

# BANNER

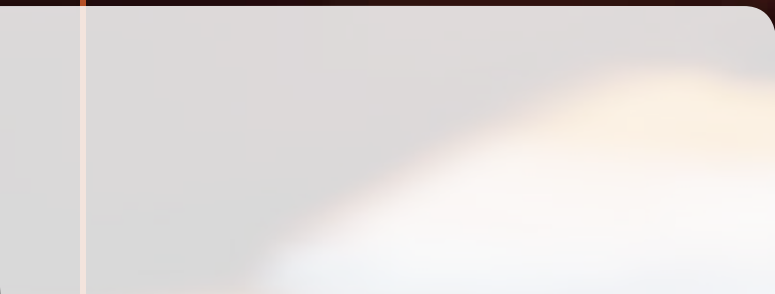
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# BANNER

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# In All Honesty

**NEVER SAW ANYTHING LIKE IT:** two devout Muslims at the front of our church's "sanctuary" facing Mecca and chanting their sundown prayer to Allah.

We invited them to introduce Islam to us for two Sunday evening education sessions. They did a marvelous job of it, sketching both the profound similarities and the key differences between our religions. It didn't hurt that the main presenter, an internationally recognized Islamic scholar, grew up in Edmonton and was raised by a Roman Catholic mother and a Muslim father. He knew, more or less, where we were coming from.

Because our session spanned sundown, our presenters needed to pray their evening prayer. They offered to go out into the parking lot, but we persuaded them to stay right where they were. They were courteously mindful of our "sanctuary," our "holy space," but in our branch of Christianity a church is a people, not a steeple.

We learned much about Islam. Dialogue doesn't have to make us see things the same way—it doesn't have to be a win/lose proposition. By understanding Islam better, Christians can critique it more honestly and fairly. That's a win/win. The ninth commandment forbidding us from bearing false witness against our neighbor extends to Muslims as well. If we criticize Muslim beliefs and practices, we'd better be sure we know what we're talking about or we sin against them.

Here's an example. Someone asked an excellent question: "If following the five pillars of Islam gets Muslims to heaven, then doesn't that mean that Islam teaches a 'works-righteousness' by which people earn their salvation?" The response was enlightening. Our presenters told us that Allah bestows on people the joys of heaven as a gift of overwhelming generosity and mercy, since that gift is so much unimaginably greater than all acts of human

If we criticize Muslim beliefs and practices, we'd better be sure we know what we're talking about.

piety. Besides, they said, those five pillars and Muslims' ability to follow them are in and of themselves gifts of Allah's grace.

I missed the next question because I was breathing a silent prayer asking God's forgiveness for maligning Islam in more than one catechism class on this very point. As the scholar clearly emphasized, there are enough differences between our religions that we need not invent more. Islam has its own holy book that, Muslims believe, trumps all others, including the Bible. Islam denies the Trinity, the divinity of Christ, original sin, and substitutionary atonement.

Nevertheless, after this experience I have much greater respect for Islam's view of Allah. Theirs too is a God of grace, not the vengeful tyrant our media tend to ascribe to all Muslims, rather than to the fundamentalist radicals they happen to be covering.

I'd like to go back for next week's Q&A session; it should be a real hummer. But I'm hopping a plane to attend the baptism of my new grandson. As wonderful and perfect as Micah seems, he needs a good scrubbing in the water that symbolizes our Savior's blood. That simple reenactment places in such bold relief how differently Christians and Muslims see our relationship to God. In contrast to Islam, the Bible teaches us how deeply we humans have fallen and how deeply God the Merciful, God the Compassionate, stooped down in Christ to bring us back to him.

How great is our God! ■



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# Birthday Prayer

**T**HE BLAZE of candles gives a warm, waxy taste to the lungful of air I just inhaled over the birthday cake on the table below me. I'm garnering sufficient breath to extinguish them. Another November 5 has come, and with it another year of living. I suppose I'm not properly amused.

After 30-plus go-arounds, birthdays are starting to become more wearisome than wonderful—another step toward midnight on life's ever-ticking clock.

As I mark time's passage, I'm struck by what changes and what doesn't. The old wooden dining room table supporting the cake has been around longer than I have. I think of the rise and fall of cities of Legos, Tinker Toys, and Lincoln Logs on its surface. I think of family Thanksgivings, the tabletop piled with steamy mashed potatoes, golden turkey, home-grown corn, and green beans glistening with dollops of melting butter.

My mind traces further back and the table changes. Or, rather, I realize that I have changed.

When I was a child this dining room table and its chairs were anything but utilitarian. Their towering mass could be the walls and roof of an epic castle, a stalwart fort, or a cozy home populated with smudged stuffed animals. I could walk under them or, as I grew, climb under them. But somewhere along the march of November birthdays, I outgrew their shadow.

The chair I once climbed under, and later sat on with dangling legs, became smaller. One birthday my toes touched the floor as I scooted forward. Then they touched even when I sat all the way back. A few birthdays later I could plant my feet squarely on the floor.

I wonder if something of the mystery and wonder of childhood isn't the swinging squirm of dangling legs. Toes that do not touch speak of an expansive world—a world of opportunities. Free-kicking feet inhabit a world infused with a sweet mixture of wonder and dependency, of hope and of trust.

Somehow the rootedness of feet firmly planted uproots the mystery of innocence's dangling spaces.

At 6'3" I don't get too many daily experiences of smallness. Rather than peering over, I must now stoop down toward my birthday cakes. Rather than being overshadowed, I overshadow. Rather than kicking freely, I scrape and scuff with heavy footfalls.

As I've grown bigger, my world has grown smaller. As I've grown stronger, my world has grown more overwhelming. As my intellectual faculties have ripened, the scope of my imagination has withered.

So this year as I gather my lungful of candle-warmed air, I breathe a prayer:

Lord, you have grown us. Grow now the world around us. Let us kick tiny feet into the bigness of your rest. Expand our world, and with it, our hope and trust in you. Amen. ■



Rev. John Lee is pastor of Bethel CRC in Sioux Center, Iowa, where he now shares a new dining room table with his wife, Mary Jo, and their cat, Bear.



Lord, grant me  
the grace of wonder.

