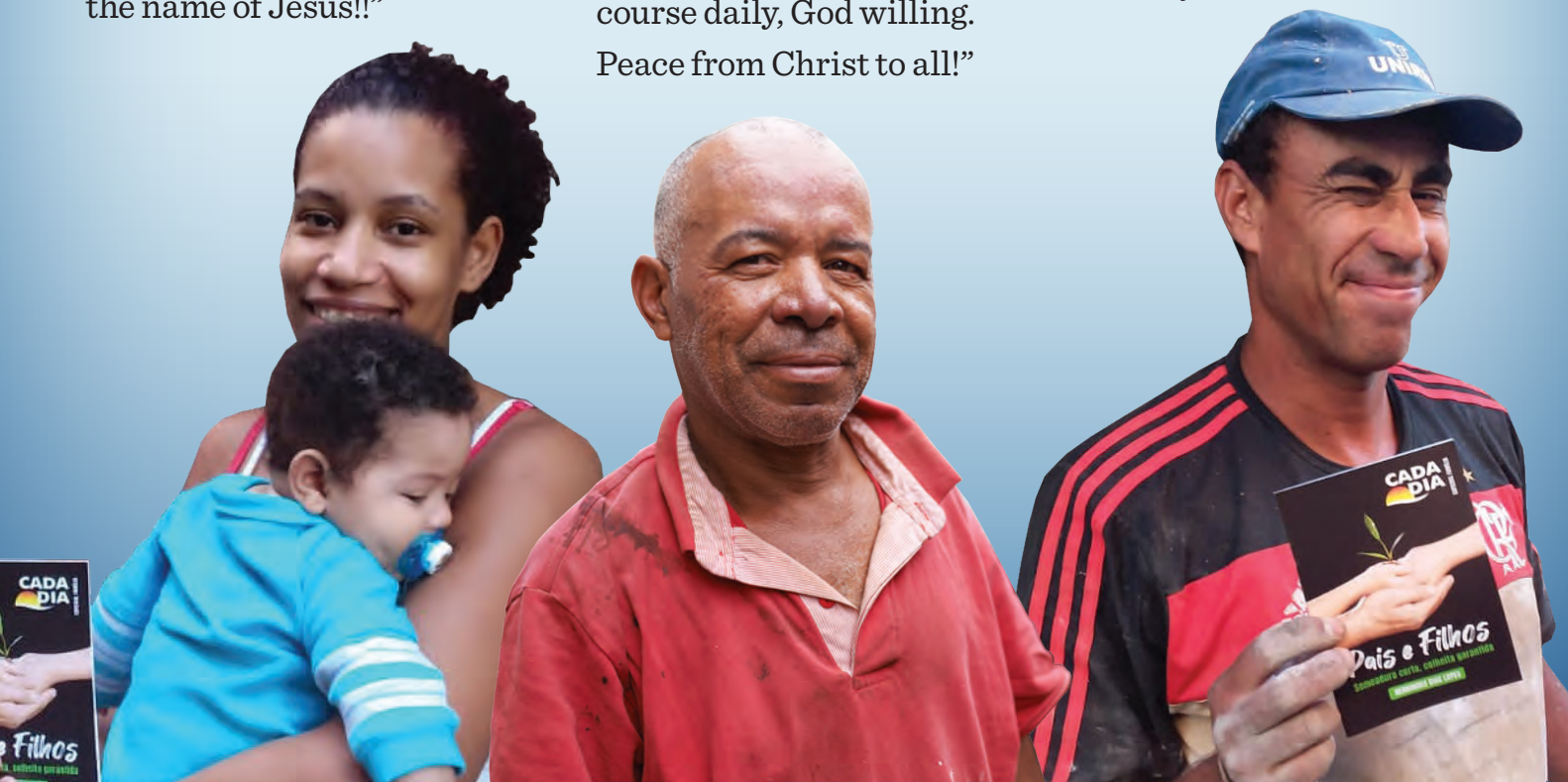
“Excellent classes! May the Lord kindle this richly, and be faithful and set on fire in the name of Jesus!!”

Marcus Lima:

“What a lesson this is! From this class on, I will follow the course daily, God willing. Peace from Christ to all!”

Antonio Cabral:

“I'm grateful to God for these studies, as it is of great importance for today.”



**ReFrame
Ministries**

is the new name of
Back to God Ministries International
ReFrameMinistries.org

Scan for more stories of the CRC's
work in Brazil through ReFrame



Mounds of Mountains

HAVE YOU EVER WONDERED what it would be like to stand at the top of a mountain? Maybe you have gone hiking on a steep hill or have seen snow-capped mountain peaks from an airplane. The earth is filled with hills, valleys, and mountain ranges that are all uniquely different. Here are some cool facts about mountains!

How Are Mountains Formed?

Some mountains are formed when tectonic plates (huge slabs of rock in the earth's crust) push against each other over a long period of time, like the ridges that are made when you push opposite ends of a dish towel together on a table. The Himalayan mountains in Asia are an example of mountains formed from tectonic plates.

Volcanic mountains are formed from melted rock that starts deep underground. When the melted rock (called magma) breaks through the surface of the earth, it is called lava. The lava cools and forms into volcanic rock that over time forms into a volcanic mountain. Mount Fuji in Japan is an example of a volcanic mountain.

The Tallest Mountains in the World

Mount Everest is part of the Himalayan mountains. It straddles the border between Nepal and China. It is usually named the tallest mountain in the world, standing 29,032 feet (8,849 meters) above sea level. "Above sea level" means how tall something is compared to the average level of the world's oceans. Some people say that the Mauna Kea mountain in Hawaii is the tallest mountain in the world if you measure from its base, which is on the floor of the Pacific Ocean. By that measurement it is about 33,496 feet (10,210 meters) tall!



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.

Cool Mountain Animal Facts

There are lots of animals that make their homes in mountain ranges around the world. These animals include the snow leopards in the Himalayas, spectacled bears in the Andes Mountains of South America, mountain goats in North American mountains, and so many more!


Did You Know?

- » Snow leopards have wide paws, allowing them to walk easily on snow without sinking—the perfect snowshoes!
- » Andean (spectacled) bears are omnivores. They eat berries, grasses, bulbs, cactus flowers, rodents, and even birds.
- » A female mountain goat is called a nanny, a male is a billy, and young goats are called kids!

Our Mighty Creator

Mountains are wonderful parts of creation that show the power of God. There are many Bible verses that mention mountains, like Psalm 95:4:

In his hand are the depths of
the earth,
and the mountain peaks
belong to him.

