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October 8, 15, 22, 29, November 5 and 12

Mid-Series Retreat & Brunch Saturday October 21 | 9:00 am | Lessons 5 & 6

Closing Retreat & Brunch Saturday November 18 | 9:00 am | Lesson 11 and Wrap-Up

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Sessions will be recorded and made accessible to registered participants upon request.

Questions? Contact Jodi MacLean | jodileighmaclean@gmail.com or any TIR Committee Member
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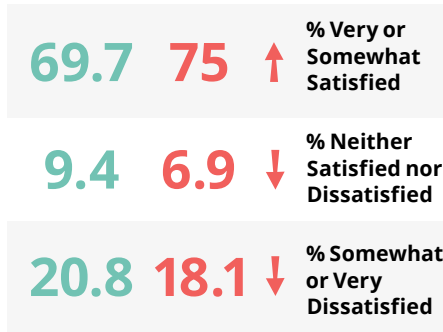
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BY THE NUMBERS

Reader satisfaction with *The Banner* has gone up over the past three years, according to data from reader surveys in 2020 and 2023.

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We asked, "Overall, how satisfied are you with *The Banner*?"



In both years the *Banner* reader survey was conducted by DataWise Consulting (previously called the Calvin Center for Social Research). There were 721 responses to this question in 2020 and 829 responses in 2023.

WHAT'S ONLINE

Look for these headlines at *TheBanner.org*

- » News: Christian Labour Association Represents Trinity Western Faculty
- » Children's book review: *Farmhouse*, by Sophie Blackall
- » Streaming review: *The Ark*
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Begin with Compassion

The church
must reach out
with love and
compassion.



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/korean 에서 보실 수 있습니다.

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

SYNOD 2023 UPHELD last year's decision to declare confessional status to the interpretation of homosexual sex as unchaste, requiring agreement on this from all Christian Reformed churches, officebearers, and members. Synod also urged churches to "be places of belonging for LGBTQ+ members seeking to follow Christ" and instructed churches "to show love to all people groups including our LGBTQ+ members and neighbors" (see p. 24).

On that score, I was reminded of what the synodical report on "Pastoral Care for Homosexual Members" said over 20 years ago on compassionate ministry (excerpted from *Agenda for Synod 2002*, pp. 326-7):

First, the church must remember that gospel, not law, has the power to redeem our lives and make us whole. Saying no is not enough. The church must reach out with love and compassion, creating a fellowship of mutual honesty, caring, and support.

Christian ministry begins with compassion. Just as Jesus was moved by the cry of the blind man on the way to Jericho, by the widow following the body of her son, ... so too we must first be moved in our deepest feelings by those who struggle with same-sex attractions.

Compassion is what we feel when we are in touch with the pain of others even though their situation may be very different from anything we have experienced. Compassion is born of imagination, the ability to put ourselves into their situation and know what it is really like. Only when we know our own brokenness, our own pain, and our own temptations can we begin to identify with others and feel compassion. That compassion is the motivational power for ministry. It moves us to reach out and do what we can. It also helps overcome their shame, the shame they do not deserve.


Compassionate ministry seeks to incorporate those with same-sex attractions

fully into the body and life of the church, satisfying (the) need for community, for intimacy, for oneness with others, and (the) need to serve (the) Lord. ... (What we all need is) to love and to be loved, to know and to be known, to feel worthwhile about (ourselves).

Compassionate ministry begins with lifting the taboo. Love and compassion will help us overcome our apprehension about same-sex attractions or about those persons who experience sexuality this way. We need not stop our ears or avert our eyes. We must break down the conspiracy of silence and the walls of separation, which convey judgment, alienation, exclusion, and loss of hope to our brothers and sisters in Christ and to those outside of Christ who have been shut out of the church.

We must pray for all who struggle with sexual temptations, some with attraction to persons of the same sex, others to persons who are not their spouses, and still others with deep, dark secrets about their sexuality and their sexual behaviors. We must speak of who we are in Christ and how little being male or female, black or white, Cuban or American, homosexual or heterosexual says about who we are. We must bear one another's burden, support one another in the Christian life, strive to live in holy obedience, hold out hope to one another, and seek healing from all our impairments.

When we do these things, we will meet our Lord, for he has said, whatever you do to the least of these my brothers and sisters, you do to me.

May this posture of compassionate ministry also help bridge the divisions among us. May all sides of the same-sex marriage debate have such compassion for each other. 



The Tent City of God

By Jeremiah Bašurić

During the pandemic, an Indigenous prayer camp developed into a tent city named Pekiwewin. I passed by the prayer camp often on my way to my work at a local inner-city agency. Some of my friends lived there. One day I biked up to the camp, and the first person I saw was someone I knew from my time at The King's University. He was volunteering to cook the meal that evening. The next people I saw were two members of the tent city. One was an Indigenous woman looking for a shopping cart; she was in the process of moving homes after a conflict with a neighbor. The other person was a man I had seen around the inner city. He generously offered to give me a tour of his home.

My guide told me that he felt safe and connected to others at Pekiwewin. He showed me where his tent was. His

friend had given it to him, and now they were in the same neighborhood in the camp. Walking, we saw that the Indigenous woman I had previously met had found a cart and was enlisting others to help with the move. One leader of the camp told us that Pekiwewin is a true community. There is harmony and joy, but also conflict and general craziness. Such is typical for those experiencing homelessness.

This kind of community might be seen as unusual or even dangerous to many of us who are used to four walls and a fence. I wonder, however, how our Lord views those who live in tents. In Scripture, one of the most formative experiences for the Israelites was their time in the wilderness. The Lord wanted the memory of this experience forever etched onto their hearts and bodies. He commanded Israel to enact Sukkot, the festival of tents. In the book of Jeremiah, we meet a nomadic

people known as the Rekabites. They were obedient to their ancestors' legacy, including the command to forever live in tent cities. Because of their obedience, the Lord blessed them (Jer. 35:19). Not all Israelites became city dwellers or land-owning farmers after their time in the desert. Scholars argue that nomads, farmers, and city dwellers lived together in Israel, with their movements depending on the abundance of the resources of the land and the seasons.

Unlike Israel, history has tended to favor houses over tents. Historians note that nomads are often seen as suspicious or even dangerous. The stripping away of the Indigenous cultures within Turtle Island (a term some Indigenous people use to refer to North America) is one horrific repercussion of this deep prejudice. Even the faithful Rekabites, according to legend, were attacked for their way of life.

This pervasive worldview has affected the way we view cities as opposed to tent cities. While cities are celebrated for overcoming wild land and draining its abundance, tent cities are criticized for their temporary nature, unruly like the wind or a gopher sneaking about. In fact, cities try to eradicate these tents through policies and practices that some say are based on Western societal values of possession, control, and mastery.

In his book *After Whiteness*, theologian Willie Jennings argues that these three values have morphed into “demonic” virtues we embody and idols we cherish. The idol of possession—the need for ownership and acquisition of material things—stems from a deformed view of human maturity in which humans evolve from being owned to becoming owners of land and bodies. The idol of control is the need to force all things into a monolithic image, procedure, or ideal—it is easier to control things that are the same. Finally, the idol of mastery praises self-sufficiency, individualism, and domination—people want to possess many things and control everything. It is my contention that when we fear tent cities and their citizens, we are actually reacting to the unveiling of these idols we zealously worship.

These idols constitute what the great African theologian Augustine described as the City of the World, in which “both the rulers themselves and the people they dominate are dominated by the lust for domination.” Those who seek to possess, control, and master are driven by this lust for domination.

In contrast stands the City of God. This city is not merely a grouping of houses and businesses. Rather, like ancient Israel, it is a diverse array of peoples and creation, including diverse ways of relating to the land. “In the City of God,”

In Scripture,
one of the
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wilderness.


declares Augustine, “all citizens serve one another in charity, whether they serve by the responsibilities of office or by the duties of obedience.”

In Pekiwewin I experienced the Tent City of God. There I was invited to imagine an alternative to these idols. Instead of striving to possess and hoard things, my community guide gave me a comb from a toiletry bag someone else had given to him. Instead of seeking to control and dominate a community by mandating how one ought to live, Pekiwewin was a place where nomads, housed volunteers, and guests like myself were invited into community. At the end of my tour, my guide invited me into his tent. He offered a mattress to lie on and some food. Even though I had a home very different from his, I felt welcomed and loved.

Instead of being a collection of independent masters, the tent city was a

place where everyone depended on each other. It was also a place where people must learn to depend on the Creator for their needs, safety, and sense of belonging. In my community guide’s tent, we prayed. We quoted our favorite Bible passages. Mine was Psalm 23. His was John 1. In this Tent City of God, I was presented new values of generosity, charity, and interdependence.

To be sure, tent cities have their own demons to contend with. However, I believe that inside their tents is salvation—or at least healing—from our idolatries. As we learn from the tent city’s inhabitants how to resist our idols, I pray that we might also be used as instruments of our Lord to heal the brokenness they too face.

May the Lord of all peoples, nomads, and city dwellers walk with us into the wilderness ahead. 



Jeremiah Damir Bašurić is a commissioned pastor at mosaicHouse Church, a multicultural Reformed church plant in Edmonton, Alta. He is also a chaplain who through an inner-city organization journeys with many people the Bible calls “rich in faith.”

1. What were your feelings about tent cities? Have you ever seen or experienced one in person?
2. Do you agree with the author’s description of the idol of possession? Do you agree that this value has become an idol in our modern Western society?

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Growing Up in a Kind, Racist Community

Those several years of disruption to our daily lives and transition to the suburbs took deep root in me.



James Dekker lives in St. Catharines, Ont. He worked for Resonate Global Mission in Latin America for nine years and nine more pastoring missionaries after serving three Canadian Christian Reformed churches for 27 years in between.

I'M NOT SURE WHEN it dawned on me that I had embraced pretty deep racist attitudes expressed unconsciously in regular behavior. Discerning, then trying to deal honestly with those, took years. It felt like peeling off layers of scabs covering my soul's eyes.

I thought I came from a diverse community in the Roseland neighborhood of Chicago. We all descended from different European ethnic groups and thoughtlessly called each other names no longer acceptable. Up and down 103rd Place resided, among others, people we called "Paddies," "Polacks," "Swedes," "Limeys," and "Krauts." They called us Dutch folks "Wooden Shoes" or "Cheese Heads." I'm not sure why we deserved two epithets. Was Dutch too much? Many parents and a few kids spoke with heavy foreign accents. Neighbors went on picnics together on summer weekends. Surely there were more, but I remember only two fights among neighborhood kids.

We knew all the neighbors from Harvard to Wentworth avenues. Kids played baseball and basketball on Roseland Christian School's playground. Every kid rode a bike all over Roseland and Beverly Hills. In winter we ice-skated at Fernwood Park or Kohn School. A few buddies and I often hung out with the firefighters on 104th Street. Sometimes they let us slide down the brass pole.

We all attended ethnic churches. Dutch people went to Reformed and Christian Reformed churches, of which there were seven; German people to Lutheran; English people to Episcopalian and Baptist; and Irish, Polish, and Italian people to Catholic churches of their groups. Other kids could ride bikes and play ball Sundays. Christian Reformed kids studied the catechism, read *The Banner*, or napped.

I didn't really know that I was "white," because everyone I knew looked like me. I often saw Black people, but I never knew a Black person until I met Rocky. He scraped Dainty Maid Candies' floors clean of thick chocolate grime dripping daily from trays carted to the packing area. Rocky mopped those floors till the maroon paint was visible. I didn't know where he lived and didn't ask. During breaks I bummed cigarettes off him; he never snitched to my Cadet counselor boss.

A mile north, 95th Street marked the divide between white and Black neighborhoods. We ventured there only around Christmas. Houses and front yards full of lights displayed Santa Claus and elves packing a sleigh with gifts. It never struck me as odd that those characters were always white.

In April 1956, my family and I took a trip to the Smokies. One afternoon we stopped at a Tastee-Freez in Tennessee. After finishing my soft-serve, I had to wash the ice cream off my hands and face. Halfway to the bathroom I saw two drinking fountains labeled "White" and "Colored." "I'd love that colored water," I thought, and grabbed the faucet. A split second later an employee shouted, "Hey, that's for n*****."

White Flight

Around 1963, Black people started moving south of 95th Street. Neighborhoods farther north were being destroyed by the Dan Ryan Expressway construction. That 11-and-a-half-mile, six-lane trench linked downtown Chicago to South Holland and Lansing, Dutch farming towns south of 159th Street. Churning to the Loop and back, the Dan Ryan displaced thousands of Black families.

White people soon began leaving Roseland. Pain and anger fueled conversations full of those wicked



names for our new neighbors. Black kids rode their bikes on “our” streets, played basketball on Roseland Christian School’s courts. Black families shopped in “our” grocery, hardware, and department stores. We didn’t know exactly why we were feeling so angry and scared, but we knew whom to blame.

Those several years of disruption to our daily lives and transition to the suburbs took deep root in me. I have spat out all those epithets when a Black person did something annoying, like throwing a candy wrapper on the ground.

I didn’t begin to recognize such attitudes and behaviors as racist until late in high school. Such community and personal blindness was, well, wooden-headed, inexcusable. Martin Luther King had been making news for years in the U.S. South, going to jail along with John Lewis and leaders of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and Southern Christian Leadership Conference. I don’t remember hearing kind words about King until after his assassination.

King’s 1963 “I Have a Dream” speech at the Lincoln Memorial moved me, but I hadn’t internalized its message. Nor did I connect his work with my

own kinship to Southern whites trying to keep Air Force veteran James Meredith from enrolling as the University of Mississippi’s first Black student; he needed police escorts for weeks. After all, Abraham Lincoln had freed the slaves; the North had won the Civil War. Northerners were the good guys. Governors Orville Faubus, Lester Maddox, and George Wallace were the bad guys, along with Birmingham’s public safety commissioner Bull Connor and his dogs attacking demonstrators.

Learning and Growing

In September 1965 I met two Black students at Calvin College. They told of walking Grand Rapids’ streets and enduring evil name-calling. Their stories stirred up my soul’s muck of shame. I’d used those names; that was how we talked in the kind, racist community where I grew up. I hadn’t really known such guilt until I was 18.

With friends like these men, painful yet healing lightning struck and made me see—the opposite of St. Paul’s Damascus Road theophany. The flashes burned into my deep racism. Images from Revelation 7 lit up a hopeful future. That “great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the

Lamb” is what Christ’s church should look like.

In 1969, my family moved to a new subdivision built in suburban Oak Forest over fertile farmland. Between 1967 and 1969, all four Christian Reformed churches in Roseland and two of three Reformed churches sold their buildings and fled south and west. Gradually my heart’s long disobedience in one racist direction lessened. Almost two years in the U.S. Army taught me to live, eat, sleep, and work with Black and Hispanic people. A Black draftee I knew lived a few blocks from where I was raised.

In basic training the two of us spent evening hours together. I described the hatred and flight of us white Christians to the suburbs. He didn’t get angry, held no grudges. After our discharge, we visited regularly. He became an award-winning teacher in Chicago’s public schools. Later I worked with Resonate Global Mission alongside Guatemalan Mayan pastors. Still today gracious Asian, African, and Latin American colleagues help scour and nurture my soul. They look and sound like Revelation 7.