—JOSHUA ABRAHAM HESCHEL

# Burn the Quran?

**There are better ways to get Muslims' attention.**



**MY WIFE AND I** serve in the Muslim country of Bangladesh with Christian Reformed World Missions. As I write, we're now home on our first home service. Since we've been back in the States people have been asking me what I think about burning the Quran, as a pastor in Florida had publicly threatened to do.

I guess my question for that pastor and his supporters would be this: What was your desired outcome? If the desire was to get a lot of attention, make a bad name for the followers of Jesus, and burn bridges between Muslims and Christians, then burning the Quran would be an effective means to those ends.

But if the goal was to get Muslims to think about the truth of God in Christ, then burning the Quran would be burning a bridge between Muslims and Christians.

For Muslims the Quran is the compilation of God's final revelation to humanity through Muhammad. It is their holy book. But it's not just the words that they revere; the physical book itself is also considered holy. It is usually given an elevated position in the home on a top shelf or otherwise displayed honorably. It is handled with care. To a Muslim, the offense of burning the Quran is not comparable with burning the Bible to make

a point or to show disagreement with Christianity.

To consider burning the Quran as a threat against building a mosque near Ground Zero is to mistake the spiritual battle for truth as a battle of religious manipulation concerning physical places and artifacts. If we want to compel Muslims to think about the truth of God in Christ, our most effective means is to consistently show them how we revere God's Word not just as a physical book but in our hearts and lives. Burning the Quran would just confirm their belief that non-Muslims are infidels. But living the truth of God through loving relationships forces Muslims to think anew about truth.

One story from our work illustrates this point. I was talking with a Muslim friend of mine who was thinking about moving out of Bangladesh to get away from all the corruption and hopelessness.

Then he said, "You Americans are so lucky. You can go to almost any country in the world. But where can I go? We Bangladeshis have a difficult time getting into another country to work." I said, "What about going to one of the Middle Eastern Muslim countries?" He chuckled cynically and said, "I have no interest in going to those countries. They are wealthy and they are supposed to be my Muslim brothers, but what are they doing to help me or Bangladesh? They do nothing for us. But here you are, a Christian, and you have given up your nice life in America to come live with us and work here."

When we live out God's Word in our lives and hearts, that's when Muslims will be forced to reckon with their convictions about the truth of God. ■



**Troy Bierma**, his wife, Faith, and their son, Yazzie, live in Bangladesh. They work in Bangladesh and Nepal training leaders in ministry (CRWM).



## Separation and Sin

During a visit with friends in Seattle, the article of Rev. Palmer ("Is Separation Always a Sin?" September 2010) came to my attention. As a retired minister of the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa and one of the original signers of the Belhar Confession in 1986, I am upset and concerned.

The cause for my alarm is that Rev. Palmer misses the whole message of the Belhar Confession, because he seems to be arguing from a position where prevalent culture and ethnic traditions are normative for the ordering of society—the same ideology that caused untold suffering in South Africa and countless communities in similar situations all over the world. Rev. Palmer warns against importation of confessions from "a different political and cultural context." I would point out that all three of our other confessions and even Scripture itself originated in cultures distinctly different from our own.

I agree with him that "it is beautiful when Christians from different ethnic groups worship together," provided, of course, that it is practiced in such a manner that it does not obstruct the God-given unity of the body of Christ.

# LETTERS

But, I would ask, is it not exceedingly more beautiful if we worship all together in spite of our cultural differences so that the words of Jesus are fulfilled: “By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another?” (John 13:35).

—Rev. Anton Doyer  
Ohrigstad, South Africa

Thank you for publishing Rev. Palmer’s brief, timely, and refreshing piece in September’s *Banner*. Far too much of the denomination-wide conversation concerning the Belhar has focused on the universally appreciable themes of unity, justice, and reconciliation rather than the text of the Belhar Confession itself. We would all do well to read the Belhar carefully with Rev. Palmer and weigh it on the basis of what it says, which in places is indeed questionable.

—Rev. Nicholas Davelaar  
Hospers, Iowa

In suggesting that “it is risky to import a confession from a different political and cultural context,” I want to suggest that it is equally risky, if not dangerous, to import and use the modern concept of race and ethnic purity, which have been creations of the worst of 20th-century ideology. I say there is only one race—the human race; a reading of the gospels and Acts would second that, I think.

—Henk Smidstra  
Surrey, British Columbia

## Homeschooling

I was disappointed with Judy Cook’s answer in the FAQs section (September 2010) regarding how to respond to a son and daughter-in-law’s plan to homeschool their children rather than follow in the

family footsteps of Christian day school. What is truly important is that the children receive an excellent Christ-centered education that thoroughly prepares them to go forth for Christ. Many families today find that homeschooling is just as effective or, in some cases, even more effective than Christian day school in academics, extracurricular activities, and spiritual formation. Christian parents who homeschool generally do so out of a deep commitment to their children’s education and spiritual health.

—Sallie Borrink  
Grand Rapids, Mich.

The grandparents’ concern over the possibility of their grandchild being homeschooled is unfounded and should not be seen as a put-down of their dedicated careers in Christian education. They should be excited that their daughter-in-law is choosing to follow in their footsteps in becoming the primary teacher to their grandchild. Education begins at birth, and it can be a natural progression for the parents to continue this process. What a blessing for their grandchild to receive a Christian education from his or her mother, to develop a closer relationship with his parents during his education, and to receive a personalized, mentor-type education. Many studies show that homeschooling students are very successful. Homeschooling also honors our denomination’s support of the beauty of Christian education.

—Dick and Renee Van Eck  
Yorba Linda, Calif.

## Yes, We Have No Water Buffaloes

While we enjoy the “Just for Kids” pages in *The Banner* each month, we take exception to the comment of the one crow to

the other crow in the September issue. We don’t think the crow should be saying, “Everybody has a water buffalo” when, in fact, *not* everyone has a water buffalo. We fear *The Banner* will be overflowing with letters and emails saying, “Where’s my water buffalo? Why don’t I have a water buffalo?” Is *The Banner* prepared to deal with that? I don’t think so! With apologies to Archie Asparagus,

—Peter Beimers  
Norwich, Ontario

## Corrections

Regarding “Seminarists Study Abroad” (October 2010, p. 28), the timing of a miracle got lost in editing. The Turkish pastor’s interrogators tried forcing him to renounce his faith in Jesus, but he could not do so because he suddenly found himself unable to speak. The corrected version has been posted online, and *The Banner* apologizes for the error. We also apologize for the glaring misspelling on p. 8 of that issue, which we hope you missed.