The next time you see a spectacular mountain range, don't forget to praise God for his mighty power and strength! 

The New Wave of Christian Fiction by Authors of Color

WHENEVER I GOT SICK growing up, my Christian bookseller dad would bring home a fresh bag of novels for me to read as I convalesced—his version of chicken noodle soup. I continue to read some Christian fiction as part of my job as Mixed Media editor of *The Banner* (along with nonfiction and mainstream books). Recently I realized there is a glaring gap in Christian fiction: books written by people of color.

A voracious reader from my church, an older Black woman named Rita, opened my eyes. We were talking about books when she said something that stopped me in my tracks: “I sure do wish there were more Christian novels written by Black authors,” she said, sighing. I recommended anything by my friend Robin Pearson and then fell silent, wishing I could think of more choices.

Thankfully, when I dug deeper I discovered a growing number of titles by BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and people of color) authors being released by major Christian publishers such as Baker, Tyndale, and Thomas Nelson.

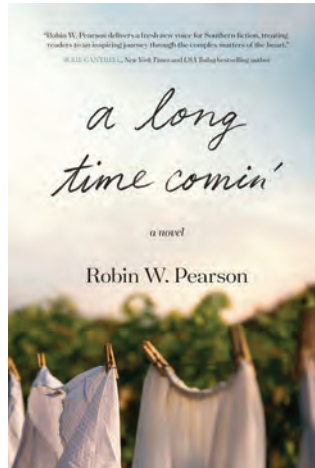
The bad news is that these publishers are behind their mainstream counterparts in this area. But I do see a genuine effort to catch up, and I have been impressed with the books I’ve read so far. Each month I try to read one classic, one new book that everyone is talking about, one book from my “unread” shelf, and one by an author of color. The last category is my favorite because I relish learning from other perspectives, cultures, and experiences.

I challenge *Banner* readers who love to read books too to mix up their reading rotation by intentionally choosing novels by BIPOC authors. Here are a few of my favorites, all published recently except Tessa Afshar’s *Pearl in the Sand*, which came out in 2010 but was rereleased in 2020. **B**



Lorilee Craker, a native of Winnipeg, Man., lives in Grand Rapids, Mich. 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.

If you like contemporary family dramas:



Robin W. Pearson (*A Long Time Comin'*) is a top-drawer storyteller who won a Christy Award for her first novel.

In her followup, *Till I Want No More*, Pearson offers readers a savory story of one young woman and the secrets that threaten to upend her carefully balanced life. I reveled in this story and its exuberant characters. Families can be as complex as heirloom recipes, and Pearson captures all the love, care, and flaws of a big, boisterous family. Watch for her newest novel, *Walking in Tall Weeds*, set to release in July 2022. (Tyndale)

If you like historical fiction:



When Stars Rain Down, Angela Jackson-Brown’s evocative novel about race relations in 1930s small-town

Georgia, reminded me of *The Help*, which was loved by readers but criticized for playing into the white-savior narrative. *When Stars Rain Down* is told through the lens of Opal, a Black teenager who works as a domestic along with her grandmother, Birdie, in the home of Miss Peggy, a boss and a friend. Tensions ignite when the Ku Klux Klan descends on the community and unspoken codes of conduct are revealed in this post-Reconstruction-era town. A haunting, empathetic, and page-turning read, this book is often recommended by Chris Jager, the fiction book buyer at Baker Book House, the retail arm of Baker Publishing in Grand Rapids, Mich. “Reading this novel put me in that character’s shoes and allowed me to experience something I never, ever would have (otherwise),” she said. (Thomas Nelson)

If you like biblical fiction:



After Tyndale sent me a pre-release copy of *Jewel of the Nile*, I became a big fan of author Tessa Afshar, who is of Iranian heritage. In a testament to

the power of fiction, I came to adore the Ethiopian eunuch, a major character in this rich and engrossing book about the ancient kingdom of Cush (Ethiopia) and its queen, Candace. Afshar was planning to write a novel centered around Philip the Evangelist, who is a character here, but changed her mind when a Black fan wrote her asking when she would write a book about a character who looked like her. Chariline of Cush is the central character in a story that entranced me and had me Googling ancient kingdoms deep into the night. I was also captivated by *Pearl in the Sand* (Moody), Afshar's first book, which tells the gripping story of Rahab, one of my favorite biblical characters before I read this and even more so after.

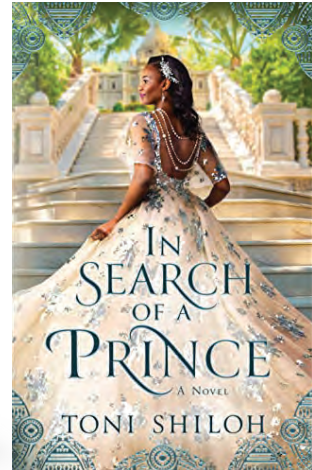
If you like mysteries:



Nonfiction author Patricia Raybon's debut novel, a historical mystery set in 1920s Denver, caught the attention of no less than NBA icon Steph

Curry, who chose *All That Is Secret* as his online book club pick for March 2022. It's a game of "fortunately/unfortunately" for main character Annalee Spain, a Black theologian who is struggling to make ends meet teaching at a Bible college in Chicago when she is called back to her hometown of Denver to try to solve her father's cold-case murder. Unfortunately, 1920s Denver is a city ruled by the KKK, and danger follows Annalee as she tracks clues in her undercover position as a maid in the home of a rich politician. Annalee is winsome, fun, and intrepid, and I loved her obsession with Sherlock Holmes. Raybon is off to a strong start with her planned series featuring Annalee as a sleuth. In the words of the *Denver Post*, "(Annalee) is a welcome addition to a genre that is dominated by white women and hard-boiled men." (Tyndale)

If you like romance:



In Search of a Prince, by Toni Shiloh, is a retelling of Meg Cabot's young adult series *The Princess Diaries*. Chris Jager often recommends

this book to readers searching for a breezy and relaxing beach read, and plunging into surprise Princess Brielle Adebayo's enchanting world, I could totally see why. Brielle, a teacher in New York City, is shocked to find out her late father was heir to the throne of an island kingdom in Africa, which in turn makes her heir to the throne. Complicating matters is the fact that she must marry before her coronation, or the crown will pass to another. Complete with an intriguing cast of villains and allies, including Brielle's ailing grandfather, the king, *In Search of a Prince* delights and charms as it keeps you up at night turning the pages through lots of clever twists and turns. (Bethany House/Baker)



**What Do Immigration and
Refugee Resettlement
Have to Do With the Gospel?**

By Cassie Westrate and Megan Herrema

Salman* moved to Berlin, Germany, from Iran. Like many people in Iran, he came from a Muslim background, but one of the first things he sought out was WillkommensGemeinde—a church that Resonate Global Mission missionaries David Kromminga and Mary Buteyn started with and for newcomers to the country.