Although racism now rides more lightly on my soul’s back, those many names are still the first words that roar through my mind when I see Black people. In a long microsecond I have to repent, push them down, and turn my mind to respect. Every day, though, I marvel at the miracle of God’s forgiveness that is still changing me and the communities of my youth. And it’s all because of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, the Lamb of God, a brown-skinned man who spent some of his formative years in Africa. **B**

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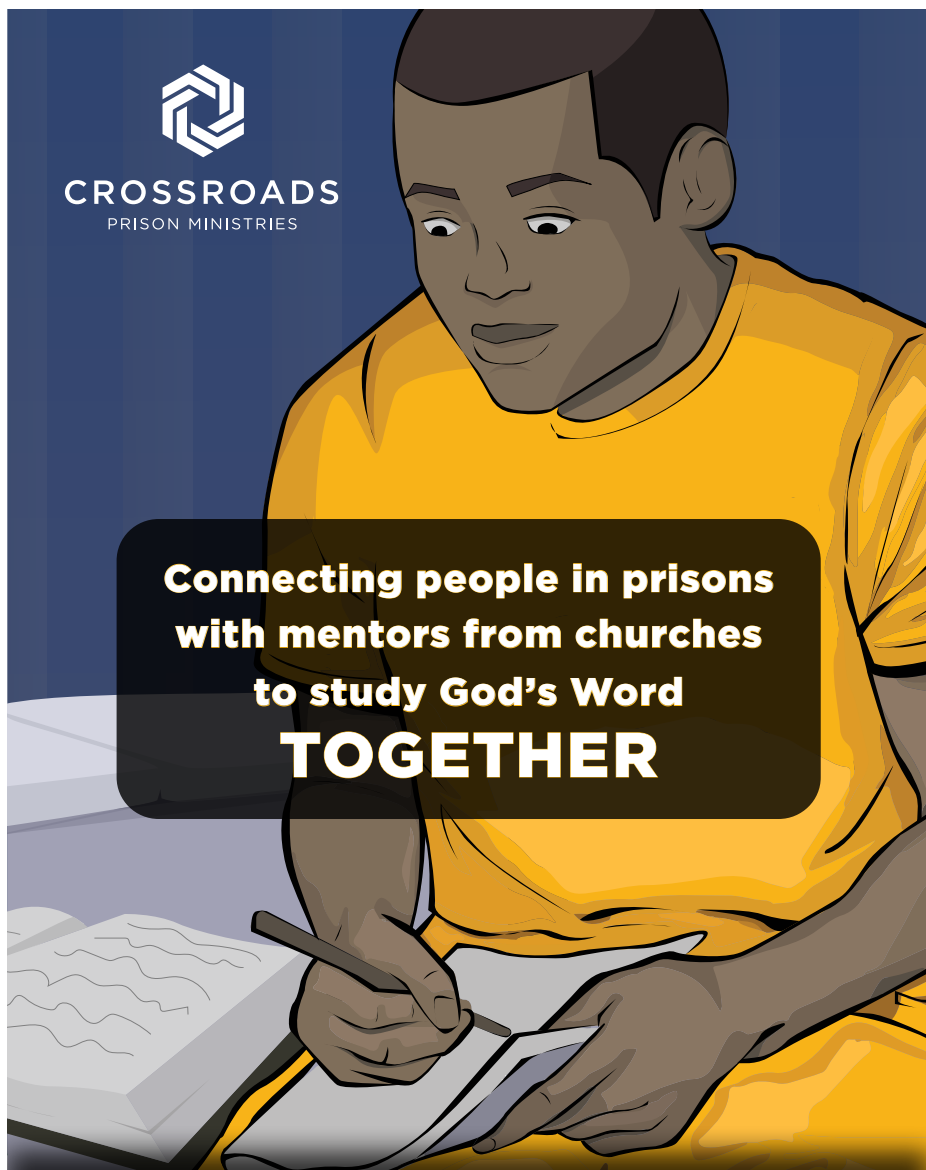
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Election and Mission

To read the Hebrew prophets is to recognize that to be chosen is a fearful responsibility.

MANY BIBLE READERS—especially those raised in Reformed church circles—find themselves unsettled when they consider the doctrine of election. What about those who are not chosen?

In response, we are often reminded that the doctrine of election can be a comfort. Why? Because it is a strong articulation of God's faithful and free gift of salvation, identity, and belonging, regardless of who we are or what we've done. But I wonder if those unsettling questions about those deemed "not elect" are on the right track. Is there something in the logic of election that we are missing?

Focusing on the comforting nature of the doctrine of election for believers can distract us from the missional heart of the biblical story of election: that God calls some for the sake of the many. Abraham and Sarah, the people of Israel, Jesus of Nazareth, the first apostles, the earliest church—the story of God choosing a few is also and always the story of God inviting all to participate in God's kingdom of "righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Rom. 14:17). The Redeemer and Reconciler's invitation to all always come through the witness of the few.



Jonathan Nicolai-deKoning is the director of the Micah Centre, a justice, anti-poverty, and global citizenship initiative at The King's University in Edmonton, Alta. He is a Christian Reformed pastor and a member of Fellowship CRC.

In fact, those in the biblical story who dwell too long on the comforting nature of their election at the expense of their calling to invite others into God's story often find themselves the object of God's frustration and anger. In Jonah 4, God asks the prophet Jonah to consider the possibility of God's care for those outside of Israel, clearly upset with Jonah's (and, by implication, Israel's) overconfidence in his identity as the chosen and his neglect of the other. Or, as God says through the prophet Amos: "You only have I chosen of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your sins" (Amos 3:2). To read the Hebrew

prophets is to recognize that to be chosen is a fearful responsibility.

Lesslie Newbigin, the British Reformed theologian and longtime missionary to India, thought long and hard about this question. Why does God appear to choose only some rather than revealing Godself to all? Why does a powerful God choose to work through the (broken and often-misguided) few? Newbigin's answer in *The Open Secret* is helpful: "The gift of salvation is bound up with our openness to one another. It does not come to each, direct from above, like a shaft of light through the roof. It comes from the neighbor in the action by which we open the door to invite the neighbor in."

Why does the gospel work this way? Because the how of the gospel is in keeping with the God of the gospel: a God of communion, whose very being is triune love-in-relation. Again, Newbigin puts it well: "There is no salvation except in a mutual relatedness that reflects that eternal relatedness-in-love which is the being of the triune God. Therefore salvation can only be the way of election: one must be chosen and called and sent with the word of salvation to the other."

That, I think, is the logic and challenge of election—the challenge of being in life-giving relationship with God and with our neighbors, for their sake and ours. It's a challenge we'll miss if we focus solely on the comfort we can derive from the doctrine. In this understanding, the gospel is less about the rescue of the souls of the elect and more about the redemption of human persons knit together with others in a shared participation in and responsibility for God's created world. **B**

Synod 2023: Incomplete and Broken

SYNOD 2023 NEWS

Synod 2023, the annual general assembly of the Christian Reformed Church, met June 9-15 on the campus of Calvin University in Grand Rapids, Mich.

In this coverage from *The Banner*, with thanks to reporters Greg Chandler, Kristen Parker, and Roxanne Van Farowe and to photographer Steven Herppich, we try to keep the parliamentary language of synod to a minimum and describe more conversationally the actions that synod has taken.

Note that an “overture” is a formal request submitted to synod; a “classis” is a regional group of churches (plural: classes); “gravamina” (singular: gravamen) are formal expressions of a question or difficulty with part of a confession; and “Church Order” is the agreed-upon and published guidelines that govern how member congregations of the CRC will work together. Church Order is often amended and updated, but only upon careful consideration and usually requiring one synod to propose a change and a subsequent synod to adopt it.

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Synod 2023 of the Christian Reformed Church in North America left many stunned and, it seemed, none happy.

Several unhappy delegates left the assembly before its conclusion. One of the walk-out delegates, speaking in a circle outside with first clerk Henry Kranenburg, said, “I stand by what I said yesterday. If God is for this, it will stand. If he’s not in it, it will fail.”

Inside, Paul DeVries synod president, spoke similar words of reassurance to the incomplete assembly, recognizing its brokenness: “God is still in heaven. Christ is still the Lord of the church.”

DeVries didn’t ask the worship team to close the session with singing as it had opened the sessions 11 times throughout the week. “Given the time constraints and some of the great difficulties with which we ended,” he said, “I don’t want to in any way manipulate this group, to force you into places that are perhaps difficult for you or don’t feel too comfortable.”

Instead he quoted the third verse of “Holy, Holy, Holy” (*Lift Up Your Hearts*, 538), which the assembly had sung together on Monday: “Holy, holy, holy! Though the darkness hide thee, though the eye made blind by sin thy glory may not see. ...”

“We have seen a lot of the ‘eye made blind by human sin’ amongst us these last several days,” DeVries said. “God is still holy—perfect in love and power and purity.”

Departing Delegates

Adrian de Lange, Classis Alberta South/Saskatchewan, and a few other delegates left in protest of a truncated debate on how the CRC should deal with formal expressions of concern or uncertainty with any part of a confession (see p. 22). Classes and churches had sent 20 overtures on these matters, and the committee processing them presented majority and minority reports in response. After less than 15 minutes discussing the

majority report, with 30 minutes left until the scheduled close of synod, the body voted to cease debate.

DeVries prayed, asking for the Holy Spirit’s wisdom. Then Cara DeHaan, Classis Hamilton, expressed deep disappointment with synod’s decision to cease debate. De Lange walked out, saying, “I have lost confidence in this body to deliberate and to seek the will of the Holy Spirit. As a result I can no longer be seated as a delegate.”

But he wasn’t the first delegate to leave. Just after morning worship on synod’s final day, Dave Struyk, Classis Grand Rapids South, told delegates: “Because of the message we sent to many LGBTQ+ people—including my son—I will be leaving synod in protest.”

Struyk was referring to decisions of the previous day to uphold Synod 2022’s interpretation that “unchastity” in the Heidelberg Catechism includes “homosexual sex” and to uphold the confessional status of that interpretation (see p. 18).

Incomplete

Twenty minutes before Synod 2023 was scheduled to adjourn, the officers of synod determined that synod was unable to completely process what it had left to do—including that vote on how to deal with statements of confessional difficulty (gravamina) and the officebearers who file them. Out of time, the officers of synod determined to defer to Synod 2024 the 20 gravamina-related overtures and another overture asking synod to “shepherd” congregations who disagree with synod’s decisions into another denomination. (These are advisory committee reports 8D and 8E-majority and -minority, if you’re keeping track for next year.) One delegate challenged the officers’ decision to defer, but the challenge was not sustained. DeVries told synod: “Even if we were to act on this motion, we have several more to go. There’s no tenable



In the Calvin University Chapel, in the last moments Synod 2023, the officers of synod consult with director of synodical services Scott DeVries and synodical parliamentarian Kathy Smith to determine how to proceed.

way that we could get through it in a good and healthy way. That's the collective judgment of four officers."

Seeking to 'Lead With Grace'

Before its incomplete and broken ending, Synod 2023 did try to hold the edges of a clearly divided church together. Sean Baker, a pastor-church ministry consultant with Thrive, the CRC's new congregational ministry agency (see p. 26), had encouraged delegates at the very beginning to "find ways to treat the people around you as the very essential parts of the body that the apostle Paul describes." Baker called for a "measured pace," not too fast or too slow, so that the process would be as clear as possible and no one would feel "swept along or left out." And DeVries had announced that the galleries around the perimeter of the Calvin University chapel meeting space would remain open throughout all discussions. "We think transparency is important," he said.

Synod compromised on reading notes of protest from delegates of classes that understand from Scripture that women are not to serve as elders, deacons, or pastors. Church Order does not require that protests of seating women as delegates be read aloud, but the president of synod has regularly done so since women were first seated in 2008. Synod 2023 adopted a new practice: If an individual or classis protests the seating of women delegates on their written credentials, the synod president would only name the individual or classis and read aloud an acknowledgment of the CRC's two differing views on women serving the church (see p. 25).

Synod 2023 adopted a Code of Conduct for Ministry Leaders (see p. 28). An earlier version had been presented to Synod 2022. The adopted version has a new introduction that positions the code as

subservient to Scripture and the confessions and notes that "the implementation of the Code of Conduct is the responsibility of the local council."

Synod urged congregations to "be places of belonging for LGBTQ+ members seeking to follow Christ" and instructed churches "to show love to all people groups, including our LGBTQ+ members and neighbors, by condemning hateful or demeaning speech and violent or demeaning actions." Those statements came after synod decided to maintain Synod 2022's confessional-status declaration on the definition of "unchastity" and before synod rejected the appeal of Neland of Grand Rapids, Mich. Neland Avenue CRC had asked Synod 2023 to repeal a Synod 2022 order calling for the congregation to rescind its decision to ordain a deacon who is in a same-sex marriage (see p. 20).

Left to Wait

While an earlier vote showed synod's desire not to delay acting on implications of the human sexuality report (see p. 19), up against the clock and with confidence in the body lost for some members, more time—breathing space—is exactly what the CRC will have as it waits for Synod 2024 to take up what Synod 2023 left undone.

"May we, even as we leave this place with much of the brokenness we came in with still all broken," DeVries implored, "... leave with rejoicing on our lips, because that's always directed toward God."

—Alissa Vernon, Banner News Editor

Synod Upholds Confessional Status on Interpretation of Unchastity

Synod 2023 upheld Synod 2022’s interpretation that “unchastity” in the Heidelberg Catechism includes “homosexual sex” and upheld the confessional status of that interpretation. Synod was responding to overtures from six classes and five congregations that had asked for changes to the 2022 decisions.

An advisory committee presented recommendations in two separate reports, with a minority opinion proposing a change from “confessional status” to a “settled and binding” decision of synod. Despite two requests from the floor during discussion to take up that minority report, only the majority report upholding the confessional stance was debated.

While there were two reports, Willem Delleman, Classis B.C. North-West, chair of the full committee and for the minority report, told delegates working with this group of brothers and sisters was one of his best experiences. “The Holy Spirit brought unity in the (committee meeting) room and allowed us to listen to each other.”

Erik DeLange, Classis B.C. South-East, spoke against the recommendations of the majority report, noting that the church has been divided before. “We can debate this all day long and for years to come, but I believe we’re at a pivotal moment in history,” he said. “Last year we declared the truth, and this year we need to declare the spirit of unity.”

Thomas VanderPloeg, Classis Grandville, also spoke against the majority report: “We have people with questions and confusions, and the HSR (human sexuality report) tried to bring clarity, but confessional status brought more confusion.”

John Klompfen, Classis Heartland, was a member of the committee that put forth the majority view. “Our confessions help us to have a clear and abbreviated understanding of Scripture,” he said. “Homosexual sex is a sin, just as any other



If confessional status is building more walls, drawing harsher lines, and breaking more relationships, then I don’t stand for this motion.

—Samantha Brinkman,
young adult representative

sin, and can be repented (of), and there is great hope in it. For the person who needs to repent just like me, we need the gospel, we need the Scripture, and we need the confessions.”

Committee member Timothy Turner, Classis Illiana, spoke in favor of including a background statement in the *Acts of Synod*. The statement calls out misuse of Scripture and the confessions and advocates for “‘radical obedience’ to Christ—both in holding to His Word and in the manner by which we journey together—ALL together.” Turner said it’s “an attempt to create a lasting record of the wrongs of our church and of our commitment to do better.”