# FAQs

## Relationships

**Q**Our daughter cuts herself, and we don't understand her need to do this. Can you shed some light on this disorder?

**A** Cutting or self-harm is baffling, and I can understand your confusion and feelings of helplessness when your daughter uses self-inflicted pain to feel better. It's likely that your daughter will say she does not know why she feels the need to do this and will promise not to do it again. Things might settle down somewhat, but, more often than not, the cutting continues.

The reasons for self-harm are complex and varied. It occurs most often in teens and young adults, and more often in girls than boys. Most often it relates to the inability of a young person to cope with intense feelings. If there are no proper outlets for those feelings, or if tender feelings are seen as weak or bad in a family or school culture that is often competitive and success-oriented, then the temptation for some teens is to begin to live a life of pretense.

A young person can also be hiding overwhelmingly bad feelings related to some trauma, such as the death of a parent, sibling, or friend; a failed relationship; or the hidden experience of childhood abuse. This is something to explore with the help of a professional family counselor.

Your daughter needs a therapist she can learn to trust, and who will help her explore what is at the root of her disorder. This takes regular (weekly) therapy for at least a year, and possibly longer.

At its basic level, cutting brings immediate relief from stress, anxiety, and other psychic pain. The need to cut becomes addictive because it triggers relief via the brain's opiate receptors.

God knows our struggles and promises freedom when we embrace his truth.

In the final analysis, therapy can only work if your daughter knows she has a problem and wants to overcome it. The conquering of any addiction starts with the decision that the addictive substance or behavior is no longer an option for relief. The good news is that God knows our struggles and promises freedom when we embrace his truth, rather than the lie of quick relief that addiction holds out for us.

—Judy Cook

*Judy Cook is a family therapist living in Hamilton, Ontario. She is a member of Meadowlands Fellowship Christian Reformed Church in Ancaster, Ontario. You may e-mail her at [judycook.thebannerqanda@gmail.com](mailto:judycook.thebannerqanda@gmail.com). All responses will be held in the strictest confidence.*

## Calling

**Q**If the media are right and I should expect to change careers/jobs at least four times in my lifetime, what does that say about God's calling in my life? Does God keep changing his mind?

**A** Speaking as someone who's had approximately nine jobs over the course of my work life, I have a bird's-eye view of the job-change thing. Some of those jobs/careers were a great fit—I knew that I was in the right place to use my gifts and talents. Other jobs ranged from mediocre to horrible; I hated the work and wasn't good at it. In both cases, however, I can now see the Lord working to teach me his lessons in his ways.

One of the lessons I learned along the way was that I have not been designed to do all things equally well. Working with myriad minute details in exacting ways, for instance, challenges me to the core. On the other hand, I know that God has given me the gift of listening to someone's story and discerning a path through the muddle.

There are a number of ways to go about finding innate giftedness. Get feedback from friends and family, of course. But also examine yourself: what are those things toward which you are naturally drawn, your areas of rapid learning, and activities that you eagerly anticipate doing again? And finally, career tests can offer helpful and objective feedback.

Sometimes when I speak to groups about this topic, I show two different drinking utensils: one a portable plastic bottle with a detachable top and one a delicately crafted hand-painted china cup. Both instruments were created to hold liquids, but their design and use is for different purposes. In a similar way, each of us has been uniquely crafted for God's will and purpose.

—Bonnie Speyers

*Bonnie Speyers is a career counselor at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Mich. ■*

# { An Improvable Feast }

When the last thing we want to do is gather at the table, it's likely what we need most.





**T**HE FIRST PIECE of furniture I purchased after I bought my home was a large rectangular Shaker-style table of naturally finished pine with six matching chairs. I installed it in my dining area and called

my oldest sister, Joyce, to come see it.

Joyce pronounced it good—a double win for me, since she has an eye for decorating and a heart for bargain shopping. And she didn't even realize that it was more than a table.

No, for me—a single, first-time homeowner after years of apartment living—this was not just a table; it was a symbol of my new status as “the lady of the house” and the hospitality I wanted to express as such.

I was proud of that table and imagined myself hosting dinners at it or standing at the head of it with a huge platter of turkey in my hands, like a matriarch in a Rockwell painting.

Never mind that I rarely ever cooked except by microwave oven and usually dined alone, either in front of a television or behind a steering wheel. I had a table now, so things would be different—eventually. Of course, I still had other rooms to furnish, repairs and renovations on the house to complete, settling in to accomplish. It would be months, I thought, perhaps longer, before I actually had to become the woman in the picture.

### Resentment at the Table

Joyce, however, took it upon herself to accelerate my timetable. Looking around my spacious new home, she instantly got an idea about the upcoming holiday weekend, just days away. And before I knew how it happened, she had invited herself and other family members over for a big weekend family dinner and get-together, with a number of overnight guests.

It would be an especially significant celebration for our elderly mother, whose health had been compromised by a stroke and severe dementia. For Mom, the world had shrunk to a tight focus on her own comfort and the well-being of her chil-

dren—and she worried most about those who lived the farthest away. She would love having all of us together for a sit-down dinner and extended visit.

I don't clearly remember agreeing to host; I probably just fell into the old habit, as youngest in the family, of going along with things decided without me. I didn't even mind that much, except for one thing. Joyce had invited an estranged family member, our “middle” sister, Jan, with whom I was angry and not that eager to be reconciled.

So throughout my hasty preparations for the weekend, I seethed with resentment. I kept imagining having to sit at the table with a sister who I felt had wronged me and others in the family, one

## Throughout my hasty preparations for the weekend, I seethed with resentment.

who neither acknowledged any guilt nor expressed any remorse.

Ruefully, I imagined serving Jan food in my house, and the very thought dulled the shine of my new table for me. I couldn't help thinking, “Some feast *this* is going to be!”

### A Divine Precedent

As the holidays approach, many people anticipate gathering with family or friends or coworkers to celebrate, often with some sort of banquet or buffet. From ancient times to the present and in cultures around the world, it has long been customary for people to mark important or sacred events with festive meals together. After all, we have to eat anyway, right?

Yet the phenomenon of dining together on special occasions is more than simple custom or pragmatics. Whether we realize it or not, ritual feasting is a matter of biblical principle and precedent—with a heavenly mandate.