Hundreds of millions of people in our world are on the move every year. Like Salman, some are forced from their homes because of war or persecution. Some are in search of education, job opportunities, medical care, or what they hope will be a better life for themselves and their families.

How does this movement of people throughout the world affect the spread of the gospel? As Christian Reformed churches, ministries, and missionaries extend a warm welcome to newcomers in their communities, they've had opportunities to share the love of Christ in ways that might not have been possible before.

Extending a Warm Welcome to Newcomers

It's right there in the name: translated into English, "WillkommensGemeinde" means "The Welcoming Church." The community worships in beginner-level German and seeks to warmly embrace newcomers in Berlin.

"We want to mirror the hospitality of God," Kromminga said. "God welcomed us into existence. God welcomes us into a redeemed relationship with him. We want to mirror that on a human level—that you are truly welcome here because our God is a welcoming God."

When Salman first visited WillkommensGemeinde, he was greeted at the door. "I suspect he was looking for a community that speaks German at his level," Buteyn said. "He just hung around with us, and there were some other Iranians too."

Salman was interested in the gospel and joined a class Kromminga was leading for Muslims interested in Christianity. In Iran, it would have been dangerous for Salman to show interest in the gospel. Converts from Islam to Christianity are at risk of persecution from the government and, in some cases, from family, friends, and the community. But in Germany, Salman did not face the same risk.

Tens of thousands of newcomers live in Berlin. That's why Resonate missionaries David Kromminga and Mary Buteyn started a church plant with and for refugees.

The coronavirus pandemic forced Kromminga to stop meeting as a group after just a few classes. Instead, Kromminga started taking walks with Salman and talked one-on-one.

One day Kromminga asked Salman, "Do you have any questions?"

"I think I'm already a Christian," Salman said. "I think I've believed this for quite some time."

On Easter 2021, Salman was baptized, and he remains a committed member of the church to this day.

Kromminga and Buteyn witness an openness to Christianity every day in their ministry and community.

"I think people who are displaced and on the move are open to new relationships that long-settled people are not open to, and there's also a willingness to think about things differently," Kromminga said.

"There's also a huge hunger for community," said Buteyn. She and Kromminga note that extending a warm welcome to newcomers like Salman is just as important as the classes, worship, and prayer gatherings they lead.

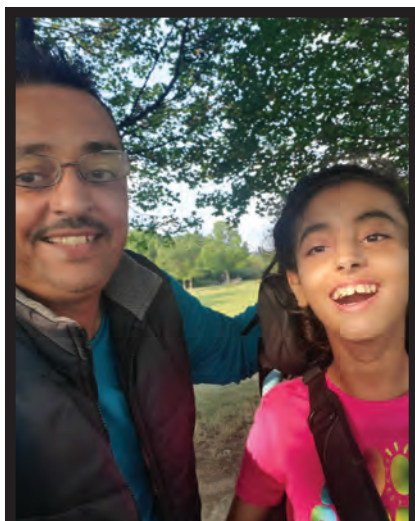
"Our church is simply radically hospitable," said Buteyn.

Advocating for Families

When Mahmoud* and his daughter Rayya* came to Canada in 2018 to seek medical treatment for Rayya, they had to leave the rest of their family in Yemen. The medical visa by which they came to Canada allowed for only one parent to accompany a child seeking treatment. With violence and danger affecting everyday life back in Yemen, they claimed refugee status soon after arrival. Mahmoud and Rayya connected with Open Homes Hamilton, an organization that



Resonate missionaries Mary Buteyn and David Kromminga



Mahmoud and Rayya (names have been changed) were reunited with family in February 2022 after local churches joined them in advocacy.

works with churches to support refugee claimants by offering home-based hospitality. Soon Mahmoud began working toward obtaining permanent resident status so he could bring the rest of his family to Canada.

That's when Meadowlands CRC entered the story. Several volunteers with Open Homes Hamilton attended Meadowlands CRC in Ancaster, Ont. When they heard of Mahmoud and Rayya's story, they invited their church

to advocate alongside them as they worked toward permanent resident status. To do that, they participated in a Faith in Action workshop led by Cindy Stover, Canada Justice Mobilizer with the CRCNA.

As part of the workshop, church members sent letters to their member of parliament in which they encouraged the MP and his office to do all they could to assist the processing of Mahmoud's application for permanent residence so he could bring the rest of his family to Canada.

"The Faith in Action workshop was designed so that congregations can take it and adapt it to the justice issues that are priorities for them," Stover said. "In this case it meant that Meadowlands CRC was able to do direct advocacy for Mahmoud and Rayya and their family."

Soon after the workshop, some of the people who had sent letters got a response from the MP's office, and some even received a phone call from the MP himself. "The Spirit moved in many ways from there to see the family united," said Stover.

One of those ways was through the providential hospitality of Jeffrey and Melissa Bos at the Al Amana Centre, a Christian ecumenical and interfaith organization in Oman supported by the CRCNA that works to promote peace and tolerance among Muslims and Christians around the world.

As the final step in their paperwork process, Mahmoud's wife Aisha* and their children had to stop at the Canadian embassy in Oman to receive their visas. A couple at Meadowlands CRC knew the Bos family, so they reached out to let them know about the family. When Aisha and her children arrived in Muscat, they were able to stay at the Al Amana Centre while completing their final paperwork.


In February 2022, exactly one year after the churches joined them in advocacy, Aisha and her children reunited with Mahmoud and Rayya in Canada. "Reuniting with my family was the happiest moment of our lives," Mahmoud said. "Thank you, thank you, thank you to everyone who stood by us."

Today Mahmoud and his family are enjoying life in Canada together. "The kids are enrolled in school, and though the weather was difficult when they arrived, they are glad for warmer temperatures now," said Danielle Steenwyk-Rowaan of Open Homes Hamilton. "It has been challenging to live in a one-bedroom apartment while they wait for a larger one to open up, but they were so happy to go through Ramadan together as a family recently."

Stover mentioned the importance of recognizing God's hand moving in multiple different communities to work toward the reunification of Mahmoud's family.