Myiah Klinger, a young adult representative who was on the committee, said she “endorses the (majority) report.” She said, “Our officebearers are held to a higher standard than the people in our congregation.” She emphasized the need to ensure that officebearers “are not (simply) abiding by these things, but they believe (them).”

Samantha Brinkman, another young adult representative, said young adults



I feel this is necessary for us as a church, and necessary for the sake of the gospel.

—Joshua Dykstra,
Classis Illiana

are “searching for a posture that represents Christ.” Though young adult representatives do not have voting privilege, she said, “If confessional status is building more walls, drawing harsher lines, and breaking more relationships, then I don’t stand for this motion.”

Rita Klein-Geltink, Classis Quinte, who was reporter for the committee that authored the minority report, asked, “If this (upholding confessional status) passes, can someone who is unsure of what God expects of LGBTQ+ people become a member (or remain a member) of the CRC?” With a weary voice, she said, “If my four sons and their wives fall into this category of ‘unsure,’ can the CRC still be their home?”

Steven Zwart, Classis Lake Superior, who was reporter for the majority committee, responded to Klein-Geltink with tears and hesitated to give a clear “yes” or “no” answer. He said, “What grieves me is that we make decisions here, and then we leave—and some decide to be ogres and jerks about it.”

He turned to the delegates, saying, “If you’re going to vote for this majority

Synod Says No to Delaying Action on Human Sexuality Report

report, please don't leave here and be a jerk about it."

Responding again to Klein-Geltink, Zwart said, "Yes, I want to believe, if we're not jerks about it, we can find a place to converse."

Seemingly unsatisfied, Klein-Geltink called back from the floor, "That's a no."

Joshua Dykstra, Classis Illiana, spoke in favor of maintaining confessional status, saying, "Yes, it's hard; yes, it's difficult; yes, there are pains behind it—but I feel this is necessary for us as a church, and necessary for the sake of the gospel."

Synod 2023's other related decisions were:

- » to decline one church's request to define "chastity," saying the human sexuality report already adequately describes it.
- » to decline revising the definition of homosexuality as requested by Classis Southeast U.S., saying there weren't sufficient grounds for the request.
- » to decline an overture from Classis Eastern Canada that would in effect create a local option by allowing individual congregations to decide whether or not to allow same-sex marriage.
- » to decline an individual's request to make the CRC's doctrine of marriage confessional because the "doctrine of marriage is already clearly articulated."

—Kristen Parker

Synod 2023 turned down requests from several Christian Reformed churches and classes to delay implementation of the conclusions of the human sexuality report, which last year's synod approved for church use.

The overtures, from Classis Alberta North, Classis Eastern Canada, a Michigan congregation, an Ontario congregation, and one individual, argue that Synod 2022 changed the category of the CRC's position of prohibition on homosexual sex from pastoral advice to confessional status. Because that is a dramatic change, the overtures claim, churches need three years or more (depending on the overture) to decide what actions to take and to address the harm that LGBTQ+ people might feel.

The statement adopted by Synod 2023, however, argues that the urgency of pastoral care for LGBTQ+ people is a reason not to delay implementing the recommendations in the human sexuality report. The statement claims to be made "in a spirit of lament for failing in our pastoral care to ... the LGBTQ+ community."

Several delegates advocated for a delay.

Heidi Sytsema, Classis Muskegon, told synod that the young people she interacts with are walking away from the church: "If you actually listen to so many of the kids like I have listened, you will hear that we need time and space to work this out in a gracious way."

"We need to talk about how we can make this work so that it's acceptable to others," said Dave Apol, Classis Hackensack. "That's what we need to do before the hammer comes down. I believe that we can come together, that if we work together—not changing the conclusions, but changing how we go about things, how we go about pastoral care—I believe we can keep this denomination together."

But a few delegates voiced firm opinions that a delay is unnecessary.

"Pastoral care will always be important and a part of our ministry," said Dave Ten Clay, Classis Georgetown. "But three years' delay will lead to confusion and disunity. A three-year delay feels like an attempt to change our minds about what God says about human sexuality. God's Word is not going to change in three, five, 10, or 100 years."

"We cannot use the word 'love' to cover up the word 'sin,'" said Christian Sebastia, Classis Rocky Mountain. "Giving more time is not going to change God's opinion of what he already has established."

Fourteen people registered votes against the decision to not delay the implications of the report. (See note on negative votes, p. 21)



We need time and space to work this out in a gracious way.

—Heidi Sytsema,
Classis Muskegon



Three years' delay will lead to confusion and disunity.

—Dave Ten Clay,
Classis Georgetown

—Roxanne Van Farowe

Synod Rejects Neland Avenue's Appeal; No New *In Loco* Committee

Neland Avenue Christian Reformed Church appealed an order of Synod 2022 that its council “immediately rescind its decisions to ordain a deacon in a same-sex marriage.” Neland asserted that Church Order articles 3 and 4 leave “the final judgment as to who is qualified to serve” to the local council alone and that Synod 1980 had identified “the local council or consistory as the appropriate body for decision making in complex pastoral situations.”

Synod 2023 did not accept those grounds or the appeal. It was defeated by a vote of 124 to 47, with six delegates abstaining.

Synod 2023's decision followed a review of the situation by an *in loco* committee that had been mandated to act on behalf of Synod 2022, as well as deliberation by a Synod 2023 advisory committee and passionate debate from delegates.

“This has been heavy—heavy for everyone,” said Jason Ruis, of Classis Wisconsin, who chaired the advisory committee. “There’s no desire to cause pain. Part of the heaviness of our committee is recognizing that no matter what decision we made, there would be grief and pain.”

In May 2020 the Neland Avenue elected a person who was in a same-sex marriage to the office of deacon. Officebearers are meant to uphold the confessions and teachings of the church. Since its explicit articulation in 1973, the Christian Reformed Church has held the position that homosexual sex is contrary to the will of God as revealed in Scripture. Neland expressed in a communication to Synod 2021 (deferred to 2022) that its appointed deacon was a member in good standing and that it understood “that the CRC position on homosexuality and same-sex marriage is based on synodical decisions given as pastoral guidance ...of a somewhat different weight and authority than synodical decisions considered to be interpretations of the confessions.”

Todd Kuperus, Classis Northern Michigan, was reporter for the committee that



We are not saying Neland can't stay with us. We are calling them into repentance.

—Mike Jager, Classis North Cascades

processed the appeal. “The Church Order clearly stipulates that only those who meet the biblical requirements are eligible to serve as officebearers in the Christian Reformed Church,” he said. “Thus, while local congregations have the responsibility to elect their own officebearers, they do not have the right to elect anyone who does not meet biblical requirements. ... Synod has the authority to declare the biblical requirements for officebearers.”

Michael Van Denend, a delegate from Classis Grand Rapids East and an elder at Neland Avenue, defended the congregation's position as well as the deacon, who has since completed her term and is no longer on the church council.

“You know one thing about our deacon,” Van Denend said. “You don't know her. How could you? She's a member of our congregation, our church, and it has always been the council and the congregation that make these decisions. How can you know this person? We do, and every single fruit of the Spirit is evident (in her). ... That's why our deacon was elected.”

Marilyn McLaughlin, Classis Lake Erie, also spoke in support: “Neland Avenue



You know one thing about our deacon. You don't know her. How could you?

—Michael Van Denend,
Classis Grand Rapids East

evidences the work of the Spirit. They are alive; they are growing. Their life and vision (are) bearing good fruit. How can we deny them?”

Mike Jager, Classis North Cascades, said the action against Neland Avenue is not intended to shut out the church or its members.

“We are calling them into repentance in line with what we passed,” Jager said, referring to synod's earlier decision to uphold the confessional status of the interpretation that “unchastity” includes homosexual sex. “We are not saying they (Neland) can't stay with us. We are saying they must return to our faith, to our confessions.”

“No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful,” Jager read from Hebrews 12. “Later on, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.”

Edward Yoon, Classis Ko-Am, expressed concern over ways of interpreting Scripture that depart from what he called a “conventional and common-sense approach that upholds the historic Reformed stance.”

“I have observed new and unfamiliar attempts to interpret the Bible, not based



Neland Avenue evidences the work of the Spirit. How can we deny them?

—Marilyn McLaughlin,
Classis Lake Erie

upon the already-approved or common-sense approach, but rather on each individual’s presupposed agenda,” Yoon said. “The Bible is the absolute and objective revelation of God, ... without fault or error from within.”

Bob Boersma, Classis Grand Rapids South, served on the advisory committee and said he struggled with his decision, citing Neland Avenue’s posture in handling the situation. Ultimately he supported the decision to deny the appeal.

“My heart wanted to say, ‘We’re going to let Neland go (on with what they’re doing),’ because they are doing great work,” Boersma said. “They’re doing better than most of us when it comes to offering grace. ... The issue here is, did they serve the church best by saying, ‘We’re going to go ahead and do what we did?’”

Classis Asked to Guide Neland ‘Into Alignment’

In a separate action, synod voted to instruct Neland Avenue to refrain from ordaining any officebearers in the future who are in a same-sex marriage or relationship. It also called for Classis Grand Rapids East, the regional body

to which Neland Avenue belongs, to guide the congregation “into alignment with the biblical guidelines affirmed by Synod 2022.”

Delegates voted down a motion calling for Neland Avenue to issue a letter of repentance to the churches of the CRCNA. Synod also voted against establishing a new *in loco* committee to continue oversight of Neland Avenue and Grand Rapids East. Some delegates spoke against leaving the matter with no further follow-up, but Paul DeVries, Classis Thornapple Valley, who chaired the Synod 2022-appointed *in loco* committee, called the motion to appoint another committee “a mistake.”

“It is clearly punitive, and the goal is, it seems to me, to remove the church,” DeVries said. “Neland is only learning today, hours ago, that (their appeal) was not sustained. And now we’re going to go ahead and outline the procedure for removing them? It’s a mistake.” DeVries, who served as president of Synod 2023, did not chair the portion of the meeting dealing with the *in loco* committee’s work.

Synod was also asked to call 10 other congregations “to repent of and rescind their public affirmations of same-sex relationships” (Overture 56, from the council of Trinity CRC in Fremont, Mich.) and to instruct five other classes to begin the process of church discipline “upon constituent churches that publicly and proudly proclaim their acceptance of blatant heterodoxy” in these matters (Overture 59, from Classis Minnkota). Synod 2023 adopted two statements in response:

» That synod instruct all classes to guide into compliance the officebearers of their constituent churches who publicly reject the biblical guidelines affirmed by Synod 2022 regarding same-sex relationships.

» That synod remind all church visitors (officebearers appointed by their classes to visit churches to determine church spiritual health) of their authority and responsibility to, in a spirit of love and grace, guide officebearers into alignment with the biblical guidelines.

—Greg Chandler and Alissa Vernon

A note about negative votes:

A delegate to synod who disagrees with a particular action of synod may register his or her objection by recording a negative vote. Many of synod’s decisions were not unanimous, and several delegates did register negative votes.

At the time of publication only draft minutes for Synod 2023 were available, and the full number of negative votes registered against particular decisions of synod were not available. Names of those who did register negative votes will be included in the printed *Acts of Synod 2023*.

We couldn’t fit all the synod news in this print edition. Visit thebanner.org/synod to find stories on prayer and worship, ethnic advisers, young adult representatives, and more.

READ MORE ONLINE

Discussion of ‘Confessional Difficulties’ Cut Short; Matter Pushed to Synod 2024

Synod 2023 received 20 overtures about the practice of officebearers filing confessional-difficulty gravamina—formal expressions of question or concern regarding a certain doctrine or part of a confession. The committee that dealt with these presented minority and majority reports at the very end of synod’s deliberations.

According to the majority report, a confessional-difficulty gravamen is intended “to allow officebearers to honestly question doctrinal matters contained in our confessions, giving them space to wrestle with the biblical accuracy of these doctrines while also ensuring that there would be a season of pastoral care provided for the officebearer in his/her struggle and search for clarification.”

Todd Kuperus, Classis Northern Michigan, reported for the majority, which said the process “should be time-bound and time-sensitive and should result in a final decision whereby some terminal action takes place.” The suggested timeframe for councils to resolve such gravamina was “six months or until the next classis meeting” with additional time-bound steps, if necessary.

That’s far too short, said Brandon Haan, Classis Grandville, who described the 10-year process he personally went through in moving from what he called homophobia to an affirming stance of LGBTQ people in the church and finally to a traditional stance. The process suggested by the majority report “greatly decreases the freedom to go through the wrestling” and “short-circuits the process.”

Kuperus said, “We aren’t trying to shut down conversation or struggle. We’re saying it can’t go on in perpetuity.”

The minority report presented a view that the gravamen process could “have boundaries” but also “room to struggle,” as reporter Robert Boersma, Classis

Grand Rapids South, described it. Instead of a prescribed, time-bound process, the minority report wanted to convey that “the officebearer is expected to submit to the church’s confessions and judgments and must not teach, disciple, care, or counsel against the doctrine for which they are filing a gravamen.” It suggested revisiting any filed gravamina yearly “so that the officebearer may both (1) continue to serve in faithful ways—including, but not limited to, delegation to larger assemblies—and (2) work actively toward full realignment with the confessions.”



Ceasing debate is incredibly harmful to whatever sense of trust the minority has in this body.

—Cara DeHaan,
Classis Hamilton

The minority report was not debated; synod voted down one request to take it up. On the first recommendation of the majority report—to make changes to the Church Order supplement that would “clarify the proper use of a confessional-difficulty gravamen,” including that “it is not a request for an assembly to tolerate a subscriber’s settled conviction that a doctrine contained in the confessions is wrong”—synod heard five speakers: two for and three against. Then vice president Chad Steenwyk, who chaired that portion of the meeting, called to cease debate, and synod voted to do so.

That abrupt end didn’t sit well with Cara DeHaan, Classis Hamilton, who chaired the minority report. “What you’ve done here by ceasing debate is incredibly harmful to whatever sense of trust the minority has in this body.” She acknowledged that synod was on a timeframe, having less than an hour left in its meeting, but asked, “Could you please give at least a few people the chance to voice their disagreement with what the body apparently has already voted on? ... I cannot believe we are going to vote on this incredibly, incredibly important motion without proper deliberation.”

Craig Buma, Classis Northern Illinois, was on the committee and said even they faced time constraints before bringing their recommendations to the floor. “I don’t think we do good things when we do it this way,” Buma said.

Demonstrating that others also felt things were not being done in good order, Adrian de Lange, Classis Alberta South/Saskatchewan, rose to speak. “I have lost confidence in the ability of this body,” he said, removing his name tag. At this time, a handful of delegates stood up, took off their name tags, and walked out, many of them not leaving a record of their departure.

Sid Ypma, Classis Eastern Canada, said, “I’ve waited to talk about one thing, and it was this, and I knew I wasn’t hopeful. But what ties me to this body is so much more than the human sexuality report. I’m willing to say I will not go against the creeds and the confessions, and I will abide by this body.” He continued, “But the way we’re handling this now, I also, under protest, am leaving,” and walked out.

Before leaving in protest, Sonya Boersma, Classis Eastern Canada, said, “I feel this denomination, in which my parents started two churches, has lost all integrity.”