God himself approved of the practice: after calling on Moses to lead the Israelite people out of bondage and into the Promised Land, the Lord instituted a number

of holy feasts and instructed his people in the proper observance of them.

God meant for those festivals to remind his people of his continued presence and the ongoing history of his grace.

In the New Testament, Jesus' first recorded miracle occurs at a wedding feast (which, incidentally, is perhaps why bringing good wine to a dinner could be considered a very Christlike gesture). Later Jesus repeatedly presided over important meals, from the miraculous feedings of thousands of listeners to his intimate breaking of bread with his disciples.

During his life and even after his death and resurrection, Jesus frequently shared a meal with those he wanted to comfort or encourage.

Jesus also mentioned feasting in his parables, as when he compared the kingdom of heaven to a king throwing a wedding banquet for his son (Matt. 22). In that story, the king works hard to get people to his table. Nevertheless, many of the invited respond rudely and ruthlessly, if at all.

### Eat, Drink, and Be Wary?

Jesus' parable of the king's banquet may strike some hearers as an unlikely scenario. Why would anyone refuse such an invitation? Most of us like to celebrate, after all, and a fancy dinner paid for by a rich host is nothing to blow off.

Yet how many of us have foregone a holiday dinner with family to avoid difficult relatives or uncomfortable confrontations? How many workers, perhaps angry over a small or absent bonus or stressed

*continued on p. 37* »



Jennifer Parker is a writer, teacher, and librarian who lives in Jackson, Miss.



# When Kids **STOP** Walking with God

**M**ANY CHRISTIAN PARENTS share a common joy: children who are walking with God. But many also share a common grief: children (or grandchildren) who have walked away from God.

If it becomes clear that your son or daughter has no desire to walk with God, you will probably go through a time of painful soul-searching. How could this happen? Why my child? Where did I fail? Is the Lord punishing me? Should I tell the church? How should I pray? Is God even listening? Should I talk to my child? How? Where can I turn for help?

Fear can gnaw away quietly at you as you wonder what to do. Spouses may at times feel impatient with each other—moments of disagreement can carry a sense of accusation. A sense of resentment may invade your family life.

Sometimes life brings problems for which there are no solutions, but we still have to face those problems. Here are some places to start if you have a child who isn't walking with God.

### Take Stock

First, I would invite you to sit down with your spouse or, if you're a single parent, with a trusted friend. Take stock of the things you know for sure. Perhaps the most important is this:

*God is in charge.* The destiny of your children is in *God's* hand. The Lord gave parents a wonderful role to play in their children's faith life, but we must realize that God, not us, is the source of that faith.

So you can commit your child to God, knowing that God will deal salvation-wise with him or her in *his* time.

Salvation is by God's grace. Your child's faith-decisions are between him or her and God's Holy Spirit. But what is beyond you is *not* beyond the Spirit, so leave your fear and worry before your Father's mercy seat.

### Remain a Friend

Second, I encourage you to consciously recommit yourself to your child. Parenting includes being your child's friend—playing a supportive role that needs ongoing expression. Continue to show delight in your child, to show your appreciation of his or her gifts and interests. Praise her for her efforts. Listen to his stories. Your parental friendship should remain solid for every child, believer or unbeliever. Your unbelieving child is equally entitled to your friendship for the simple reason that he or she is your child.

This has another side. Children have an uncanny psychological sense. They watch you—how you relate to your spouse, how you relate to God. And they watch how you express your values and ideals.

# Your commitment to love your kids is not negotiable.

What a child watches for especially is whether Mom and/or Dad are just church members or whether they are truly followers of Jesus.

Kids experience a lot of insecurity. They face a threatening world. Your home is their God-appointed shelter. They need your friendship, but they don't want you to be their *buddies*; rather, they seek your protection, your acceptance, your affection, and your sincere interest.

Children can accept correction and even discipline, but they dread being emotionally disowned by their parents. Your commitment to love your kids is not negotiable—so be Christ to them!

Such loyalty creates an atmosphere in which children feel secure and free to confide in their parents. And it is especially your “wayward” child who needs that warmth and security. Your child must know that you remain on her side with love undiminished. That will help her deal with one very paralyzing thought: “Now that I don't believe anymore, my parents will think that they have failed in bringing me up.”

Does your continued love mean that you will not be sad if your child walks away from God? No, you will experience real sadness. But in your sadness your trust remains in the Lord.

God is patient. He is not through with your child yet. And that's why your prayers can continue unhindered. (Consider the following Scripture passages to bolster your trust and faith: Rom. 8; Eph. 2; and Col. 1.)

## A Hot Topic

I think we may generally agree that the Christian Reformed Church cares about young people. Youth work is rated high in individual churches. And our most recent synod (annual leadership meeting) highlighted the challenge to care for children and young people. Representatives of the Calvin College Center for Social Research presented a summary of the splendid study *Spiritual and Social Trends and Patterns in the Christian Reformed Church in North America*. Lots of good advice!

The denomination's recently formed Youth Ministry Task Force is working hard on a coherent youth ministry plan. Churches have been urged to address the disconnect between adolescents and the older generations and to keep track of young members who move away.

In a *Banner* editorial as long ago as May 2006, editor Bob De Moor suggested that young people be represented at meetings of synod, with the privilege of “having the floor.” Good thinking, though just now being implemented with the invitation of youth advisers to synod.

Finally, the June 2010 issue of *The Banner* contains an article on youth ministry by Pieter Pereboom and Anita Kuiken, “Shaping a Youth-Friendly Church,” which contains splendid advice. You may wish to read it again at [www.thebanner.org](http://www.thebanner.org).

—Louis Tamminga

## Can the Church Help?

Yes, the church and individual members can help. But it is not easy; grieving parents face complex, highly nuanced situations. And no two situations are alike. Parents themselves have a hard time understanding their young adult children.

On the one hand parents feel a need to talk with trusted church members about these problems, but on the other hand they hesitate because they know how difficult the situation is.

Here are some things concerned church members can keep in mind when talking with a parent who is saddened by a child's lack of faith:

- Ask the parent how all his or her children are doing; then ask about the child for whom this parent worries.
- Don't be in a hurry. Don't look around as if you're eager to move on.
- Don't change the subject or cut the parent short.
- Don't offer unsolicited advice.
- Don't look anguished.
- Don't refer to other situations that you think are similar.