"We had no idea that we would get such an immediate response from the MP's office," she said. "We had no idea there was another church in Mississauga praying about this at the same time. It's a reminder of how God can use our everyday work and bring others in to build on it to see miracles happen!"

As people move throughout the world, the church can play an important role in helping to meet the needs of immigrants and refugees. Salman found a welcoming faith community where he learned about the grace and hope of Christ. Mahmoud's family was able to be reunited.

"If the church can be a healthy Christian community," Kromminga said, "that can be an empowering thing for somebody who has left or walked away—or had to run from—their home." 

*Names have been changed to protect privacy.

**Elements of this story originally appeared in the February 2022 CRC News article "Prayer and Advocacy Help Reunite a Family."

From the Sermon to the Sidewalk: Worship Renewal Grant Sparks Weeklong Scripture Engagement

FOR ONE IOWA CHURCH, a Vital Worship grant started a congregation-wide initiative to expand Sunday worship to the other six days of the week.

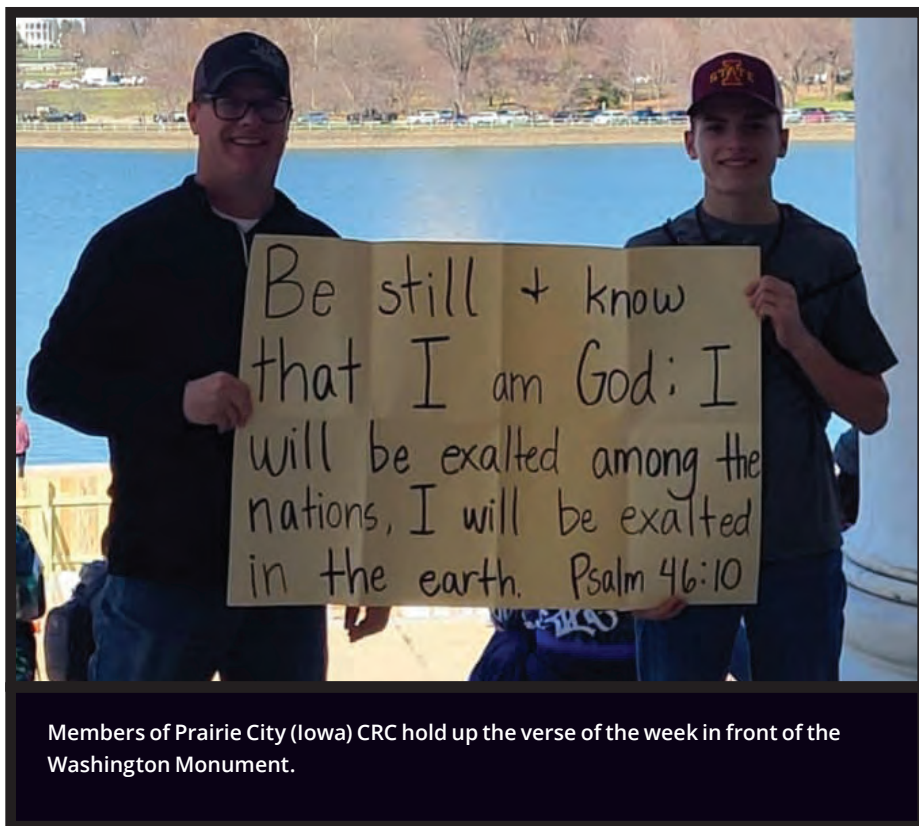
Two years ago, a group of ministry leaders and congregation members at Prairie City (Iowa) Christian Reformed Church wrote a grant proposal centered around finding ways to help members engage worship throughout the week.

“One of those ways was to give them a memory verse each week,” said Matt McClure, pastor at Prairie City CRC. “But thinking about it, memory verses are sometimes intimidating, and there’s not a lot of participation, either, unless we want to come up and recite it in front of everyone, which is not fun for many.”

Instead of memory verses, the worship grant team invited the congregation to engage a “verse of the week” that tied to the previous Sunday’s sermon and provided an interactive way for members to dwell on the verse. Activities included putting the verse somewhere it would be seen frequently, changing phone backgrounds to a picture of the verse, reading the verse at every meal, and using chalk to write out the verse of the week on driveways or sidewalks.

“When my kids and some other kids in the congregation did the sidewalk chalk idea, some of the kids weren’t old enough to write yet,” McClure said. “They drew pictures of what the verse of the week would look like on the sidewalk all the way to the front of the (church) door.”

Along the way, congregation members began to contribute their own creative ideas for engaging the verse of the week. As spring break approached, one member suggested a competition to see how far families traveling for



Members of Prairie City (Iowa) CRC hold up the verse of the week in front of the Washington Monument.

spring break could bring the verse of the week.

The verse of the week team took the idea and added specifics to the challenge: the three members or families who brought the verse the furthest and submitted a picture of themselves with a readable verse would win gift certificates to the local ice cream store.

As they traveled, families took pictures of themselves holding up poster board or a cellphone with the verse of the week on it in places including in front of the Washington Monument in Washington, D.C.; on a hiking trail near Las Vegas, Nev.; in the Assembly Chamber of the Wisconsin Capitol; and next to a statue of Frank Sinatra at the Hollywood Wax Museum in Branson, Mo. The church then shared the pictures to its Facebook page. That’s when Faith Formation Ministries regional catalyzer Trudy

Ash noticed and reached out to McClure to learn more and celebrate the creative project.

“These kinds of church-wide activities provide opportunities for families to share this experience with other families and across generations,” Ash said. “I love how they chose activities that appealed to the different senses and to different interests. This makes room for people to find something they can connect with. I also see these activities providing opportunities to try something new and maybe find a new faith-building practice or habit that could follow them for many years.” 

—Megan Herrema,
Faith Formation Ministries

The View from Here

Whatever You Do, Do It for the Glory of God

AS I LOOK BACK on my time as executive director of the Christian Reformed Church, it seems improbable that so much has happened in the life of our church and denomination in such a short time (February 2020 to June 2022).

The period began with a structural and organizational crisis we had to navigate. There was the resignation of the former executive director and the need to restructure the CRCNA to comply with Canadian charitable law. As this work began, we found ourselves in the midst of the global COVID-19 pandemic. This triggered the cancellation of numerous ministry activities, including synodical gatherings, for two years. These cancellations limited face-to-face conversation and exacerbated latent tensions within congregations and our various ministry bodies. In addition, our sense of peace was rocked by the re-emergence of long-simmering racial tensions.