After a huddled officers’ meeting to determine what to do next, Steenwyk

'No' (Again) to Belhar as Confession



I have lost confidence in this body. I can no longer be seated as a delegate.
 —Adrian de Lange,
 Classis Alberta South/Saskatchewan

proposed to have Synod 2024 respond to the overtures listed in the report. He said, "We as the officers are going to make that ruling, and we are going to pass that on to next year."

This decision was initially challenged but then supported by delegates. Paul DeVries, president of synod, confirmed that if someone who served on Advisory Committee 8 is back at synod in 2024, their work on the previous year's committee will be considered as the past officers make next year's committee assignments. (Officers of one synod make up the program committee for the next synod.)

Synod 2024 will receive the unaddressed material from the 2023 8E-majority and -minority reports as deferred overtures, and the reports themselves as communications.

—Kristen Parker

Synod 2023 unanimously resolved not to revisit adopting the Belhar Confession as a Christian Reformed confession but made separate actions to encourage its use in CRC congregations.

First Hamilton (Ont.) CRC brought an overture to synod asking that the Belhar Confession, created in 1982 by South African Reformed Christians in response to apartheid, be adopted as a CRC confession. Synod 2017 decided to adopt the Belhar in the category of "contemporary testimony" rather than as a church confession.

"We've had an entire synod devoted to this discussion. This has already been decided," said Tim Turner, Classis Illiana.

Some delegates, while agreeing not to revisit the Belhar's status, did want synod to encourage churches to act on the Belhar's ideas.

Synod 2023 encouraged churches to "make regular use of the Belhar Confession in worship and daily practice." Synod also recognized that adopting the Belhar as a contemporary testimony in 2017 "was a significant step in a journey of ongoing racial reconciliation, and more steps are needed." Lastly, synod encouraged churches to make use of the denomination's resources on racial justice available from Indigenous Ministry (Canada) and Thrive.

—Roxanne Van Farowe

No Change to Belgic Confession

Classis Alberta South/Saskatchewan asked synod to revise a couple of articles in the Belgic Confession regarding the specific naming of Anabaptists. Synod chose not to make this change, referencing the response of Synod 2002 to a similar overture: "Historically, synod has opted for a historical-textual, rather than a 'too literalistic approach to the Confessions' in the hope that we would avoid making so many changes to these documents. ... Our confessions were born in a certain climate of theological debate and can be best understood in light of that history" (*Acts of Synod 2002*, p. 499).

Synod also noted that "while the change seems simple" (Alberta South/Saskatchewan only wanted to replace "Anabaptists" with 'those' in two instances), "due to the widespread usage of our version of the Belgic Confession in other Christian denominations, we do not want to create undue complexity" without engaging with them.

—Kristen Parker

31

31 of the delegates to Synod 2023 were also delegates to Synod 2022.



Synod Urges Churches to Show Love, Inclusion

In a mood of sadness over divisions in the room, Synod 2023 took several steps intended to increase inclusion of LGBTQ+ people in the church.

Synod urged congregations to “be places of belonging for LGBTQ+ members seeking to follow Christ” and instructed churches “to show love to all people groups, including our LGBTQ+ members and neighbors, by condemning hateful or demeaning speech and violent or demeaning actions.”

“I don’t know more than a handful of churches that have even tried to do those things well,” said Brandon Haan, Classis Grandville. “It costs me nothing to uphold the position of 1973. It costs many of us nothing to uphold the biblical position. But it should cost us. (It should cost us) to open our homes and our lives and our families and our relationships to people with whom we differ. Do not go home and



If we’re going to be able to manage disagreements, we have to be able to have them.

—Michelle Rooker,
Classis Alberta North

just stay at home. Do not think we can embody the posture of 1973 (the CRC’s first report on pastoral care to same-sex-attracted people) simply by having a list of resources. We have to actually do what we said. It’s been half a century. The time is now.”

Synod also affirmed “our commitments (as local congregations) to manage disagreements ... with love, charity, and grace, and to ensure ... a respectful place to honestly (share views and listen).”

While synod accepted this statement, some delegates questioned whether, after what synod had already decided, disagreements are even allowed.

“This statement is lovely, and I can completely get behind it,” said Michelle Rooker, Classis Alberta North. “But we’ve been told we are not allowed to have disagreements. ... If we’re going to be able to manage disagreements, we have to be able to have them.”

“How do we show love to all peoples?” asked Stanley Jim, Classis Red Mesa. “We should love by condemning hateful or demeaning speech and violent or demeaning actions. As Indigenous peoples, we’ve been living with broken treaties for many years, and I hope this is not a broken treaty to us as well.”

Several delegates referred to the CRC’s *Challenging Conversations* toolkit as a quality resource for working through disagreements. But they also mentioned the potential impossibility of those conversations given synod’s recommitment to the decisions of Synod 2022.

“*Challenging Conversations* was for us a very helpful tool to begin the process of managing disagreements,” said Bernie DeJong, Classis Huron. “We were well on the way to developing something meaningful for our congregation. Now ... we have to manage a live grenade or hot potato that synod is tossing into our lap.”

—Roxanne Van Farowe

Communication on Racism and Biblical Justice

Zachary King, general secretary of the Christian Reformed Church, prepared a “Communication on Racism and Biblical Justice” in response to Synod 2022’s instructions. It was included in the supplemental agenda for Synod 2023, released just nine days before synod convened. In the communication, King notes the importance of “opposing racism and embracing a biblical vision of ethnic diversity.” He referenced the Christian Reformed statement on race relations developed between 1957 and 2022 and included on the denomination’s website. Expressing a posture of lament, King referenced resources from Calvin Theological Seminary and from Thrive (formerly Congregational Ministries) “to help your church pray over, lament, and commit to addressing racial injustice in our churches, our communities, and our world.”

The communication was included in a list of things presented by the Council of Delegates early in Synod 2023’s proceedings. Young-Kwang Kim, Classis Wisconsin,

32

32 female delegates
155 male delegates

Female – 17%
Male – 83%



Synod Has New Acknowledgment for Protests of Seating Women Delegates



We need to keep having conversations about racism and white supremacy and how we could coexist in our denomination.

—Young-Kwang Kim,
Classis Wisconsin

said, “We shouldn’t receive this as information as if we are done talking about this,” adding that a three-page report does not (give the topic) justice.

“I would hate to see that be the message here—that we have done our work and we’re moving on,” Kim said. “We need to keep having conversations about racism and white supremacy and how we could coexist in our denomination.”

King said, “The (communication’s) length doesn’t equal the weight,” noting that “much of the ministry of our denominational institutions and agencies really revolves around the work that was mentioned in that document.” He mentioned several of the ministries by name, including Thrive, which he said includes work focused on “encouraging ethnic (diversity) groups in their ministries and enfolded them in the Christian Reformed Church.”

The “short communication does not stand alone,” King said.

—Alissa Vernon

Classes and delegates who theologically view the offices in the church as only open to men—one of two biblically honoring views in the Christian Reformed Church—may, as a matter of conscience, register a protest to the seating of women delegates at synod, but Synod 2023 decided such protests will no longer be read aloud.

“Delegates who believe the seating of (or election of) women delegates (or synodical deputies) is in violation of the Word of God may record their protest on the appropriate credentials,” reads the supplement to Article 45 in the Church Order. “Their names, along with protests, shall be recorded in the minutes of synod.” Traditionally that has included having the protests read aloud, but synod parliamentarian Kathy Smith clarified that the supplement only indicates that the protests must be recorded in the minutes, not necessarily read aloud.

In light of that, and in response to an overture from Classis Niagara, which asked “that, in a spirit of common ministry and the unity of the body of Christ, synod refrain from reading these repetitious notes,” Synod 2023 adopted a new practice.

Recognizing that any classis or delegate has the right to written protest and that “the repeated reading of these protests has caused pain to some delegates,” Synod 2023 landed on a compromise.

The names of any delegates or classes registering a protest will be read by the synod president, and the following statement will be read: “We, as delegates, acknowledge that there are a multitude of perspectives and opinions represented among us. We recognize that there are



It’s extremely unwelcoming for many delegates, both male and female.

—Sonya Boersma,
Classis Eastern Canada

two different perspectives and convictions on the issue of allowing women to serve in the offices of deacon, elder, minister or (commissioned pastor), both of which honor the Scriptures as the infallible Word of God’ (*Acts of Synod 1995*, p. 731). Some object that there are women seated as delegates; others lament that there are not more women among us. We choose to work together despite these differences.”

Sonya Boersma, Classis Eastern Canada, objected to even including that statement. It’s unnecessary, she said, and “extremely unwelcoming for many delegates, both male and female.”

The vote to adopt the new practice passed.

—Kristen Parker

Synod Dissolves Ministry Mandates, Recognizes 'Thrive' as New Agency



Thrive co-director Lesli Van Milligen (second from left) at a Synod 2023 workshop on listening.

Synod 2023 recognized Thrive as a new ministry agency of the Christian Reformed Church. Led by co-directors Chris Schoon (U.S.) and Lesli van Milligen (Canada), the ministry is meant to engage and accompany Christian Reformed congregations “as they seek to faithfully and holistically embody the gospel in their respective contexts.”

Synod received the guiding document for the new agency, included in the *Agenda for Synod 2023*, and approved its “vision, mission, mandate, and core postures” as the synodical framework for Thrive. Synod concluded the ministry mandates of the former standalone ministries now collected under the umbrella of Thrive: Chaplaincy and Care, Disability Concerns, Faith Formation Ministries, Office of Diversity, Pastor Church Resources, Race Relations, Office of Social Justice, Safe Church Ministry, and Worship Ministries. Synod instructed Thrive to use “these historical guidelines as valuable information for understanding synod’s intent regarding the desired denominational support for congregations.”

Several Thrive staff led devotions, worship, or times of reflection during synod, including van Milligen and Schoon; Amanda Benckhuysen, who works with Safe Church; Pastor Church consultants Dave Den Haan and Sean Baker; and Worship content manager Katie Ritsema-Roelofs.

Ritsema-Roelofs coordinated the liturgies for the week, planning times of worship for the beginning of every session of synod except those prepared by Church of the Servant, the Grand Rapids, Mich., congregation that served as host church for Synod 2023.

—Alissa Vernon

State of the Church: ‘Weak but Hopeful’

In his address to Synod 2023, general secretary Zachary King conceded that the Christian Reformed Church is weak—and that in its weakness the church looks to God for strength.

He observed weaknesses in declining membership, church closures, difficult separations, and divisive issues.

“The church has always been weak in some way, yet God has always been strong, and therefore we have hope,” he said. He compared the CRC’s situation in a changing culture to Israel’s exile in Babylon, a time of “massive disruption” when God told the Israelites to “build houses and settle down; plant gardens; ... (and) seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you in exile” (Jer. 29:5-7).

“In moments of weakness, disruption, and vulnerability, God strengthens his people to follow him into mission and ministry,” King said.

King said average Sunday attendance at CRC churches has declined from 77% of a church’s membership before the COVID-

19 pandemic to 66% of members in 2023. Yet, he added, “I am increasingly hearing reports of deepening practices of prayer and reflection. ... Furthermore, personal devotions and prayer seem to be strong among our members and have been growing.”

“There is a strong temptation to make survival of our viewpoints and our churches our focus. Yet our purity, our holiness, our theological convictions, even our very existence is secondary to God’s fulfillment of his mission through us,” King said.

“The state of the church is hopeful,” he concluded. “God is strengthening our churches to follow him in mission and ministry.”

—Roxanne Van Farowe



There is a strong temptation to make survival of our viewpoints and our churches our focus.

—Zachary King,
CRCNA general secretary

CRC to Pursue Strategy to Address Membership Decline

Synod 2023, “in humility,” acknowledged the decline of membership in the Christian Reformed Church “as of grave importance.” After quickly accepting that statement and taking three other actions in response to a detailed overture from Classis Southeast U.S., delegates debated whether the moves were enough to satisfy the concerns raised in the overture.

Synod celebrated the work that Resonate Global Mission and Thrive are already doing toward church multiplication and discipleship. Synod urged churches to use resources from those agencies in their own efforts to spread the gospel and grow the church, and synod thanked Classis Southeast U.S. for its passion about these concerns.

But that didn’t go far enough for Scott Vander Ploeg, a pastor from Classis Southeast U.S.

Vander Ploeg said, “I wholeheartedly celebrate and support” the first four recommendations, but “it’s my opinion that this is the most important matter before synod this year.” He urged the delegates to go further because “we have to have a concrete plan.”

Vander Ploeg asked synod to instruct the Office of General Secretary to “work with the Council of Delegates, each agency, as well as churches and classes” to develop a strategy to reverse the membership decline trends and work toward growth. The request included a plan for reporting on progress.

Daniel Roeda, Classis Chicago South, spoke against more “strategies,” noting that while “techniques” of evangelism have changed over the years, what is needed is not throwing another thing at the general secretary to “please figure out from the top what it’s like.” This needs to be a “congregational effort,” Roeda said. “This (evangelism) is the call of Jesus. It’s the fundamental one. We don’t need a huge study committee or to



It’s my opinion that this is the most important matter before synod this year.

—Scott Vander Ploeg,
Classis Southeast U.S.

add something else to (the work of the general secretary).”

David Bosscher, Classis Thornapple Valley, said he wanted to see synod do as much as it could to put church growth at the forefront. It’s “entirely possible that no matter what we do, we will still see a decline in the church in the West” and that “maybe there’s nothing we can do about it.” But he added that “if we are going to go down, we want to go down with our full focus on seeing if there is anything that we could have done to serve our Lord better, to make ourselves more useful, and perhaps to see God do something through us.”

Andy Littleton, Classis Arizona, expressed concern for how “our metric is membership growth only.”

Catherine Chan, an ethnic adviser to Synod 2023, said she sensed a lot of ambivalence and pessimism in the room, and she encouraged delegates to look at this from “a strength-based approach.” Chan said that if you look at the chart of denominational membership trends included in the overture, “there is a lot of decline in membership, but then if you look at Florida, they have a 2% increase.



Let’s not be so hard on ourselves. Churches who are struggling could learn from those who are doing better.

—Catherine Chan,
ethnic adviser to Synod 2023

If you look at Ko-Am, which just joined the CRC in 2014, they have a 75% increase. And for a couple of other classes, there is only a 1% or 2% decrease. Let’s not be so hard on ourselves.” Chan suggested that churches and classes who are struggling could learn from those who are doing better.

Synod accepted Vander Ploeg’s addition, which was very similar to the original request from Classis Southeast U.S. The Office of General Secretary will work with the Council of Delegates to create a strategy intended to increase membership.

Part of that may be a transformed membership. Zachary King, general secretary, encouraged delegates to “dig into the core of this issue—that is, God changing us and (our) coming to repentance to continue growth in the love and knowledge of God and the love for people who are hurting.”

—Kristen Parker

Synod Adopts Modified Code of Conduct for Ministry Leaders

With more than 75% approval, Synod 2023 voted to adopt a code of conduct for ministry leaders in the Christian Reformed Church.

The code aims to prevent abuse of power in CRC congregations by “(clarifying) for ministry leaders what is required for healthy and safe ministry and (communicating) to parishioners what they can expect from ministry leadership,” according to its introduction.

One of the affirmations in the adopted Code of Conduct for Ministry Leaders reads: “I will speak and act, in all my personal and professional relations, in ways that follow the pattern of Christ, who used his power to serve.”