In other words, just listen—the kind of listening that clearly comes from being engaged.

Why is listening to burdened people so helpful? It affirms to them that they belong. Their plight can make them feel inadequate. Heart-to-heart listening assures them that you value and esteem them.

After listening, assure the parent of your prayers (and be sure to keep your promise). Perhaps the situation will be suitable for a short prayer there and then.

Do not wait too long before following up with this mom or dad by phone or in person: “Hi, it's good to speak with you again. How have you been since we talked last? I've continued to think of you and pray for you.”

The church can also help by bringing concerned parents together for mutual support and encouragement. See “Living Room Compassion,” in the September 2009 *Banner* ([www.thebanner.org](http://www.thebanner.org)) for a description of how one church brought hurting moms and dads together to share their stories.

Above all, we need to realize that parenting is not easy. Our prayers—especially for families with growing children—need to be fervent and frequent. ■



Rev. Louis Tamminga, a retired pastor in the CRC, has served on the staff of Christian Reformed Home Missions and as director of Pastor-Church Relations. He is the author of *The Elder's Handbook* (Faith Alive).

# Giving Thanks

Saying “thank you” is polite, right? We thank people for passing us the butter, for holding a door open, or for telling us we look nice. But when God gives us things—like food to eat, people who love us, and even his

own Son—we often forget to say “thank you”! Here are some fun ideas to make your Thanksgiving celebration, or any other occasion, a time to give God thanks.

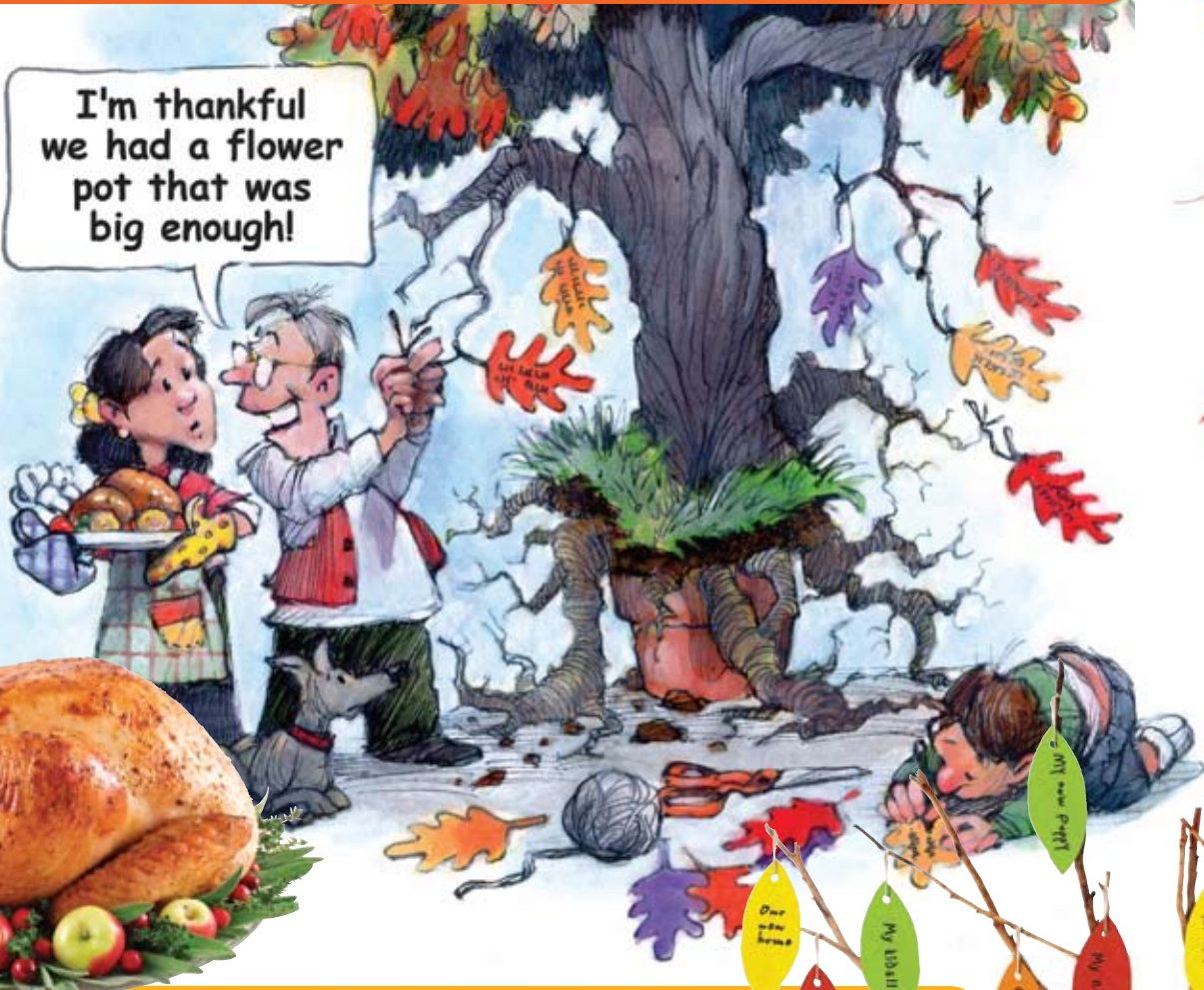


ILLUSTRATION BY SCOTT HOLLADAY

## Thankful Tree

Make this fun table decoration to use at Thanksgiving dinner—or anytime!

### What you need:

- flowerpot
- sand or rice
- tree branch
- construction paper
- yarn
- black marker

### What you do:

Fill the flowerpot with sand or rice. Stick the tree branch in the pot. Cut out leaf shapes from construction paper—at least one per guest, and more if you want. Punch a hole at one end of each leaf. Thread a piece of yarn through each hole and knot it. When your guests arrive, ask each of them to write something they’re thankful for on a leaf and hang it on your Thankful Tree. Then read those things out loud during dinner or at prayer time.



Give

Thanks

## Thanksgiving Games

### Candy Corn Drop

This game is just for fun, and the taller you are, the harder it gets! All you need are some small paper cups and a few bags of candy corn. First, give each player a paper cup filled with candy corn. Have players stand in a line with an empty paper cup between their feet. Holding a candy corn to their chin, they have to try to drop it into the cup by their feet. The person who drops the most corns into his or her cup in one minute wins!