As all of these events unfolded, by God's grace and his leading we were able to respond—and I believe we did so prayerfully and effectively.

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, denominational staff reached out to virtually every congregation and solicited input as to how we could help. Out of this came the implementation of the Church Engagement Fund, which gave grants to churches with new needs because of the pandemic. We discovered that though individually we experienced loss and lack, as a community we could experience the abundance of God together.

In the midst of our organizational stresses, the Council of Delegates, the CRCNA Canada Corporation, and denominational staff collaborated to design an organizational solution that has the potential to rebuild familial relationships across the U.S.-Canada border as well as insulate the new

Office of the General Secretary from falling prey to similar structural and relational fissures in the future. The new structure also has a framework to enfold diaspora churches as they seek affiliation with the CRC. The approach incrementally unfolded as we prayerfully depended on God.

At the time that I'm writing this, Synod 2022 has just ended. That body addressed key issues of interest to the church, including human sexuality and racism. Synod 2022 codified the 1973 traditional position on human sexuality as being confessional and reiterated the fact that white supremacy and ongoing systemic racism are anathema to the gospel. Similar to organizational restructuring and pandemic pivoting, both of these decisions have real impact on congregations and individuals. They have the potential to create division within the church and will require prayerful conversation and engagement for unity to be maintained.

At one point during Synod 2022 deliberations, one delegate said these decisions are only the start of a conversation. I pray that we will continue to listen to and talk with each other throughout these times of transition. Our gospel witness depends on it.

I will retire from my position June 30. Before I stepped in as executive director, I spent five years serving as director of ministries and administration. In these seven and a half years of service to the denomination, I have seen the hand of God guiding us toward becoming a more inclusive, focused, and effective denomination.

With God's help, we addressed the consolidation of Home Missions and World Missions into Resonate Global Mission to better prepare us for overall mission in the global diaspora that is now our reality; we joined forces with

the Reformed Church in America to create Vibrant Congregations, a new ministry to ensure that churches can be periodically renewed by a prayerful and contemplative process that fully engages their leadership; and we developed a new ministry plan—Our Journey 2025, which allows the entire denomination to focus on four milestones, the first of which is prayer and spiritual disciplines.

Of all the initiatives we have done, I believe our focus on prayer and spiritual disciplines has been most critical in helping us navigate difficult times. I pray that this focus will continue well beyond my tenure.

I also recognize that as I leave this position, there are many other challenges, known and unknown, coming for our church. We must address these issues as we have always done—on our knees before God.

“And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord's people” (Eph. 6:18).

It is only through such prayer that our denomination, congregations, ministries, and agencies will be able to continue to live into the aspirational vision statement of the CRCNA:

The Christian Reformed Church is a diverse family of healthy congregations, assemblies, and ministries expressing the good news of God's kingdom that transforms lives and communities worldwide.

To God be the glory!



Colin P. Watson Sr. retired June 30 from the position of executive director of the Christian Reformed Church in North America. He is a member of Madison Square Christian Reformed Church in Grand Rapids, Mich.

Supporting Diversity in the CRCNA

“IN PREVIOUS GENERATIONS, the Christian Reformed Church sent missionaries to faraway places such as China, Argentina, Nigeria, and Indonesia,” said Reggie Smith, director of the Office of Diversity for the CRCNA. “Now the nations are coming to North America and settling in places such as Toronto, Seattle, Miami, and Houston. These diaspora groups are starting spiritual communities and looking for fellow partners with theological connections that fit their cultural homes.”

This is why the CRCNA started the Office of Diversity in 2019, and it is the impetus for Smith’s work. While the Office of Race Relations educates and equips congregations and members to dismantle the causes and effects of racism, the Office of Diversity supports this work by coming alongside leaders and churches from diverse backgrounds to help orient them to the CRCNA and to help the CRCNA benefit from their expertise and experiences.

“In the New Testament,” Smith said, “Pentecost marked the beginning of the church—the growth of the kingdom of God through the contagious outpouring of the Holy Spirit. The birth of the church began with the Spirit changing from the old to the new. In today’s church, the Pentecost fire has been active among groups such as our Latino brothers and sisters.”

Under the leadership of Consejo Latino, an active network of Hispanic ministry leaders within the CRC, a joint agreement led the way for 25 churches in Venezuela to join the Christian Reformed Church. Through training and discipleship, the churches officially joined Classis California South in 2022.



As director of the Office of Diversity, Reggie Smith supports diverse CRCNA leaders in a variety of ways, including speaking at a Korean pastor’s conference in San Diego, Calif.

Smith and the Office of Diversity also support leaders representing Korean, African American, First Nations, Chinese, and Southeast Asian and Pacific Islander communities. Together, these groups represent about one-third of all CRCNA churches.

Smith supports these groups in a variety of ways. He attends gatherings such as the San Diego conference for Korean ministry leaders. He advocates for the groups with senior denominational leadership. He connects groups to the CRCNA translations team to produce materials and connects them to denominational resources that might be of use. This includes pathways to candidacy, information about affiliation with the CRCNA,

tools for various congregational needs, and more.

“The Christian Reformed Church is on the cusp of a shift that might change the future forever,” Smith said. “I believe the Holy Spirit has been nudging us from fearful isolation into engaging hospitality. This is what the Pentecostal fire has been up to in the last 25 years. Let’s not fight the Spirit, but offer ourselves and help stoke the fire.” **B**

—Kristen deRoo VanderBerg,
CRC Communications

God of the ... Ellipses

SOLYANA COELHO in Brazil says she regularly thinks of God as the author and editor of her life.

“Our God is an expert in putting ellipses where we believe there should be a full stop,” Coelho adds.

Ellipses help us know that something is so important that it can't wait until the next sentence to be mentioned. Coelho's birth story contained ellipses:

When Coelho was born, doctors told her mother that Coelho would only have a few minutes before she would die ... but they were wrong.

Today, Coelho is 25 years old. Though she defied doctors' expectations by living more than a few minutes, she had a long and difficult journey growing up.

Born without arms and with two malformed legs, Coelho had many surgeries over the years as well as near-death experiences caused by her condition. Through all of those trials, she maintained a positive attitude and earned a degree in psychology.

Now Coelho has dedicated her life to sharing why she believes God saved her. Coelho is a gifted public speaker and a commissioned missionary. She regularly shares her story at churches across Brazil's many denominations.

“God lifted me up to tell my story,” Coelho says. “Many people ask me how I can be happy with so many limitations, but the truth is that happiness isn't an equation, and it doesn't depend on any condition.”