Synod also unanimously affirmed that “the Code of Conduct is subservient to Scripture and our confessions and must be interpreted and utilized accordingly.” And synod proposed two additions to the Church Order stating that all officebearers and ministers must adhere to the standards summarized in the Code of Conduct. Adherence would not require a signature unless the local council implementing the code required it. Those proposed changes must be ratified by Synod 2024 before being incorporated into the Church Order.

That would be almost six years after the Addressing Abuse of Power Committee, created by Synod 2018, expressed a need to develop a code of conduct for ministry personnel. Synod 2019 called for that among its responses to the abuse of power report. The Council of Delegates adopted the report and brought it to Synod 2022 for implementation. (The



I get calls two or three times a week asking ‘How do we deal with this situation?’

—Amanda Benckhuysen,
Safe Church adviser

decision waited until then because no synods took place in 2020 or 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic.) Synod 2022 asked for more time for the churches to consider the code.

An advisory committee of Synod 2023 labored to make the code palatable to some delegates who were skeptical of it. Four classes had sent formal overtures requesting that synod reject the proposed Code of Conduct, and two others also submitted overtures criticizing the Code of Conduct for being “one-sided and an overreach” (see Overture 9 in the *Agenda for Synod 2023*) and unnecessary because Scripture, the confessions, the Church Order, and the Covenant for Officebearers are already in place (see Overture 6).

The advisory committee added a lengthy introduction to the draft of the code published in the *Agenda for Synod 2023*, adapting part of what had been an attached FAQ. “We moved to give it a much better heart,” said Ryan Braam, Classis Quinte, who served as reporter for the advisory committee. “We added

the introduction to clarify that the Bible is the ultimate authority, and we also used the introduction to set a safe and flourishing tone.” Besides the introduction, only a few minor wording changes were made.

“A document like this is only necessary in a low-trust environment,” said Patrick Anthony, Classis Central California. “One group doesn’t trust the denomination; one group doesn’t trust the pastors. This document is evidence of the tension in our denomination.”

“It’s true that we have a low-trust church,” said Blake Campbell, Classis Illiana. “But we do have to consider the creation of this document was spurred on by people who have been hurt. We are called to bear with the weaker brother. To the extent that we can bear with them, I think we should.”

“Abusers don’t know in their own minds that they are being abusers,” said Tom VanderPloeg, Classis Grandville. “If having a code of conduct helps us to clarify what is abuse, then it is needed.”

“We do have people in the CRC who have experienced abuse,” said Amanda Benckhuysen, Safe Church adviser. “I get calls two or three times a week asking ‘How do we deal with this situation?’”

Many of the calls she receives do not require serious action and might only require an apology, Benckhusen explained. “‘I am so sorry I brought you harm’—that acknowledgement goes a long way where harm has been done.” Other times, her office helps find a way for churches to “move toward a healthier culture,” she said.

In adopting the code, synod “encourages councils and classes to implement the Code of Conduct for all staff (non-ordained as well as ordained) and volunteers who are providing leadership in the church or classis.”

—Roxanne Van Farowe

Synod Urges ‘Discretion’ in CRCNA Communications on Social, Political Issues



There are matters that cannot be specifically discerned from Scripture, like how to vote on a farm bill.
 —Neil Jasperse,
 Classis Chicago South

Synod responded to Overture 3 from Classis Southeast U.S., which requested that church communications be refocused away from those “promoting or endorsing any social, economic, or political idea or action.” Synod instructed the Office of General Secretary to make a report to Synod 2024 showing “how the concerns noted in Overture 3 have been addressed.”

Synod did not opt to form a “denominational content management committee,” as the overture had requested, but it did “urge the CRCNA organization to exercise discretion when responding to social, economic, and/or political matters.”

The committee processing the overture noted that past synods have addressed similar concerns and that, in its opinion,

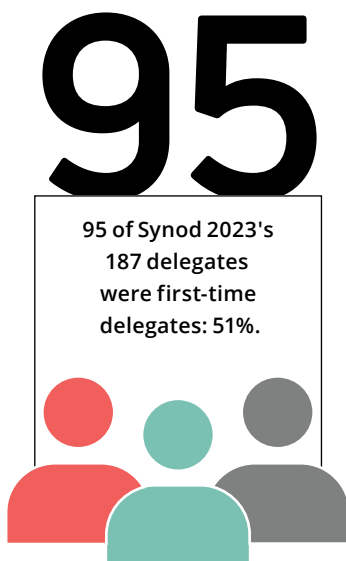
the U.S. committee created by Synod 2018 to provide guidance and support to the Office of Social Justice “has not done enough to oversee and guide the communications.”

“Further, broader guidance is needed for the entire CRCNA organization on how it ought to communicate on social, economic, or political matters,” the committee said. (Note that the Office of Social Justice and eight other ministries are now grouped under Thrive, the CRC’s new congregationally focused agency.)

The reporter for the committee, Neil Jasperse, Classis Chicago South, described discretion as “wisdom, being aware of dynamics, of moving cautiously.”

“We as a committee realized that this was a fine line—God’s church is called to be prophetic, and there are clear areas that we can speak boldly to from biblical principles,” Jasperse said. But there are other matters, he continued, that cannot be specifically discerned from Scripture—like how to vote on a farm bill. There, “it would be obvious,” Jasperse said, to “be discreet in the steps you take.”

—Alissa Vernon



Kevin DeRaaf Appointed as Director of Resonate



I stand here with deep conviction that God has led me to this place.
 — Kevin DeRaaf, director,
 Resonate Global Mission

Kevin DeRaaf, acting Canada director of Resonate Global Mission who was nominated as the mission agency’s director in February, was appointed to that position by Synod 2023, effective July 1. DeRaaf is replacing interim director Joel Huyser.

“I didn’t accept the job easily,” DeRaaf said. “I don’t need to tell you why someone might hesitate to become a church ministry director at a time like this,” referencing church membership decline, ministry finances, theological division, and politics. Yet, he said, “I stand here with deep conviction that God has led me to this place,” and he said he enters the role with “excitement and anticipation.”

Several delegates and observers showed their support by wearing yellow shirts from Resonate reading “The Future Looks Bright.”

“I dare in faith declare: the future is bright,” DeRaaf said, noting he “cannot believe how much good work is done by good people around the world and across North America under the Resonate banner and as part of the Christian Reformed Church.”

—Kristen Parker

Synod Blesses Candidates at the 'Doorway' of Ministry



Delegates, family, and friends pray for and visit with candidates (top to bottom) Kevin Kornelis, Anastaze Nzabonimpa, and Zhengfei (Stone) Wang.

In a service that emphasized humility and calling, Synod 2023 welcomed the latest group of candidates for ministry of the Word in the Christian Reformed Church (see pp. 43-45). Fourteen of the 30 candidates were able to attend in person, while the other 16 participated via livestream.

Susan LaClear, director of Candidacy, encouraged the candidates to consider their work to be a vocation rather than just a job to be done. She introduced a litany based on Philippians 3:4-15:

“Lord, give us grace, that we too may consider all that we’ve gained in this life as loss compared to the surpassing worth of knowing Jesus Christ, our Lord. And whenever we are tempted to place our identity in achievements, status, or righteous works, please draw us back to resting in your grace alone.”

Jul Medenblik, president of Calvin Theological Seminary, addressed the candidates: “Today is a day that marks your transition in this ‘doorway moment’ between school and church. This is a church that loves you, that desires to pray for you and also to encourage you to the ‘doorway ministry’ of Jesus Christ.”

After Medenblik’s address, synod sang a song based on the Lord’s Prayer called “Your Will Be Done.”

“Your will be done, my God and Father, as in heaven, so on earth. My heart is drawn to self-exalting. Help me seek your kingdom first,” the first verse says.

Synod delegates, along with family and friends present, gathered around each candidate in the room to pray a closing blessing over them.

—Roxanne Van Farowe

Relaxed Rules for Who May Be Delegates



We’re aiming to have all four spots of a delegation full so it gives classes more freedom to delegate.

—Ryan Braam, Classis Quinte

Synod 2023 approved a change to the Church Order that gives classes more freedom in selecting delegates. The change, recommended by Synod 2022, could result in fewer deacons serving at future synods.

Church Order Article 45 will now read that “ordinarily” a minister, elder, deacon, and other officebearer will be delegated, and that “a classis may send no more than two delegates bearing the same office.” As a result, any classis could choose to send two ministers and two elders to synod, resulting in less deacon representation.

“We’re trying to aim for having all four spots of delegation full so it gives classes more freedom to delegate accordingly,” said Ryan Braam, a delegate from Classis Quinte and reporter for the advisory committee that dealt with the Church Order change.

It is also true that, with the change, a classis could send two deacons along with an elder and a minister, but typically more deacon spots have remained vacant

Tijerina-Pike and Daley Join Calvin Theological Seminary Faculty

since they began to be included in the delegations at Synod 2016. At Synod 2023, there were seven deacon vacancies and one elder vacancy.

Several delegates argued that deacons are needed to add diversity to synod.

“It took 53 years of work to get deacons at the table,” said Heather Strooboscher, Classis Grand Rapids North. “One of the arguments is that it’s hard to find deacons to attend synod meetings. Hard work is hard, and we need to work hard to include marginalized voices at the table.”

“Studies have shown that in solving complex problems, diverse groups consistently outperform teams of like-minded experts,” said Heidi Sytsema, a deacon delegate from Classis Muskegon. “We’re dealing with complex problems at synod... We need deacons present here.”

“The point of diversity can be viewed from two different angles,” said Braam, noting that some “ethnic minority classes have had a harder time finding deacons, so this change (could) give them better representation.”

—Roxanne Van Farowe



Gabriela Tijerina-Pike

Synod 2023 interviewed and approved two new faculty members of Calvin Theological Seminary. Gabriela Tijerina-Pike, Ph.D., is now director of Latino ministry and an associate professor of New Testament. Daniel Daley, Ph.D., was appointed assistant professor of New Testament.

Tijerina-Pike replaces professor Mariano Avila-Arteaga as director of the seminary’s Latino/a Ministry Program. In her interview with synod delegates she described her path to Reformed theology as a “long path with different layers.” She grew up in Monterrey, Mexico, serving in various ministries. After being led astray by a pastor, she said, she devoted her efforts to studying the New Testament and learning Greek. The influence of a Christian Reformed pastor made an impact, she said.

Tijerina-Pike obtained her Ph.D. from the University of Aberdeen’s School of Divinity in Scotland in 2008. She has served as the academic director for the Spanish program at Christian Leaders Institute since 2017 and was the president of Seminario Todas Las Naciones (All Nations Seminary) from 2019 to 2022. She taught at Thirdmill Seminary and Christian Leaders Institute.

She said she was “all in” for the three forms of unity in the CRC, which she called “the three main guides”—the Belgic Confession, the Canons of Dort, and the Heidelberg



Daniel Daley

Catechism—and referred to them as “treasures.”

Daley comes to CTS from the University of Leuven in Belgium, where he served on a fellowship for the past four years in the school’s department of theology and religious studies with a focus on biblical studies.

A native of California, Daley grew up in a home where his parents were not believers, but he was introduced to faith by his grandparents and extended family. Daley was later encouraged by a pastor who had heard him speak to consider entering vocational ministry.

Daley said that when he studied books on biblical exegesis as an undergraduate student in Oregon, “I chipped away at all the wrong answers until I got to what I thought were the right ones, and when I looked at it, I thought, ‘That looks like Reformed theology.’”

Daley served in various pastoral roles at two churches in Reno, Nev., before going to graduate school. He earned two master’s degrees at the University of Edinburgh and then moved to Trinity College Dublin, where he was a tutor and assistant lecturer of New Testament for four years while earning his doctorate. He has written two books, published through Baylor University Press: *God’s Will and Testament* and *Ideal Disciples: A Commentary on Matthew’s Beatitudes*.

—Kristen Parker and Greg Chandler

‘Assisted Suicide’ Will Be Addressed With a Task Force and a Position Statement

Synod 2023 agreed that the Christian Reformed Church needs a statement on assisted suicide and tasked the general secretary to “promptly create” an interim statement, realizing he cannot speak for synod. Synod also appointed a task force to make a comprehensive report.

Almost all the delegates were in agreement with that action.

Mark Quist, Classis Rocky Mountain, said, “I would love to have something official and clearer from the church,” especially since his state, Colorado, has already approved assisted suicide. “I need guidance,” Quist said.



I would love to have something official and clearer from the church.

—Mark Quist,
Classis Rocky Mountain

“As a Canadian, this is our lived experience,” said Victor Laarman, Classis Huron. “It’s absolutely diabolical, and we need a statement about it.”

Sonya Boersma, Classis Eastern Canada, recommended including as many Canadians as they can on the task force because, she said, “what you’re talking about is already fully integrated into the Canadian health care system.”

Michael Abma, Classis Grand

Rapids East, said, “It’s too simple to just make a short statement on something this complex, and I look forward to seeing some of the people in our denomination give us some guidance.”

Meanwhile, Eric Tisch, Classis Hamilton, expressed frustration at having to wait for a task force. “We’ve already formed our opinion,” he said. “MAID (medical assistance in dying) should not be there. I object to commissioning a task force when a statement will do. However, the general secretary has already mentioned (that office) can’t provide you with a statement. You have to wait for the report.”

Synod 2023 agreed to appoint a task force with eight members that will present a report in two years. Before the end of synod, officers announced that they had received nominations for membership on the task force but there was not enough time to put those names to synod for a decision. Synod empowered its officers to finalize the appointment of members to the task force.

—Kristen Parker

Synod Plans Changes to Church Order for Pastors With Two Jobs

Synod 2023 acted to make changes to the Church Order and its supplements that will better serve bivocational pastors in the Christian Reformed Church.

Bivocational pastors have two jobs: one in the church and another outside of the church. The number of bivocational pastors has greatly increased in the CRC over the past several decades, especially as the denomination has become more multicultural. The CRC has welcomed and encouraged these pastors’ decisions to answer the call to ministry while holding another job.

Yet the language of the CRC’s current Church Order has a “distinct bias toward full-time pastors,” as Synod 2023 president Paul DeVries put it. The Church Order allows pastors to take a second job only “by way of exception” (Art. 15). Elsewhere, the Church Order implies that employment deemed to be “non-ministerial” is incompatible with the office of minister of the Word (Art. 14-d).

That language from both articles is now slated to be removed, reflecting the current reality. An approved addition to Article 15 clarifies that a calling church is not required to provide “proper support” (a salary and benefits) to the pastor it calls; rather, the church must “attend to” such support by creating a financial plan to “include income and benefits provided by a variety of potential sources.” The financial plan should be “carefully reviewed and signed by a classical counselor” when



Pastors understand the call from the Lord is full time, but unfortunately this is the reality.

—Harold Caicedo,
Classis California South

Synod Wants Theological Report on ‘Virtual Churches’

the pastor is called to ministry and also reviewed when the financial arrangement changes.

“The church needs to communicate with the pastor to know that the pastor is being cared for financially,” said Mike Vander Laan, who reported to synod for the the Study of Bivocationality Task Force.

These proposed changes are subject to the approval of Synod 2024 because changes to Church Order or substantial changes to its supplements require the agreement of two synods.