### Thankful Words

Give everybody at your table a pencil and a piece of paper. Challenge them to see how many words they can make out of the letters in the words "Thanksgiving Day." Words have to be longer than two letters, and no people names are allowed. Don't forget that plurals count as separate words, like "hat" and "hats." There are WAY more possibilities than you think!

### I'm Thankful

This is a fun memory game for groups. The more people who play, the more challenging it is! Start with the youngest person in your group. That person says something they're thankful for, like "I'm thankful for mashed potatoes." The next person repeats what the first person says, and adds something of their own: "I am thankful for mashed potatoes and a warm bed." The next person repeats those two things and adds another: "I'm thankful for mashed potatoes, a warm bed, and my cat." Keep going until everyone has had a chance to add something or until someone messes up.



**Sandy Swartzentruber** works for Faith Alive. She's thankful for her family, good books, and pumpkin pie (no ice cream).



## The Bowl Game

Write each of the following things on a separate slip of paper and put them in a bowl. Ask everyone around your table to take one, read the category on it, and tell one thing in that category that they're thankful for and why.

- A favorite food
- One of your five senses
- A person not in your family
- A time when God took care of you
- A good book
- Your favorite smell
- A favorite teacher
- A sport or hobby you enjoy
- Your favorite place
- A favorite Bible verse
- Your favorite day of the year
- A favorite toy
- Your best family memory
- A time when you helped someone
- Something a parent taught you
- A good friend
- Work you like to do
- A favorite song

## Cone Cornucopias

The cornucopia (say it corn-oo-CO-pea-yah) is a traditional symbol of Thanksgiving. It's usually a horn-shaped basket filled with lots of different fruits and vegetables, and it reminds us of the many good things God gives us. Here's how to make a cornucopia that's good to eat and (mostly) good for you, too!

### What you need:

- Raisins, dried cranberries, and other dried fruit
- Nuts or sunflower seeds
- Cheerios or other cereal
- Mini chocolate chips
- Mini pretzels
- One sugar cone (pointed ice cream cone) per person

### What you do:

In a big bowl, mix everything except the sugar cones. Scoop some of the mixture into a cone and enjoy! Then thank God for the people all over the world who grow food for you and your family to eat.

## After Your Pastor Leaves

**P**ASTOR GEORGE JUST RETIRED after a long-term ministry at Bethel; he was dearly loved and will be sorely missed. Pastor Cynthia's ministry at Hope Church ended badly, both for her and for the church, which has a history of troubled ministries. First Church has been without a pastor for a long time; many members blame the extended vacancy on the previous pastor, whom they believe bad-mouthed their congregation to his colleagues.

And so it goes. Pastors come and pastors go. When pastors leave, churches grieve—whether the previous pastor's ministry went well or poorly.

Some churches face a pastoral vacancy as though they are a marching band “marking time,” moving their feet but not going forward. They begin the search process for a new pastor with a touch of cynicism, wondering if they will ever find the “right” match. Other churches see their pastoral vacancy as a time to save some money, maybe replace the carpeting in the sanctuary or repave the parking lot—whatever project has been put on hold.

For several years now, the Christian Reformed Church's Office of Pastor-Church Relations has offered a more intentional transition process for “vacant” churches. More specifically, it offers churches one of nine (so far) Specialized Transition Ministers (STMs), who have been trained in guiding a church through the process of finding a new pastor.

Covenant CRC in Winnipeg, Manitoba, took advantage of that guidance in their recently completed transition process. This is their story.

When Covenant's previous pastor left, at his recommendation the church council contracted with an STM who would spend nine months with the church helping the congregation resolve some of the significant issues of the past, discover their strengths and areas for growth, and determine a course for the future.

Covenant is a merged church—a product of the joining of the original Christian Reformed church in Winnipeg with its 100-year history and a second-generation immigrant church that was started in the early 1960s.

The relatively large merged congregation built a beautiful new building in 1996, and many men and women from both congregations worked side by side to complete construction. That appeared to unify the two churches, but more likely the project masked the differences in the personality of each church.



As those differences began to find expression over time, the membership began to polarize around certain issues. The first pastor who served the newly merged church came in 1999 and left in 2008.

### The Past

To begin the transition process and assist the Specialized Transition Minister, Covenant's council appointed a Transition Team, made up of people from a cross-section of the membership who knew the congregation well and were respected by the membership. The STM served as their coach.

The transition process is composed of three phases that focus on the past, the present, and the future. The process itself began with a storytelling event, where members were invited to write down significant memories of their involvement in the church. Using newsprint hung on the walls of the fellowship hall, divided into decades, about 100 people wrote their history.

This first phase, focusing on the past, serves to bring church members into the transition process by involving them in a nonthreatening way in telling a story that is uniquely theirs.

# “The transition process has revived a sense of vision within the congregation.”

## The Present

The second phase attempts to discover the church's current strengths and areas for growth. Covenant did this in two segments. First, they conducted a survey asking 40 questions about the church's life (they used the “SurveyMonkey” tool at [surveymonkey.com](http://surveymonkey.com)).

From the results of that survey, the Transition Team isolated 11 issues around which the membership had the widest range of opinions. The team then designed three discussion opportunities for members to explore those issues face to face; about 125 people participated.

The discussions gave members a forum in which they could talk and listen to each other, and one of the things they learned was how diverse their opinions are.

## The Future

The third phase is the future-oriented phase. Covenant's Transition Team took the 11 issues from the second phase, put those issues together into five topics, and designed discussion groups to look at how the church might do things in the future. About 135 people participated in these groups. The process concluded with the Specialized Transition Minister writing a final report with recommendations coming out of those discussion groups that will set the church's direction for the future.

“I think we are in a much better position to begin the calling process now than we were nine months ago,” said Rob Booy, a member of Covenant's Transition Team

“The transition process has revived a sense of vision within the congregation,” said team member Teresa Doornbos. “The process itself is thorough, thought-provoking, and well worth the time and effort involved. The discussions got people involved in the church again. People are feeling like they are part of an exciting change. . . . People are learning to listen to other people's opinions and are backing off of their own agendas. We are repositioning our path from our own wants towards God's desires for us.”