Solyana Coelho recently committed to returning to school to earn a second degree, this one in theology. As she continues her studies, pray that she will grow in her ability to share God's Word.

Encouraging Coelho

As Coelho began her missionary work, she looked for inspiration and ways to grow in her faith. That's when she found videos from Rev. Hernandes Dias Lopes, ReFrame Ministries' Portuguese ministry leader.

Like Coelho, Lopes regularly visits churches across Brazil to share sermons and shorter biblical messages. Most of these messages, along with devotional programs and biblical videos, are posted on YouTube, where tens of thousands of people watch each one. These videos have become an integral part of Coelho's devotional life and understanding of the Bible.

“Pastor Hernandes is one of the greatest spiritual references of our generation and one of the people I admire most in the world,” says Coelho.

More Than a Coincidence

Coelho had been hoping to meet Lopes to share her own story and to thank him for his inspiration to continue sharing God's Word. After narrowly missing one another a few times when they were scheduled to speak at the same churches just weeks apart, Coelho recently got her wish, and the two were scheduled to be at the same church on the same day.

“I'm sure this encounter didn't happen by chance, but rather as a precious answer to prayer,” said Coelho after meeting Lopes. “Our meeting, so special, is another proof—for myself—that God cares about everything that is important to me.” ^B

—Brian Clark,
ReFrame Ministries

Delegates Encouraged to Be Inspired

DELEGATES AND ADVISERS to Synod 2022 were surprised when they returned to their places on the plenary floor after one break. Specially wrapped KitKat bars awaited them with an important message.

“You deserve a break!” the wrapper said. “Church work can be draining. Get filled up! Join believers from across the continent at Inspire 2022, August 4-6 in Tinley Park, Illinois. Be refreshed through meaningful worship, energized by plenary speakers, and equipped at a ministry expo and a choice of 80 workshops on topics relevant to your congregation and community. Find fellowship with Christian Reformed brothers and sisters from across North America. Take a break. Be inspired.”

Each chocolate bar also included a unique coupon code to give the synod delegate or someone from their congregation 50% off the registration fee to this summer’s event.

“Inspire happens only once every two years and has so much potential to rejuvenate people in their service to their local church,” said Colin Watson, now-retired executive director of the Christian Reformed Church. “This year’s synod delegates have had to carry so much stress and responsibility; we wanted to encourage them to seize this opportunity. We also recognized that they might not be able to get additional time away this summer, so the code is transferable to someone else that they think might benefit from attending.”

This will be the third Inspire event hosted by the CRCNA. The first took place in Detroit, Mich., in 2017. The second was in Windsor, Ont., in 2019. Inspire 2021 was postponed by the

COVID-19 pandemic, but many of its plenary speakers and workshops have been carried over to the 2022 event.

“We’d love to see every CRC congregation and classis represented at Inspire,” Watson said. “Right now, we have people registered who represent five Canadian provinces and 20 states, so we are well on our way. Hopefully these synod coupons will encourage even more people to attend.”

To learn more or to register, visit crcna.org/Inspire. 

—Kristen deRoo VanderBerg,
CRC Communications



Synod 2022 delegates learned that inspiration can come in delicious forms. A specially wrapped candy bar invited them to attend Inspire 2022.

DEADLINES: 8/1/22 September; 9/12/22 October. Subject to availability. Details online.

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Church Positions Available

BETHANY CRC IN BELLFLOWER, CA is looking for a part time Children's Ministry Director to join us as we connect people to Jesus and to one another. For information about this position please go to www.bethanycrc.org.

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 neighbour. Send questions and resumes to Search@hopefellowship.ca

HIRING FULL TIME PASTOR- Bethel CRC in Lansing, IL is seeking an executive pastor to support the mission and vision of our church

by mentoring and working in concert with our current pastor to go and make disciples of all nations so that God will be exalted among the nations. This pastor will share responsibilities equally in a co-pastoring model. The ministry responsibilities include preaching, discipleship, and church administration. In addition to this, the executive pastor will have primary oversight and responsibility for administration, adult ministry, evangelism, and missions. Please contact the search committee at pastorsearch@discoverbethel.org. Job description and church profile are available on the CRCNA portal.

INTERIM ASSOCIATE PASTOR Bethel CRC Listowel, Ontario is seeking a part time Interim Associate Pastor. Request job description or submit your resume to wilmar.bakker@gmail.com

INTERIM PASTOR Riverside CRC in Wellandport, Ontario is seeking an interim pastor to fill in during our vacancy. We are looking for a pastor to help out with engaging preaching, visiting, and shepherding our congregation, so we can give our search committee the time to find a new full-time pastor for our church. We are open to looking at full or part-time for a specified period of time. Riverside CRC is a vibrant & engaged multi-generational congregation in a rural setting in the Niagara Peninsula. If interested or for more information please contact riversideclerk@gmail.com

MINISTER OF WORSHIP AND LEADERSHIP Plymouth Heights CRC (Grand Rapids, MI) seeks a full-time pastor gifted in preaching, leadership, and fellowship to join our ministry team. We invite interested pastors to learn more and apply on our website: www.phrcrc.org.

PART TIME INTERIM PASTOR First CRC Toronto seeks a part-time pastor to fill a 12 month parental leave commencing Sept 1, 2022. We are an urban, diverse, affirming, engaged, community-focused congregation. We seek a pastor who shares our vision that we are all unconditionally loved by God, and who desires to walk with us, leading us in prayer and preaching during our current pastor's leave. Contact nicholas.terpstra@utoronto.ca for more information and to submit your application and resume. Deadline 10 July 2022.

Congregational Announcements

REV. HANK BYLSTRA RETIRES Heritage Fellowship CRC of Brampton, ON gives thanks to God for Rev. Hank Bylstra and his 18 years of

faithful and loving service in ministry among us and our community at Holland Christian Homes. We pray God's choicest blessings upon Hank and Connie in their retirement! "Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good. His love endures forever." (Psalm 136:1)

Wedding Anniversary

WEDDING ANNIVERSARY 73 YEARS

VANDENBOSCH, Alvin and Rose celebrated their 73rd anniversary on June 17. They turn 95 on June 22 and September 7. Their family is grateful for their Christian presence in our lives. 301 5th Ave N. Apt 509 Edgerton MN 56128

WEDDING ANNIVERSARY 65 YEARS

GREIDANUS, Sidney and Marie hope to celebrate their 65th wedding anniversary on August 21 2022, thankful to God for having been their faithful Shepherd (wedding text Psalm 23). Much love from their children, Renee and John Vandermeer, Sheri and Frank Huizinga, Nathan and Heather Greidanus, 10 grandchildren, and 6 great-grandchildren

JANSEN, Peter and Betty. With thanks to God, Pete and Betty will celebrate their 65th wedding anniversary on July 22, 2022. Celebrating with them are their children Chris (Evie), Theona (Dan) Cooke, Kevin (Barb); grandchildren Liz (Jason), Chris (Leah), Katelyn (Cam), Brittany, Joel (Allison), Kelly (Graham), Jeff (Ellen), David (Jenna), and Olivia; and 8 great grandchildren. Throughout their lives, they have exemplified their wedding text, "As for me and my house, we will serve the LORD" Joshua 24:15.