In a related action, synod encouraged classes to fund the education of bivocational pastors in equal measure to their funding of traditional seminary students. Synod also instructed the Office of General Secretary to “create an exit interview / ministry postmortem learning process for classes, churches, leaders, and their families to use when burnout occurs in bivocational ministry.”

A few delegates spoke in response to the bivocational study. Harold Caicedo, Classis California South, said the bivocational pastors he works alongside “don’t want to work (second jobs). They understand the call from the Lord is full time, but unfortunately this is the reality.”

According to the Study of Bivocationality Task Force report, printed in the *Agenda for Synod 2023*, up to 75% of pastors in African American congregations are bivocational, as are 65-70% of pastors in Hispanic churches and 40% of pastors in Chinese congregations. Among Korean churches, most lead pastors are full-time employees, but a majority of associate pastors are bivocational. In 2020, 40% of church planters were bivocational, synod heard.

—Roxanne Van Farowe

Synod 2023 declined a request from the council of Wyoming (Ont.) Christian Reformed Church to declare that a virtual church—“a church which, by design, meets only online”—is not a church and instead asked the CRC’s Office of General Secretary to create a report to give a “theological framework for the possibilities and parameters” of a virtual church.

Some synod participants were hesitant about that request. “I anticipate that our future generations will struggle to live an embodied and present life,” said Daniel Choi, young adult representative. “Virtual church will teach the next generation to become reliant on the resources they can find online rather than actual, in-person human connection.”

“I’m wary” of the theological implications, said Ryan Braam, Classis Quinte. “I hope the study committee would spend deep work on (what it means to) ‘embody.’”

Jim Heyboer, Classis Grandville, noted how technology has changed so quickly and added, “We owe it to the church and to ourselves to investigate.”

Scott Muilenburg, Classis Minnkota, drew attention to the confessions of the church and said that adhering to them would already rule out a “virtual church” as a church. Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 96, he said, affirms no other worship of God “than (as) he commanded in his Word.” Muilenburg said that by that confession, “We all believe in the regular principle of worship—you may not like it, but you believe it.”

Adrian de Lange, Classis Alberta South/Saskatchewan, and reporter for the committee recommending the virtual church report, said, “A virtual church may or may not be a real church, but the reason cannot be that there is only one legitimate manifestation of the church, so we need the work of this report to explore (that).”

Maarthen Reinders, Classis Toronto, was in favor of producing the report. He said his background in the sciences has taught him that if you “presuppose your answers,” you just “confirm your bias.” He wanted the CRC to “start looking a little more creatively and being a little more courageous if they want to increase in number rather than presupposing outcomes and fitting models we’re already in.”

Zachary King, general secretary, said, “There’s an opportunity in this discussion to be creative about what mission can look like in creative contexts around the world.”

Synod did not stipulate a timeline for the report but did require that it:

- » have input from (at least) a faculty or staff member of Calvin Theological Seminary, Resonate Global Mission, and Thrive.
- » address the marks of the true church articulated in the Belgic Confession.
- » be presented to the Council of Delegates for discernment.

Synod said the report “might address similarities and differences between online ministry and a virtual church, exploring opportunities and pitfalls in each.”

—Kristen Parker



Future generations will struggle to live an embodied and present life.
—Daniel Choi,
young adult representative

Synod Tweaks Ministry Shares Program, Asks for Continued Study

Synod 2023 received the Council of Delegates' review of Ministry Shares Reimagined, the revamped system by which pooled money is collected to fund shared ministry in the Christian Reformed Church. Synod directed the Office of General Secretary to implement some improvements and to continue the review into next year, particularly reaching out to congregations that are not currently contributing ministry shares.

Last year's synod asked the Council of Delegates to examine how congregations were responding to the revamped ministry shares program, which in 2019 switched from requesting a prescribed per-member amount to inviting



We want to hear from those who don't participate in the ministry share program.

—Drew Sweetman, Classis Muskegon

church councils to pledge a self-determined amount.

After reviewing trends in denominational giving, seeking input from among its members and classis stated clerks, and having conversations with deacons and classis treasurers, the Council of Delegates suggested changes that Synod 2023 adopted:

- » Provide greater flexibility in the pledge process cycle, allowing each church to determine its pledge cycle based on its fiscal year.
- » Suggest to the churches what would be a reasonable amount to cover basic denominational operational costs as part of their pledge.

Synod 'Strongly Advises' Against Weddings Without Civil Sanction

Synod 2023 strongly advised pastors in the Christian Reformed Church not to officiate marriages that will not be licensed by the civil government. That was the recommendation of a report on ecclesiastical marriage that the Office of General Secretary will now send to the churches for guidance.

In an ecclesiastical marriage a couple is married "in the eyes of the church but not in the eyes of the state," said the statement adopted by synod. CRC pastors should not solemnize such marriages, synod decided, for three reasons: the Bible teaches submission to governing authorities; Reformed churches have historically acknowledged civil marriage; and solemnizing such marriages could create legal problems for pastors and participants.

However, synod encouraged churches to "respect and honor the marriages of Indigenous peoples and immigrants who did not obtain a civil marriage ... and counsel them in the understanding of



Indigenous cultures have their own customs for marriage that predate the civil authorities of the U.S. and Canada.

—Stanley Jim, Classis Red Mesa

Christian marriage and its relationship to civil authority in (Canada or the U.S.)."

John Hoekwater, Classis Northern Illinois, said he has encountered some people who receive disability benefits and want

to commit "their relationships but did not want to be married because it changes their status" for receiving those benefits.

A pastor encountering such a request should not officiate an ecclesiastical marriage according to the intention of the Ecclesiastical Marriage Task Force report, said task force member Loren Velduizen. The report, contained in the *Agenda for Synod 2023*, was mandated by Synod 2019 in response to an overture from Classis Georgetown asking for biblical guidance on the issue.

Stanley Jim, Classis Red Mesa, pointed out that the original wording of the task force's recommendation referred only to immigrant marriages and excluded Navajo and other Indigenous peoples, who are often married traditionally without U.S. or Canadian government recognition. In response, the wording was changed to include Indigenous peoples.

—Roxanne Van Farowe

Synod Encourages Lament in Worship, Does Not Require It

» Provide to the churches and classes more information on pledges and giving results, including what makes up the core denominational costs.

Drew Sweetman, Classis Muskegon, who reported for the committee that recommended adopting the changes, also proposed continuing the review of the ministry shares system. Ninety-eight percent of the people who responded to the first survey “attend churches that (already) participate in ministry shares. We want to hear from those who don’t,” Sweetman said. He also recommended the Council of Delegates study similar denominations to compare systems and “work toward a new vision for future ministry-funding mechanisms.” Synod requested that the Council of Delegates recommend “further changes to the ministry share program” based on its findings.

The committee that recommended the review concluded, “A further reimagined ministry share system is needed to enable the CRCNA to perform essential functions and to engage in ministry in North America and around the world well into the future.” Synod agreed. Synod did not give the Council of Delegates a timeline for completing the further review.

—Alissa Vernon

Congregations of the Christian Reformed Church are encouraged to include prayers of lament in their worship, but Synod 2023 stopped short of changing the Church Order to require it.

Classis Quinte had asked that “lament” be added to Church Order Article 61, which currently reads, “The public prayers in the worship service shall include adoration, confession, thanksgiving, supplication, and intercession.”

“We need to practice and model lament in our churches before people look to other places for answers or give up hope altogether,” Quinte wrote in its overture.

Daniel Meyers, Classis Ontario Southwest, said lament can’t be understood to already be included in Article 61. “It is true that lament is often intermixed with confession and intercession, but it’s unwise to consider it as an element of these two,” Meyers said. He shared about his experience of losing his first-born daughter to spina bifida and how the songs, sermons, and prayers in his church’s worship services contained confession and intercession but did not contain lament. He said, “I found myself left behind from the church. I do not fault them. They did not know, and I did not know to tell them.”

Paul DeVries, Synod 2023 president, thanked Meyers for sharing and said, “We can’t help but be grieved by your story and how the church disappointed you and let you down.”

“May the church do better,” DeVries prayed, “and may we never leave people behind. Since we are sinners, all of us are imperfect; when we do leave people behind, may we be quick to lament, apologize, and strive to do better in the future.”



I found myself left behind from the church.

—Daniel Meyers,
Classis Ontario Southwest

While not changing Church Order, synod encouraged congregations to include prayers of lament in their public prayers. Lament, synod said, acknowledges pain while acknowledging God as sovereign, and it “brings authenticity to our struggles and gives permission to move beyond simple obedience into a covenant relationship with God.”

—Kristen Parker

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Synod 2023 recognized the retirements of 21 ministers of the Word and 9 commissioned pastors.



Other Actions Synod Took

One of the first actions Synod 2023 took, right after opening worship led by host congregation Church of the Servant in Grand Rapids, Mich., was to elect its officers: Paul DeVries, pastor of Brookside Christian Reformed Church in Grand Rapids, Mich., as president; Chad Steenwyk, pastor of Central Avenue CRC in Holland, Mich., as vice president; Henry Kranenburg, pastor of West End CRC in Edmonton, Alta., as first clerk; and Richard Bodini, pastor at Holland Christian Homes in Brampton, Ont., as second clerk.

Ceasing an Annual List of Accredited Organizations

Synod 2023, for the last time, endorsed a list of nondenominational charities vetted by denominational staff and recommended to the churches for offerings. The list, which this year added “222Disciple,” is included in the supplement to the *Agenda for Synod 2023*. The Council of Delegates proposed discontinuing the practice of reviewing and recommending such charities, saying that the review requires a significant amount of staff resources and that information about charitable organizations is readily available online. Synod 2023 accepted that recommendation.

Upholding St. Joseph (Mich.) CRC Appeal and Commissioning a Report on Appeal Process

The Christian Reformed Church of St. Joseph, Mich., appealed to synod on an October 2022 ruling by Classis Holland, the regional group of churches to which the St. Joseph church belongs. The classis had ruled that suspended church members have standing to file overtures,

overruling the local consistory. Synod 2023 contended that the church council had been correct.

“Church Order gives primary authority to the local consistory in matters regarding church discipline, including the rights and privileges of members,” said Matthew Ford, a delegate from Classis Greater Los Angeles and chair of the committee that reviewed the appeal.

Classis Holland has since apologized for a breach of confidentiality noted in the appeal.

Ford said the committee “discerned that though there were some mistakes made by several parties, it also seemed that several parties were seeming to do their best in the midst of (a) difficult situation,” Ford said.

Looking for clarity going forward about how members under general discipline can seek an appeal, synod directed the Office of General Secretary to have a committee or task force design or clarify an appeals process for such cases.

Bringing Clarity to Historical Committee Mandate

The Historical Committee, one of synod’s three standing committees, asked Synod 2023 to “endorse the delineation of the respective duties of the general secretary and the Historical Committee regarding oversight of the denominational archives.” There had been some confusion after Synod 2019 changed how the archives would be managed. Among six responsibilities laid out for the Historical Committee is advising the Archives Advisory Council on “annual budget and major budget expenditures; major strategic policy initiatives; (and) key staff positions.” Among five responsibilities laid out for the general secretary is to “serve as the final authority with respect to security, confidentiality protocols, and usage.”



President Moses Jawara from the CRC in Sierra Leone.

Synod also noted that the Historical Committee is adding “members from the Korean church community and Classis Red Mesa, where oral history is being documented.” Synod president Paul DeVries called that “a pretty significant step” and thanked the Historical Committee and the participating Korean and Red Mesa members for working to fix a gap in collected content.

Accepting Updated Handbooks

Synod endorsed a draft of a second edition of the *Council of Delegates Governance Handbook*. The Council works on behalf of synod between meetings of synod. The handbook is being updated to reflect changes included in reports, supplements, and agreements adopted in 2021 and 2022. That includes the effects of the Synod 2022-adopted Structural and Leadership Task Force report.

Synod also approved a reorganized edition of the *Commissioned Pastor Handbook*, last updated in 2019. The new version retains “all of the preceding edition’s important content” but is reorganized into a more logical order with renamed sections that more clearly identify specific information.



Jamie McIntosh, co-director-Canada of World Renew

Welcoming Ecumenical Guests, Formalizing Relationship with Alliance of Reformed Churches

Synod welcomed Laura Osborne, coordinator for Interreligious Relations from the Reformed Church in America; Cullen Rodgers-Gates, director of development and membership with the National Association of Evangelicals; and president Moses Jawara from the Christian Reformed Church in Sierra Leone as guests to Synod 2023.

As part of its ecumenical work, synod formally recognized the Alliance of Reformed Churches as a “church in cooperation.” The ARC denomination was formed in 2021 by a group of churches that broke away from the Reformed Church in America. By way of exception, synod allowed ARC churches or ARC officebearers with previous dual CRC-RCA credentials to maintain their CRC affiliation. Synod directed the Office of General Secretary to appoint a team of staff and experts to work with the ARC on the orderly exchange of officebearers between the two denominations and other related matters.



Dan DeKam, director of U.S. ministry operations for the CRCNA

Recognizing Appointments of New Leaders

World Renew’s new co-director-Canada Jamie McIntosh, greeted Synod 2023 in a heartfelt address. He started in the role with the relief and development agency of the CRCNA in February, working with Carol Bremer-Bennett, co-director-U.S. As part of the time of introduction, McIntosh asked if synod would commission him to his work. A delegate from Classis Muskegon prayed, “Father, we pray that you would give to this man the overflow of God’s almighty Spirit. When he is weak, make him strong. When he is afraid, make him bold. When he speaks to the powerful, give him the words to say. ... In the midst of all this, may he experience the joy and delight of being used by you.”

Earlier, Dan DeKam, the U.S. ministry board’s appointee to the position of director of U.S. ministry operations, also introduced himself to synod. “God doesn’t steer a parked car. Those wheels have to be moving for God to direct you and move you,” he said of his veering away from education administration, where he’s worked for the past 30 years, and into ministry operation.



Joel Huyser, retiring interim director of Resonate Global Mission

Honoring Retirees

At a banquet Wednesday, synod honored Dee Recker, who retired from her role as director of synodical services in January 2023, and Joel Huyser, who would retire from his work with Resonate Global Mission at the end of June (see p. 39).

Recker served with the denomination for 23 years, and Huyser for 28.

Approving Lee Street CRC as Host Church for Synod 2024

Synod accepted the invitation of Lee Street CRC in Wyoming, Mich., to be the host church of Synod 2024, which is scheduled to convene next June in Grand Rapids, Mich. Lee Street leads worship services in English and Spanish and has partnerships with local schools and community ministries. Serving as host congregation, the invitation suggested, would give synod the opportunity to celebrate diversity and outreach within the CRC.

—Synod 2023 news team

CRCNA's 2023 Canadian National Gathering

The third Canadian National Gathering met May 25-28 on the campus of Algonquin College in Ottawa, Ont.

Delegates representing the 11 Canadian classes of the Christian Reformed Church in North America and those from the Canadian portion of the one binational classis (Lake Superior) met together with senior ministry leaders, Indigenous Christian leaders, and other invited church members for an agenda focused on matters of justice and reconciliation with Canada's Indigenous peoples.