## What Makes It Work

This is only one church's story; no two transition stories are the same. Each STM is a unique person, and each church is in

a unique situation with its own challenges. Each will have a different experience.

The following factors, however, contribute to the genius of Specialized Transition Ministry:

- The STM is not a consultant, but rather serves as the temporary resident pastor, doing what pastors typically do—preaching, teaching, visiting, performing weddings and funerals, and so on. He (currently all are male) “lives with” the congregation.
- The STM is not eligible to be called as the next pastor; this gives him greater freedom to be both more creative and more confrontational than a permanent pastor might be.
- The process is designed to give a voice to everyone in the church, and it provides opportunities for members to listen to each other.
- The process engages people early on, in nonthreatening ways, by inviting them to tell their stories (not a factual history, but a history of memories).
- Through a survey and in discussion groups, the members themselves discover and articulate the church's strengths and growth areas as they experience them.
- The future direction for the church gets developed at the grass-roots level, and members “buy into” it because they helped design it. Peter Scazzero writes, “In emotionally healthy churches, people . . . understand that leadership in the kingdom of God is from the bottom up, not a grasping, controlling, or lording over others” (*The Emotionally Healthy Church*, p.110).
- The STM program helps a church go into the calling process with a clearer understanding of where they believe God wants them to go and of the kind of pastor who will lead them there.

If you think this transition process would be helpful for your church, please contact the CRC's Pastor-Church Relations office at 616-224-0764 or its director, Rev. Norm Thomasma, at [nthomasma@crcna.org](mailto:nthomasma@crcna.org). ■



Rev. Peter Hogeterp is a Specialized Transition Minister. He is a member of First CRC, Chatham, Ontario, and currently lives in Belle River, Ontario, with his wife, Marianna.

» *continued from p. 19*

about their holiday to-do lists, have skipped the office Christmas party?

A holiday feast, if celebrated in the right spirit, is more than a pleasing array of special dishes. It's a symbol of grace, designed to center our attention on our blessings, our community, our shared history, and God's place at the center of it all. In that sense, every meal we share with others is an opportunity for communion, healing, and reconciliation, as well as nourishment.

Is it any wonder our adversary, the devil, tries to corrupt our holiday feasts? He has many tools at his disposal, including commercialism (idolatry and lust) and consumerism (gluttony), as well as over-busyness (sloth), holiday depression (acedia), and all kinds of interpersonal strife (pride and anger).

If those influences go unchecked, we can end up being depleted rather than nourished by our feasts. And isn't it a shame to sit down to an expensive meal, only to leave the table hungry?

## When my estranged sister came to my house, she came without any apologies or acknowledgement of a debt to me.

### Too Broken to Break Bread?

God knew his people needed "appointed feasts" as reminders of his covenant promises and past deliverances as much as they needed to come together to be filled and reassured of God's presence.

For Christians, the sacrament of communion is a similarly symbolic yet physically significant observance, designed for the health and sustenance of the believer. God invites us: Come to the Lord's Supper, partake, be filled. It's hard to see why anyone would refuse.

But when caught up in our own pain, our own disappointments, our own forgetfulness of God's power, we may tend to avoid or push away from the Lord's Table—to refuse to eat, so to speak.

Or because of broken relationships or hidden conflicts, we may feel unworthy

or unwilling to come to the table, to sit beside others who are likely to be there. Whatever the reason, it is not uncommon even for people of faith to decline God's invitation to dine when nourishment at his Table is what we need most.

Scripture repeatedly shows Jesus' concern for the nourishment of his followers. In compassion he always addresses the physical hunger of those who travel with him or who have traveled far to encounter him. But with his words and his presence—his very body and blood—he addresses their spiritual hunger as well. After fortifying them in those ways, he challenges those who say they love him to show it by feeding others.

A good friend of mine worked for a time in a restaurant. She often voiced frustration about what she thought of as the lowliness of her position. By way of encouragement I tried to point out the honor I saw in feeding people, in bringing them something that conferred strength, comfort, nutrients for growth.

Of course, it was easier to look at things that way before I found myself in

the position of serving someone I didn't really want to serve.

When my estranged sister came to my house, she came without any apologies or acknowledgement of a debt to me. She and her children installed themselves in my guest room, asked a few things for their comfort, and proceeded to enjoy their weekend as if there were no issues to prevent it. And, as it turned out, she brought a few pantry items and volunteered to cook, if she might use my kitchen, to make some of our mother's favorite dishes.

Although I'd spent a great deal on groceries and pre-prepared food, I let my middle sister do her thing. Meanwhile, we both ignored whatever was unsaid between us and focused on giving our mother (as well as our less-emotionally-stunted siblings) a happy weekend.

In retrospect, I suppose the food Jan cooked was as close as she could come to a peace offering. I didn't think much of it, as such; but then, all our offerings are imperfect compared to the Lamb of God, himself.

Ultimately, I enjoyed myself. It had been too long since we'd come together. We children hadn't gathered like this, really, since our father's funeral, and now we were under one roof, celebrating a holiday with our frail mother, whose childlike happiness made it impossible not to smile back. I served some, was served some, and as I hosted, I felt the Lord's presence among us.

At first grudgingly, then gratefully, I dined with my family. And when the table was cleared, it shone for me once again. ■

### God on the Menu

Author Leslie Leyland Fields has edited a wonderful collection of essays called *The Spirit of Food: 34 Authors on Fasting and Feasting Toward God*. In her introduction, she explains in an eloquent way part of what I tried to convey to my friend who worked in food service, a truth that I understand fairly well when I'm not actively resisting it.

"Food is nothing less than sacrament," Fields writes. "All food is given by God and is given as a means to sustain not just our bodies, but also our minds and our spirits. In all of its aspects—growth, harvest, preparation, and presentation—food is given as a primary means of drawing us into right relationship toward God, toward his creation and his people. Even its intentional absence, through fasting, pulls us toward a deeper dependence on God and one another."

If we find ourselves resisting our own nourishment, or the opportunity to nourish others, it may be that our best remedy is to seek out a place at the Lord's Table. Jesus invites us to approach and be filled, but also to be healed, unburdened, and reminded of who he is and what that means for our lives. He provides the bread and wine that satisfy, and it is only what he offers that makes our poor offerings palatable at all.