VAN TIL, Paul and Linda celebrate 65 Years of marriage on June 28, 2022. Their children: Kent, Kim, Kevin and Kris, along with spouses, grandchildren and great-grandchildren thank God for the love shown to each other, family, friends, church and school.

WEDDING ANNIVERSARY 70 YEARS

NYHOFF, Kenneth Merle & Rose (Koops) of 610 Ross St., Downs, KS 67437, will celebrate 70 years of marriage on July 24, 2022. Their children: Ken (Beth) Nyhoff, Mike Nyhoff, Greg (Cindy) Nyhoff, and Kathy Nyhoff, along with their 8 grandchildren and 8 great-grandchildren celebrate with them for God's faithfulness and continued blessings in their lives.

VAN DER WIELE, Sam & Mary and their children, Louann (deceased) & Jim, John & Laurel,

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Dave & Ruth, and Bob & Kimberly, invite you to a 70th wedding anniversary open house on August 21 from 3-5 PM at Waterford Place, 1725 Port Sheldon St, Jenison, MI 49428. Greetings to Sam & Mary may also be sent to Apt. B403 at this address. Our family is grateful for God's faithfulness and love.

VANDER KLOK, Roy and Marjorie (Tanis) at 1700 21st Ave. W. #304, Bradenton FL 34205 along with their 3 children & spouses, 11 grandchildren, 17 great grandchildren give thanks to God for His faithfulness in 70 years of marriage on Aug. 29, 2022.

Birthdays

BIRTHDAY 95 YEARS



LOIS (POPPEN) HANNINK anticipates celebrating 95 years of faithful service to her Lord on July 9. Her children, Addi Moore, Rick and Elaine (Bosch) Hannink, & Julie and John Kruithof, invite all to shower her with cards at 2111 Raybrook Dr SE; Apt 4002; Grand Rapids, MI 49546. She enjoys her 8 grandchildren and 8 great-grandchildren immensely and gives God all the glory.

BIRTHDAY 90 YEARS

IRENE KOK of Pease, MN, will celebrate her 90th birthday on July 31. Irene lives faithfully and joyfully with God and continues to show love to her family, friends, and community. She is treasured for her love, wisdom, and vitality. Her family is thankful to God for her rich and vibrant life.

Obituaries

BOUMA, Norman died on May 28, 2022. He was preceded in death in 2010 by Marian, his wife of 56 years, and in 2022 by his son-in-law Gary Postma. He is survived by his children Rich (Laurie), Randy (Jan), Gayla Postma, Linda (Brad) Chapman; 13 grandchildren. A family funeral was held on June 1, 2022, in Grand Rapids, Mich.

DEROOY, Sylvia Grace, née DeJong, of Sultan, Washington, was peacefully called to heaven on June 11, aged 91. She was predeceased by her husband, Rev. Henry DeRooy, and is survived by her children, Dwight, Sylvia Jean and Dirk, as well as many grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

HOGETERP, Clarence was a loving husband, father, grandfather, brother, and friend. He left this world suddenly on June 3 at age 76. Clarence was preceded in death by his parents, John and Patricia Hogeterp, siblings, Henry, Martha, and Siebe, and his granddaughter, Anneke. He leaves behind his wife Pati, his children, Kevin (Melanie), Kristin, and Joshua (Jessie), grandchildren Jared, Caleb, Tatiana, Nathan, Rowen, and

Winnie as well as his siblings Peter, Rose, and Hazel, sister-in-law Michelle (Tom) and many nieces, nephews, and treasured friends. He was a member of Eastern Avenue CRC in Grand Rapids.



STEENSMA, Judith Priscilla (Vonhof), age 83, May 11, 2022. Survived by her husband James of 62 years, children Andrew (Ann), Molly, Jennifer (Paul) and Priscilla (Doug). A memorial service will be held in Grand Rapids, MI on July 22.



Doc Slik (Jack Van Der Slik) is a colorful memoir from a typical Midwest kid who was nurtured by family, church and Christian schools to become a parent, teacher, professor, author, political commentator and world traveler. God gave Doc Slik a faithful life partner and three adopted children for a zig-zag, up, down and sideways set of life experiences. What is the message? God's love never fails!!

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ROME AND THE AMALFI COAST

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EXPERIENCE PORTUGAL

Sep 25 – Oct 5 | *Bruce & Judy Buursma*

JOURNEY THROUGH THE LAND

Sep 29 – Oct 13 | *Jeff & Karen Blamer*

PAUL'S MISSIONARY JOURNEYS IN GREECE

Oct 6 – Oct 18 | *Dr. Jeffrey A.D. Weima*

NEW YORK: ARTS & CULTURE

Oct 7 – Oct 13 | *Henry Luttkhuizen*

2023 GUIDED ITINERARIES:

FOLLOWING IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF JESUS: ISRAEL & JORDAN

Mar 30 – Apr 11 | *Dr. Jeffrey A.D. Weima*

NETHERLANDS WATERWAY CRUISE

Apr 14 – Apr 23 | *Bruce & Judy Buursma*

ALASKA & DENALI

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STOB, Delores Ann. During the last moments of Thursday night, May 12, 2022, Delores Ann Stob passed from the land of the dying to the land of the living. Her health had been declining; she had become increasingly aware of her

limitations, and each day was a gift to her and to those who loved her deeply. She was ready to meet her Lord and Savior whenever he called her home. Delores leaves behind William Stob, her husband of nearly 70 years, her three daughters: Deanne Dyk (Dean), Tamora Kooy (John) and Carlin Rykse (Russ). She was a grandmother to nine grandchildren and a great-grandmother to sixteen great-grandchildren. Her faith was strong, her witness was vibrant, and her personality was magnetic. She will be missed by all those who knew her. Thank you, Lord, for the gift of this saintly woman. She loved us well. We now commend her to your loving care.