More than 30 people led workshops, took part in panel discussions, told stories, presented a drama, and served as session or worship leaders. In an opening address, Adrian Jacobs, the CRC's senior leader for Indigenous justice and reconciliation in Canada, told the story of the Two Row Wampum covenant—an agreement for peaceful trade made in 1613 between sailors from the Netherlands and the Haudenosaunee people they encountered in what is now upstate New York. The covenant is commemorated by a beaded belt with parallel lines in blue and white.

Jacobs challenged delegates to renew this early friendship between two very different peoples. Throughout the national gathering, two artists, one Indigenous (Lorrie Gallant) and the other "settler" (Becky Jones), imaginatively represented the wampum belt on canvas. The finished painting will hang at the CRCNA's Canadian ministry office in Burlington, Ont.

Worship throughout the gathering evidenced the will to love God cross-culturally. Jonathan Maracle, founder of the Indigenous musical group Broken



Photo by MurrMedia (murrmedia.com | @murrmedia.co)

The praise team, including Indigenous drummer Jonathan Maracle (front row, second from left), leads worship. The Two Row Wampum, representing a covenant between Dutch newcomers and Haudenosaunee people in 1613, can be seen projected in the background.

Walls, led opening worship on Thursday, pounding a large buffalo-hide drum as he chanted. A praise team led by worship leader Ruth Ann Dykstra Schuringa joined in with guitars and voices, chanting along in harmony with the syllables projected onto a screen. The chant transitioned into a prayer to Yeshua (Jesus) before moving into worship songs and choruses familiar to most of the people at the gathering. Many in the room joined hoop dancer Kenny Wallace, dressed in red and green with beadwork accessories, in a dance around the hall. Wallace (Aboha 'a Chihowa) is an African American Choctaw Pawnee living in Canada.

"I have not had a non-Native worship team join with me in worship ever before," Maracle said. "It was a cool experience seeing the joyous expressions of the worship team doing something new."

Dykstra Schuringa added, "I think that was one of the best things I have ever experienced in my life."

The Canadian National Gathering happens every three years for the purpose of celebrating and discerning

CRCNA ministry in Canada. It first took place in 2016 in Waterloo, Ont. Plenary sessions at the 2023 gathering included "Theology in the 21st Century" by Ray Aldred, director of the Indigenous Studies program at the Vancouver School of Theology, and "Reconciliation on the Front Lines," led by Bert Adema, Harold Roscher, and Shannon Perez, directors of the CRC-established Urban Indigenous Ministries.

Financial support for the gathering came from individual donors, participants' registration fees, and, according to the printed program, "ministry shares; CRC classes across Canada; CRC agency and ministry sponsors including the CRC Extension Fund, Diaconal Ministries Canada, Resonate Global Mission, ReFrame Ministries, and World Renew; external partners including Citizens for Public Justice, the Micah Centre, and NAIITS (originally North American Institute for Indigenous Theological Studies and now called NAIITS: An Indigenous Learning Community)."

—Ron Rupke

Joel Huyser Retires

Having served as a missionary in Central America, as a regional mission leader, and most recently as interim director of Resonate Global Mission and director of U.S. ministry operations, Joel Huyser is retiring from the Christian Reformed Church at the end of June.

“He truly loves the world and its people, and that shone through everything he did in his service with Resonate,” said Joyce Suh, Resonate program leader for intercultural gospel witness. “In spite of larger responsibilities, he was always present in the moment with the people or person he was with.”

Huyser was born in Sully, Iowa, and attended Trinity Christian College in Palos Heights, Ill. He completed one year at Calvin Theological Seminary before moving to Denver, Colo., to work in an urban mission. While in Denver he also attended the University of Denver College of Law and met Jeannie Rodriguez, who would become his wife. Together they moved to Grand Rapids, Mich., where Huyser spent 14 years as a trial lawyer.

In 1995, wanting to immerse their family in a Spanish-speaking environment, the Huysers moved to Costa Rica for a year of language training and then worked with Christian Reformed World Missions (since combined with Christian Reformed Home Missions to become Resonate Global Mission) in Nicaragua. After a period of home



Joel Huyser and his wife, Jeannie.

service and in the wake of Hurricane Mitch, Huyser helped to establish the Nehemiah Center in Nicaragua in 1999 to train pastors and ministry leaders with a holistic approach to the gospel. He served as the center’s first director until it passed to Indigenous leadership in 2006.

Huyser then became Resonate’s regional director for Central America and later for Latin America and parts

of Asia. After 18 years in Central America, the Huysers relocated to Dallas, Texas. Last summer, when Zachary King, former director of Resonate, became general secretary of the Christian Reformed Church, Huyser stepped in to serve as interim director. That role and the work of director of U.S. ministry operations postponed Huyser’s retirement plans by six months. He is 71.

Kevin DeRaaf is the new director of Resonate (see p. 29). Dan DeKam was hired as director of U.S. ministry operations by the U.S. ministry board in May.

“I am eager to release the work to both Kevin and Dan,” Huyser said. “What I have been doing, they will do better.”

—Jenny deGroot

Remembering Tim Keller, 1950-2023

The following is an excerpt of a story by Bob Smietana, published May 19 on religionnews.com. Reprinted with permission.

Tim Keller, an influential Presbyterian Church in America minister who had been under treatment for pancreatic cancer, died May 19. He was 72.

Known for his intellectual and winsome approach to evangelism, Keller founded Redeemer Presbyterian Church in Manhattan in 1989 and grew the congregation into a network of churches across the city. Among his best-selling books was *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (2008).

“We are forever grateful for his leadership, heart, and dedication to sharing the love of Christ with others. While we will miss his presence here, we know he is rejoicing with his Savior in heaven,” wrote Bruce Terrell, a leader of the Redeemer Leadership Network.

Growing up in a Lutheran and then Evangelical Congregational church, Keller lost interest in practicing Christianity while studying at Bucknell University even though he was a religion major, according to a recent biography by Collin Hansen.

Keller later recounted having a conversion experience as a result of being involved in an InterVarsity student ministry.

“During college, the Bible came alive in a way that is hard to describe,” he wrote in his book *Jesus Is the King*. “The best way I can put it is that, before the change, I pored over the Bible, questioning and analyzing it. But after the change, it was as if the Bible, or maybe Someone through the Bible, began poring over me, questioning and analyzing me.”

Keller was a cofounder of the Gospel Coalition, a fellowship of evangelical churches, but his ministry reached outside evangelical circles.

“Tim’s pastorate was universal, a gift to believers and unbelievers alike. When I hear the term ‘Christlike,’ I’ll think of him,” said author Jonathan Rauch, a friend.

Keller is survived by his wife, Kathy, three sons and their spouses, a sister, and seven grandchildren.



Photo by Nathan Troester

—Religion News Service



The Evolving Face of the CRCNA

By Chris Meehan

Because of an intense interest in the Reformed tradition in recent years, the Christian Reformed Church in North America has become substantially more diverse. While elements of diversity have been there all along, there is great cause for celebration as people from Korea, Central and South America, Africa, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia have either formed their own congregations or joined existing churches.

Clearly, the face of the once-primarily Dutch denomination is in transition. But becoming more diverse has not been easy. The journeys of some churches reflect the challenges and uncertain twists in the road leading to the grand kingdom vision described in Revelation 9:7: "After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language standing before the throne and before the Lamb."

Willowdale CRC, Toronto, Ont.

After immigrating in 2007 from Iran to Toronto, Ont., Sylvie Charliekaram and her husband, Nasser Zand, began looking for a church.

"We wanted a church where we could feel the love and protection of God," Charliekaram said. "We wanted a church familiar with the Reformed tradition and doctrine. We looked and searched and prayed. We came across

Willowdale CRC, and they welcomed us. It was as simple as that."

At the time, Willowdale was struggling. Members were mostly Dutch and older. Its future was uncertain. But opening its heart and its doors to people from a different cultural background has become a sustaining gift for Willowdale.

"We want to be a church for all nations and have been willing to go through the challenges and sacrifices to make that happen," said Lesli van Milligen, a member of Willowdale's preaching team and co-director of the CRC's Congregational Ministries.

Today, almost half of Willowdale's congregation speaks Farsi, the main language of Iran. Charliekaram and Zand continue to serve as congregational leaders. More than 100 baptisms have taken place, mostly of children of immigrant parents, and the Sunday worship service uses a mix of English and Farsi.

Charliekaram's background as a Christian who married a Muslim man has played a key role as Sylvie has helped navigate the challenges and disappointments of building diversity at Willowdale. She is acutely aware of how the intricacies of faith can weave in complex ways through a person's life.

"New people and even long-time members need a lot of time and patience to be discipled into a new way of living and being together," she said. "We need to realize that everyone has a culture with its own elements, and

we need to honor that as we work with the people."

A 30,000-foot View

Churches across the CRC have learned that creating a multicultural congregation can be difficult, and many churches have yet to start the process.

"Becoming more diverse has been a challenge for years," said Reggie Smith, the CRC's director of diversity. "So many CRC churches haven't had it in their DNA to do outreach. Instead they really need to be pushing the boundaries, often leaving an old culture and accepting a new culture."

"The key for a church to grow in diversity is for traditional churches to take the stance that they need to reach out and be welcoming to others," said Bing Goei, former director of Race Relations for the CRC (an agency that is now part of a group of congregational ministries to be called "Thrive") and a member of East Leonard CRC in Grand Rapids, Mich. "To be diverse, churches need to find ways to adapt to others while at the same time sharing the gospel. Often it is not a matter of them becoming like me, but of me becoming like them."

New Westminster CRC, Burnaby, B.C.

Although New Westminster CRC still had a solid footing, a few years ago pastor Andrew Beunk was looking hard at the future of his largely white church with Dutch ancestry. He realized, with the help of then-associate pastor and missiologist Michael Goheen, that in order to thrive in the

future New Westminster needed to open itself to the wider world and especially the changing neighborhood around the church.

This isn't to say that the church, founded in the early 1950s, had neglected responding to the needs of others, Beunk said.

"Early on, because education was so important to the members, the church built a Christian school," he said. Outreach and refugee resettlement were also crucial. "In the (19)70s and '80s," Beunk added, "we took in refugees from Cambodia and elsewhere. We have also sponsored refugees from Afghanistan and Syria and continue to do that."

And New Westminster has always prioritized outreach. "The Holy Spirit has always opened us to diverse cultures in meaningful ways," Beunk said. A few years ago, the church transformed its parsonage into a center for international students from local colleges and hired Hyung Jun Kim, a Korean pastor who initially worked with the international students and eventually became New Westminster's pastor of multicultural leadership and discipleship, reaching out to the growing Korean population in the neighborhood around the church. In essence, Kim is helping to realize the vision Beunk and Goheen had of finding a way to engage and attract new church members from their neighborhood.

"I was serving as a pastor at a Korean Presbyterian church in the area before coming here," Kim said. "I left that church because I wanted experience and to broaden my understanding of church outside the bubble I was in."

At first, he attended New Westminster "to get a deeper understanding of the wider Canadian church" and especially of how a Reformed congregation lived

The face of
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out its faith. After he was hired, he said, "I slowly leaned into my job and began connecting with people who started to learn that New Westminster had room for them. Korean families saw that at this church they could build a life together with others."

Today, more than 40% of church members are Korean or come from ethnic groups other than the historically Dutch majority, Beunk said. The next challenge, Beunk said, will be to foster deeper relationships and friendships between those long-time members and those who are part of a more recent wave of immigrants to the area. "We have been preaching about the need to sit down at the table (outside of Sunday worship) and letting the Holy Spirit help us to go deeper and to bring people together," he said.

Resurrection Church, East Boston, Mass.

Another road to diversity in the CRC has come through church plants, such as Resurrection Church in East Boston, Mass. Before launching Resurrection about four years ago, Justin and Sarah Ruddy and a few others took an in-depth look at the history and

demographics of the neighborhood and the range of resources available to its mostly Latino population.

"We had a core group of people that prayed for God to work in us and to reach beyond ourselves into the community," Justin Ruddy said. "It has been a self-emptying process that had to happen, and that is hard. We realized we needed to do ministry for those who are below the poverty line as well as those who are more well-to-do. If we want to do multicultural ministry, it has to go all the way down. It can't just be a good idea you are trying out."

Raul Hernandez and his family are members of the church. They were attracted to the Reformed view of faith as part of everyday life—a view Hernandez had appreciated at his evangelical church in Honduras. After the family emigrated to Texas, Hernandez learned about the CRC and Reformed doctrine from a pastor friend, and when the Hernandezes moved to East Boston, they found Resurrection.

"We looked online, and God put in our path Resurrection Church, which represented an obstacle owing to that we only speak Spanish, but there was something inside our hearts that brought us to them, and (the language problem) did not matter to us," Hernandez said in an email translated from Spanish.

After starting to attend Resurrection, he said, "we felt really good because of the reception that all the members of the church gave us. In Resurrection we have found things that we have never experienced in our former churches—things that I consider a gift for our family and for our community in general. You can see and feel the presence of God, from the services and the preaching to the social gatherings. In

all areas of the church, the person of Jesus Christ is praised and exalted.”

African Community Fellowship, Kentwood, Mich.

Sitting in his church office, John Mondi spoke of the challenges he’s faced as pastor of African Community Fellowship CRC, a congregation in Kentwood, Mich., that is home to scores of immigrants and refugees from countries across Africa.

“Other than a few services here or at other churches in the CRC, we haven’t blended very much with our Dutch brothers and sisters,” said Mondi, who grew up in Kenya.

On Sundays, people from countries such as Sudan, Tanzania, Ethiopia, Uganda, and Nigeria gather at Mondi’s church to sing songs from those countries and hear prayers and a sermon in English.

Some of the church members are refugees who fled war and starvation; others are students; others came to the U.S. to live and work. Some have lived here for many years.

One of Mondi’s particular challenges is that many of his newer church members work at low-paying jobs and, after paying their bills, have little left over to give to the church. Although more than 150 people call this church home, Mondi is the only person on the payroll.

“We have seen good growth, but we cannot hire anyone to help out,” said Mondi, who is also a member of Resonate Global Mission’s West Michigan missions team. “We could grow more, especially in the area of youth ministry, but to sustain that ministry we need more resources.”

Despite its financial struggles, the church was able to raise enough money to expand its

building to accommodate the growing membership.

“We are grateful to be where we are and appreciate being in the CRC,” Mondi said. “We continue to pray that God and others will walk alongside us as we go forward.”

Four Corners CRC, Teec Nos Pos, Ariz.

Members of the Navajo Nation have been part of the CRC for more than a century. But about 20 years ago, CRC pastors and mission workers began to leave the area. Many pulpits were left without preachers, threatening the very existence of this unique part of the denomination.

Hoping to preserve the Navajo CRCs was Classis Red Mesa’s Leadership Development Network. The LDN formed in 2008 to train church leaders along the border of Arizona and New Mexico.

Among LDN’s first students were James and Darleen Litson from Four Corners CRC in northeast Arizona.

“There were eight of us in the first bunch. We were the guinea pigs,” said Darleen Litson, who grew up at Four Corners. “Over three years, they taught us preaching and the Bible and other things in two classes a month.”

Getting LDN up and running “was a ton of work and a lot of blood, sweat, and tears,” said Ruth Benally, one of LDN’s early teachers, “but by God’s grace we got it off the ground.”

“People really needed something like this. We offered training that wasn’t available before,” said Lora Copley, another early LDN leader. “We asked students to dig into Scripture and see how it applies to boots on the ground... We asked them to devise ministry plans and make them happen in their communities.”