—Jennifer Parker



## Adopt the Belhar

### I AM A CONVERT TO THE BELHAR CONFESSION.

Initially I thought it to be a good statement in response to the apartheid experience that had plagued the people of South Africa. I also thought the Christian Reformed Church could endorse it as a “confession for them,” and perhaps for Reformed believers elsewhere whose experience was similar to that of the church in South Africa.

I have come to believe that my initial view was naïve and wrong.

The question is no longer, or even primarily, whether the Belhar Confession is good for South Africa. It is whether the CRC should adopt the Belhar as a confession for ourselves.

To answer that question we must take into account whether we believe the Belhar is biblically appropriate and applicable to the Reformed community in North America. That discussion has been under way for some time—first in our Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations Committee, more recently at several synods of the CRC, and presently in classes (regional groups of churches) and many congregational discussion groups.

I am a convert to understanding that the Belhar speaks to important biblical themes and principles: unity, reconciliation, and justice. We already accept these biblical themes and principles, but they are not clearly expressed in our historic confessions of the 16th and 17th centuries (the Heidelberg Catechism, the Belgic Confession and the Canons of Dort). The Belhar is much more explicit.

I am a convert to the conviction that the Belhar can and should be adopted by the CRC in 2012. After careful study, that is the recommendation of the Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations Committee, and that is the encouragement of the Reformed ecumenical organizations of which the CRC is a part. It is my own conviction because we have learned much about our own lack of unity as the people of God, our own need for reconciliation on many levels, and our own participation in matters of injustice, including racism.

Adopting the Belhar Confession would be a powerful testimony that we can offer to future generations of CRC members, to the world in which we live, and to present members of the CRC who struggle with—or are victims of—the very issues the Belhar addresses. The CRC can and should adopt the Belhar as a statement of faith because it expresses what we believe clearly and concisely.

It expresses  
**what we believe**  
clearly and concisely.

Some have suggested that we endorse the Belhar as a parallel statement to our Contemporary Testimony, but that, in my judgment, is inadequate—for the primary reason that the Belhar has been proposed as a confession and not as a statement of conviction of just one denomination. Our Contemporary Testimony is just that—our testimony—while a confession by its very nature expresses and affirms important truths we share with other churches.

Confessions are ecumenical expressions of articles of the faith we together hold dear. It is time for the CRC to speak confessionally to the issues of unity, reconciliation, and justice—in solidarity with our brothers and sisters in other parts of the world—because sin knows no boundaries and, thanks be to God, neither does God’s concern for all those who have suffered the pain of alienation and injustice. Thus we can embrace the Belhar as a statement of faith we share with Reformed believers around the world. ■ **WEB Q’S**

Is the Belhar Confession merely a political statement expressed in theological language? Does it meet the standard of the historic confessions? See the author’s responses to these questions, along with additional questions for discussion, at the end of this article online at [www.thebanner.org](http://www.thebanner.org). The text of the Belhar, along with links to resources for studying it, can be found at [crcna.org](http://crcna.org) under Resources. Click on Synod Resources and look under Documents.



Rev. Peter Borgdorff is executive director-emeritus of the CRCNA and has been designated by the Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations Committee to promote the study of the Belhar in the churches prior to the proposal to Synod 2012 for its adoption as a fourth confession.

## Punch Lines

Got a funny joke or story or a photo of something related to the Reformed Christian life? Send it to *The Banner* and you might see it in print! You can email your contributions to [editorial@thebanner.org](mailto:editorial@thebanner.org) or send them to 2850 Kalamazoo Ave. SE, Grand Rapids, MI 49560.

**A**fter the church service, a little boy told the pastor, "When I grow up, I'm going to give you some money."

"Well, thank you," said the pastor, "but why?"

The boy replied with concern, "Because my daddy says you're one of the poorest preachers we've ever had."

—*Nancy Magnus*

**A**s the clerk of our church choir, I prepare the schedule of the Sundays we will sing, along with the titles of the songs to be sung. To add a little visual appeal, I include some clip art as well as an appropriate Bible verse. Imagine my surprise when Thea, our director of worship and choir pianist, called me to say, "Chuck, you made my day. I think you had better check the Bible verse written on the schedule." I had written, "Exodus 15:21: Sing to the Lord, for he is highly exhausted."

—*Chuck Lindemulder*

**M**y friend told me that her dog, a family pet, had to be "put to sleep." Her grandson dearly loved the big Labrador, and was inconsolable. His mother put him to bed that night and soon he was back, sobbing. This hap-

pened twice. The third time he got up and with a big smile, he said, "It's all right, there are animals in heaven! The Bible says Jesus is coming back on a white horse!"

—*Ellie Bazuin*

**A** pastor purchased a boat and named it "Visitation." The church secretary could then honestly answer questions as to the pastor's whereabouts.

—*Simon Holleman*

**A**n amateur photographer was invited to dinner with friends and took along a few pictures to show the hostess. She looked at the photos and commented, "These are very good! You must have a good camera." He didn't make any comment, but as he was leaving, he said, "That was a really delicious meal! You must have some very good pots."

—*John Veltkamp*

**E**veryone was seated around the table as the food was being served. When little Logan received his plate, he started eating right away. "Logan, wait until we say our prayer," his mother reminded him. "I don't have to," the little boy replied. "Of course you do," his mother insisted, "we say a prayer before eating at our house."

"That's at *our* house," Logan explained, "but this is Grandma's and she knows how to cook."

—*John Pousma*

**A** second-grade teacher asked her class to draw a picture of the nativity. One little boy drew a very complete picture, showing the manger, several angels, some

sheep, a star, Joseph, Mary, baby Jesus, and a little fat man sitting in the corner. The teacher thought for some time and finally asked the little boy to come forward. She said, "You have a very nice picture, and I understand everything except this little fat man sitting in the corner. Who is he?"

The boy replied, "That's round John Virgin."

—*Robert Lubbers*

**A** lady lost her handbag in the bustle of Christmas shopping. It was found by an honest

little boy, who returned it to her. Looking in her purse she commented, "Hmm, that's funny. When I lost my bag there was a \$20 bill in it. Now there are 20 \$1 bills."

"That's right, Ma'am," the boy replied. "The last time I found a lady's purse she didn't have change for a reward."

—*Joe Stravers*



"I know the difference between right and wrong—  
it's the similarities that mix me up."