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Giving the Process a Chance

No outcome is guaranteed, but the processes do provide a forum in which the Holy Spirit can show up and change minds.

WHEN I BECAME DIRECTOR of the Offices of Race Relations and Social Justice in 2017, I had no idea what issues of race would surface during my tenure. Through the informed work of friends, I was made aware of a Christian Reformed minister who preached and espoused kinism in his Michigan church in 2019. Kinism teaches that the races should be kept separate in racially pure “religio-ethnic states,” meaning kinism also forbids interracial marriage. I was shocked by the pastor’s social media posts and was curious why his views were not exposed sooner.


As part of my own work, I visited the church and heard the pastor’s views for myself. I began working through the denominational system to make this pastor’s views known because the Christian Reformed Church maintains that “to be in Christ is to be reconciled with one another as a community of racially and ethnically diverse people of God” (*God’s Diverse and Unified Family*, p. 8).

I also worked within the denominational system to address the issue of kinism. Two churches, Washington DC CRC and Hope Community Church-Riverside in California, worked marvelously together to shape overtures to synod inquiring about the heretical teachings of kinism and asking if CRCs in other regions had heard these teachings.

Once at synod, the synodical advisory committee handling the overtures asked me to share my story. I saw thoughtfully engaged members who were concerned that kinism had gained a foothold by using Reformed theology as the basis for preaching and teaching American apartheid as sound doctrine. The chairperson granted me time at synod to share my thoughts when the overtures came up for deliberations.

On the floor of synod, I heard many church leaders confess that kinism was unbiblical and not in keeping with Reformed theology as we understand it. As I watched these brothers and sisters express their shocked anger about this heresy, I was moved to tears.

I was heartened by the overwhelming response that kinism has no place in our pulpits, classrooms, or homes. I came away feeling as if our processes for dealing with tough, complex issues do really work if we give them a chance. No outcome is guaranteed, but the processes do provide a forum in which the Holy Spirit can show up and change minds.

I have two takeaways from the experience. First, I am still perplexed that kinism found fertile ground in any church. Maybe we shouldn’t hesitate to expose behaviors that contradict our biblical and theological principles. This takes courage. All darkness shrinks from the light of truth. Second, we can trust that our assemblies do take seriously the issues before them and deliberate with care and prayer. I believe if given the chance, our processes can produce a church after the heart of God. 



Reginald Smith is the director of diversity for the Christian Reformed Church. He attends Madison Square Church in Grand Rapids, Mich.

Saoirse Prays for Me

It's always a bit nerve wracking to discover a new medical uncertainty.

I'M LEGALLY BLIND in my left eye, although I still have some limited vision in it. I've been partially blind since birth, but it is slowly getting worse. The ophthalmologist is doing all he can to protect the remaining sight and is telling me that, should I lose the right eye for some reason, "a little eyesight is better than none." So he was concerned when, in doing a scan of my eyes, he found a large swelling on the retina of my left eye. He sent me off to a specialist to have it looked at.

It's always a bit nerve wracking to discover a new medical uncertainty. I was concerned. Was it a tumor? Was it growing? Was I going to lose my limited eyesight? The retinal specialist took pictures and asked questions and determined it was not a tumor. The swelling slowly shrank over the next several months, but then suddenly in just six weeks it grew massively bigger and became surrounded by fluid. The doctor suggested a series of injections into the eye. Yes, that's as bad as it sounds.

On the Tuesday before Ash Wednesday I got an injection. That evening I was miserable. The eye was throbbing with pain as the anesthesia slowly wore off. I couldn't sleep. My eye felt like it was on fire and was constantly weeping. I called the doctor when the office opened and they ordered medication to alleviate the pain. Unfortunately, the pharmacy had to order the drops and told me it would take several days to get them. So I suffered.

We had scheduled a socially distanced Ash Wednesday service for the Village Church. In our parking lot, Pastor Mark played worship music, Pastor Eric offered a blessing and administered stickers of ashes, and I manned the communion table, offering bread and juice in small individual containers to the congregants as they came

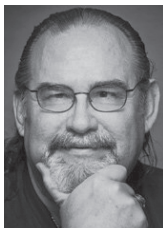
and went. We projected the song lyrics onto the church wall. It was beautiful. My eye throbbed the entire time.

In the church we have a chair we call the Healing Chair where people sit to be prayed over. As we cleaned up after the service, I asked Mark and Eric to pray over me. I sat in the Healing Chair and waited while they finished hauling in equipment and putting things away. Three-year-old Saoirse, wearing her little mask, came over and asked, "Pastor Rod, why are you sitting in the Healing Chair?"

I explained that my eye was hurting badly and that I needed prayer. She listened and nodded her head. She sat down on a nearby chair, bowed her head, stretched out her hand toward me, and prayed, "Dear Jesus, please make Pastor Rod's bad eye better." I was choked up with tears of gratitude in the midst of tears from the pain.

I had a beautiful night of rest and woke up Thursday morning pain-free. Pastor Mark and I normally breakfast together over Zoom on Thursdays, and Saoirse loves to pop in to regale me with stories and her plans for the day. When she answered my Zoom call, I told her my eye didn't hurt anymore and thanked her for her prayer. She beamed with delight and shouted, "Daddy, Pastor Rod's eye doesn't hurt any more! Jesus fixed it!"

He did. I love that he hears the prayers of 3-year-olds. **B**



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

Let's end #AbleismAtChurch

Join us (virtually)
August 11 & 12, 11 am–2 pm EDT

for an important training for all church leaders:
Let's end #AbleismAtChurch.

We will explore what ableism is and consider ways we can reduce the impact of ableism in churches.

There is no charge for this event, which is open to everyone, but registration is required.

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Keynote speakers:

Jasmine Duckworth & Chantal Huinink

Day 2: How can churches overcome ableism?

Keynote speakers:

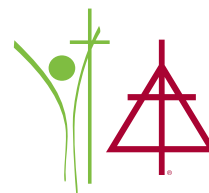
Lynn Swedberg & Melinda Baber

What is ableism?

Definitions of ableism are complex and layered:

- Attitudes, actions, and/or circumstances that devalue people because they have a disability or are perceived as having a disability.
- Intentional or unintentional discrimination or oppression of disabled individuals.
- Anything that positions a person without a disability over a person with a disability, solely based on disability or differences in ability.
- Attitudes, actions, or systems that consider a person with a disability as inferior.

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