Darleen Litson said she and her husband found ways to shore up ministry at Four Corners through their ministry plans. Then, after they graduated from LDN and were licensed to preach, James Litson began preaching at the church.

LDN has certainly played a role in preserving Native American churches and their diversity across the rugged desert country and mountainous landscape in New Mexico, Arizona, and part of Utah. But, like many churches today, those congregations are seeing young people leave to worship elsewhere or not at all. “The LDN has given us leaders,” Darleen Litson said, “but we are getting old and need to step aside for younger people to do it.”

Yet she believes there is hope—a grand and glorious hope—because the CRC, despite its shortcomings, has fostered a sense of God’s presence in Red Mesa over the decades.

Despite all the challenges Red Mesa churches have faced, God has not failed them in over a century, said Litson and others, and the Lord will build and preserve diversity in God’s church many years to come. **B**



Chris Meehan is a freelance writer and commissioned pastor at Coit Community Church in Grand Rapids, Mich.

Feeding Sheep

(Candidates') call stories indicate no other logical incentives to enter ministry than compulsion from the Good Shepherd.



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.

SHEEP-FEEDING is not a glamorous job. It takes the kind of people who are willing to roll up their sleeves and do the dirty work of keeping sheep alive—leading them to good grazing areas, warding off predators, shearing them, and tending to their wounds.

When the Good Shepherd walked the earth, surely the miracles and teachings that earned him the most acclaim were only the highlights of his ministry to the flock of God. He also lived among them day in and day out, doing all the other mundane “dirty work” necessary to keep this wild and woolly flock healthy. I imagine him bearing with their squabbles, bad habits, and attitudes with his divine balance of grace and truth. The salvation and sanctification of this flock was the joy set before him each day and the passion that compelled him to endure the cross.

Before Jesus ascended to heaven, care for his people was still foremost in his thoughts, and he entrusted that work to one who would remain with them:

When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?” “Yes, Lord,” he said, “you know that I love you.” Jesus said, “Feed my lambs” (John 21:15).

Peter seemed to be an unlikely candidate for this job. His demonstrations of love for Jesus had always been heavy on bold professions and big gestures but light on the self-sacrificing attentiveness to the needs of others that is required of a shepherd. What a paradigm shift these words must have caused for him! Love Jesus by feeding his sheep? Surely it would take more than Peter’s own instincts to carry out this commission. His heart would have to be compelled toward that self-giving work through immersion in the promised Holy Spirit.

Throughout the ages, the Good Shepherd has continued to faithfully compel people’s hearts to love and care for his sheep. Though many might despair of the church in all its failings, Jesus has made it abundantly clear that his affection for us never diminishes. Patiently, faithfully, he prompts the hearts of those who love him to nurture and feed his sheep.

I asked a group of this year’s candidates why they were going into pastoral ministry. These are some of their answers:


“We go into ministry because that’s the only thing we can do. We’ve been compelled by God.”

“I said to myself, ‘Just attend a church, but do not be a minister’. But I felt the urgency of calling in me.”

“I consider it a deep honor to be part of the simple means of grace that God uses to feed his church.”

In their journeys toward candidacy, many have decided to leave higher-paying careers, postpone retirement, and sacrifice all margin in their schedules for years on end. They are driven not by their own ambition, but by a love for God’s people that is not their own. Their call stories indicate no other logical incentives to enter ministry than compulsion from the Good Shepherd.

May we rejoice together in the love of the Good Shepherd as we celebrate these 2023 candidates, thanking God for them and for all the other lay and ordained ministers who faithfully lay down their lives to nurture God’s precious sheep.

For contact information, biographical information, eligibility status, and testimonies from each candidate, visit the candidacy committee website at crcna.org/candidacy. 



Tomas Axeland



Rebecca Bokma



Joshua Carpenter



Jeremy Engbers



Catherine Ferchau



Dylan Harper



Jonathan Hwang



William Jones



Kevin Kornelis



Sung Lee



Brandon Mick



Robert Moore



Anastaze Nzabonimpa



Cameron Oegema



Christopher Park



Esther Park



Blake Philips



Erik Pluemer



Ryan Poelman



Jennifer Richards



Kurtis Ritsema



Adam Sculnick



Benjamin Snoek



Natasha Specht



John VanderWindt



Jolene Veenstra



Peter Vos



Marissa Walters



Zhengfei (Stone) Wang



Josephine Wong

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Fireflies

HAVE YOU EVER wondered about fireflies—those smallish beetles that flicker on summer evenings? There are more than 2,000 different species of fireflies worldwide!

Fireflies—in some places known as lightning bugs—have a fascinating life cycle. After mating, most fireflies lay their eggs in the ground. Very few lay their eggs in the water or on plants. After a few weeks, the eggs hatch, and the larvae live underground, where they eat various other small creatures. In Michigan, where I live, they overwinter below the frost line underground, then come back up in the spring.

I grew up on a farm, and I remember my dad plowing one of our more low-lying fields at night. He came back home to tell us to come out with him to the field, where he would show us something amazing. Once we got there, he started up the tractor, plowed a couple of passes, then shut off the tractor lights again. It was incredible! The ground glimmered with the soft light of disturbed glowworms, which are actually firefly larvae. Yes, firefly larvae emit a glow even while living in the dirt. It was incredible to see!



Clayton Lubbers teaches science at Byron Center Christian School and has been teaching for over 25 years. He loves the outdoors and commonly meets and sees God while hunting, fishing, and exploring creation.

Once the larvae mature, they go into a pupa stage for one to three weeks, then emerge as the adults that we are used to seeing. Here in Michigan, we have more than 15 species of fireflies. Many people know that a firefly flashes to find a mate. We most commonly notice them during this brief adulthood cycle. What many people do not know is that you can tell which species a firefly is by how often it flashes! Fireflies are attracted only to those that flash their abdomens at the same rate.

You can have fun with the fireflies at night. Go out with a flashlight and, by covering and uncovering the lens with your hand, try to match the rate of flash that you see in the fireflies. If you do it successfully, they will often respond nearly in unison—when you flash, they respond with a flash. You can even adjust your timing to get other species to respond.

The fascinating thing to me about fireflies is that even the larvae glow underground where the glow is not seen by others. This can be a great lesson for us. We know it's important to let our light shine when people are watching, but having the Holy Spirit in us means that we will let our light shine even when no one is watching—especially when we find ourselves in “the dirt.”

Be like a firefly: let your light shine all the time! 🦋

On 'Wakanda Forever' and the Nature of Grief

BLACK PANTHER: *Wakanda Forever* is the excellent sequel to *Black Panther* and takes place after the real-life death of *Black Panther* star Chadwick Boseman. The movie honors the legacy of King T'Challa (Black Panther) so completely that grief itself is a character.

T'Challa's sister Shuri (Letitia Wright) has an interesting response to her grief over losing her brother. The movie opens with the king suffering from a mysterious illness and Shuri rushing to save him. The opening line of the movie has her bargaining with Bast, the Wakandan deity, for help. Yet T'Challa is not spared.

Shuri; her mother, Queen Ramonda (Angela Bassett); and other heroes must fight to protect their nation from intruding world powers in the wake of King T'Challa's death. They must forge new alliances and a new path for their kingdom. At the same time, they must process their grief.

We too will most certainly experience grief and loss of loved ones. If you haven't, keep on living and eventually it will happen. I am thinking of the year that my 90-year-old grandmother went to be with the Lord. As I wrote this, my wife received the news that her paternal aunt died, and we planned to attend a funeral the following week. If you are currently experiencing grief and loss, there are no quick fixes, but here are some things that might help.


First, feel. Name what you are actually feeling. If it is anger, name it. If sadness, name that. If you blame God, tell him so! Start to process how you feel, because no matter how you try to steer clear of your feelings or suppress them, they have a way of getting your attention, like a child who refuses to be ignored and will get on

your nerves until you look at them and say, "OK, I see you!" Feelings need to be acknowledged.

Second, take the problem to God. God is able to take it even if you are upset with him for allowing your loss. Scripture is replete with psalms expressing anger and prophets who "complain" to God—and God listens.

Third, lament. Lament acknowledges that God is good and that the world is broken. To acknowledge the former and ignore the latter is spiritual denial. To acknowledge the latter without the former drives one to despair. Lament holds them in tension, and that's where we live right now: in the "already/not yet" kingdom of God. Until the day when there will be no more crying, sorrow, or death, we hold these truths in tension as we anticipate the great day when God will make all things new.

Finally, hope and reflect. We put our hope in the living God who will resurrect all believers one day, and we miss our loved ones dearly.

Shuri found her ways of grieving, and we have our ways as Christians. It's helpful for us as moviegoers to compare and contrast the two approaches. (Stream on Disney+, Apple TV, Amazon Prime) 



Rev. Darrell Delaney lives in Allegan, Mich., and is the director of spiritual formation at Campus Ministry at Grand Valley State University. He and his wife of 18 years have three children.



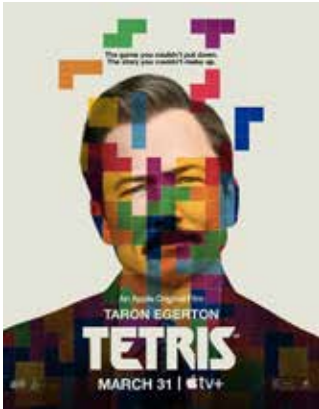
The All-American

By Susie Finkbeiner

Reviewed by Ann Byle

It is 1952 in the Detroit suburb of Bonaventure Park, an era of baseball, apple pie, and the House Un-American Activities Committee hearings. Bertha and Florence Harding, sisters as different as night and day, must face the unimaginable when their novelist father is accused of being a communist. Their worlds fall apart as friends flee, their father stops writing, and the family must move north to escape harassment.

Bertha turns to baseball, her one true love, and eventually makes the All-American Girls Baseball League's Sweet Peas team. Florence, the younger sister, escapes into the books she loves so much. *The All-American* is a great summer read as delicious as apple pie and as enjoyable as an afternoon at the ballpark. (Revell)

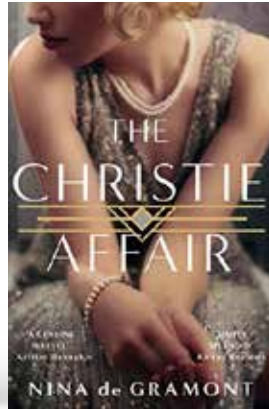


Tetris

Reviewed by Sam Gutierrez

Henk Rogers is the owner of a small game technology company who bets everything on a rare opportunity to secure exclusive rights to the game Tetris for handheld devices. Unfortunately, a powerful and wealthy company is also vying for the rights. To beat them to the punch, Rogers decides to fly to Russia to negotiate face to face. What unfolds becomes a high-risk game of its own.

Tetris is a simple game. Players flip falling blocks of different shapes left and right, up and down to fit them together in larger blocks without any gaps. It's fun and addictive. Though it's nowhere near as addictive or fast-paced as the game, *Tetris* offers a fun account of the story behind it. (Apple TV+)



The Christie Affair

By Nina de Gramont

Reviewed by Lorilee Craker

Based on Agatha Christie's real-life 11-day disappearance in 1926, this novel creates elaborate and ingenious backstories for the novelist and the surprisingly sympathetic "other woman" who ultimately came between Christie and her first husband.

De Gramont weaves a murder mystery into the plot, an imagining of what really happened to cause Christie to drive her car away and vanish, kicking off a massive search. Though this is fascinating—to this day, no one knows why she disappeared—I was enthralled by a subplot involving an adoption from an Irish convent. This mainstream novel has some sensual content, but it's not graphic.

With stunning, elegant sentences and a cracking good twist near the end, *The Christie Affair* is not to be missed for fans of mystery, suspense, and historical fiction. (St. Martin's)



Dungeons & Dragons: Honor Among Thieves

Reviewed by Sara Kyoungah White

Dungeons & Dragons: Honor Among Thieves is an affectionate nod to those who either grew up throwing dice in a friend's basement or currently spend weekends battling bugbears. But it's also a surprisingly good movie for anyone who loves fantasy adventures.

It follows most of the rules and tropes of the game, with enough insider cues to satisfy hardcore D&D players and enough context and emotional depth for even the uninitiated to follow along. In it, Edgin Darvis (Chris Pine) builds a small, ragtag team of misfits to save his daughter and the world from a former ally and his evil wizard partner.

All in all, it's a satisfying reminder of the ultimate vanquishing of evil and the triumph of all that is good, true, and beautiful. (Warner Bros.)

The Lowdown

The Upper Peninsula's Immigrants in Photos:

In *Pictured Life*, by Anneke Crans, the lives of the Dutch, Finns, Norwegians, and Swedes—immigrants to Michigan's Upper Peninsula—are revealed. This story takes the reader through family struggles and toils, shining a spotlight on the schools, barns, and homes of magnificent architecture in the U.P. (AnnCrans.com)

Your Mission, Should You Choose to Accept It:

In *Mission: Impossible – Dead Reckoning Part One*, Ethan Hunt (Tom Cruise) and his Impossible Mission Force embark on their most dangerous mission yet: to track down a terrifying new doomsday weapon before it falls into the wrong hands. (Paramount, in theaters July 12)

Season 3 Drops: In *Sweet Magnolias*, lifelong friends lift each other up as they juggle relationships, family, and careers in the small Southern town of Serenity. (Netflix, July 20)

Owner of a Lonely Heart:

When author Beth Nguyen was 8 months old, she left Vietnam at the end of the war with her father, sister, grandmother, and uncles for a life in Grand Rapids, Mich. Her mother stayed behind (or was left behind), and Nguyen did not meet her again until Nguyen was an adult. This is a memoir about family, parenthood, and life as a refugee. (Scribner, July 4)



Peacemaking in a World Full of Conflict

By Cassie Westrate and Naomi Bula

During his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus told his followers, “Blessed are the peacemakers.” The relevance of this message can’t be overstated as we experience conflict in our families, workplaces, friendships, and neighborhoods—not to mention our churches.

Sometimes this conflict is the result of disagreement or misunderstanding. Sometimes it is the result of wrongdoing that results in pain, trauma, and a need for support. In every case, peacemakers are a blessing. They help us work toward reconciliation and healing.

This is something the ministries of the Christian Reformed Church in North America are witnessing around the world.

Navigating Land Rights for Women in Uganda

For the past 60 years, World Renew has worked on behalf of the denomination to respond to disasters and work toward community development. To be successful, World Renew also works for peace and justice.

One way World Renew works with communities to address short-term crises and build long-term resilience is through land rights education. In many places, the ability to consistently provide food for one’s family is through access to land. Yet all too often, a lack of knowledge about land rights can leave people vulnerable to exploitation. Conflict over land rights can lead to tense and destructive situations. In most of these conflicts, information is power.

Joyce Ikiror lives in Apapai, Uganda. She lost her parents at a young age and was raised by her father’s brother, Francis. When Ikiror got married, she left the region to live with her husband. Together they had a son, Bernard. But Ikiror’s relationship with her husband had challenges. When things became unbearable, Ikiror decided it was best to take Bernard and return to where she was raised.

Ikiror imagined that she’d be able to start a new life with Bernard on her father’s land, but her Uncle Francis disagreed. He had been managing the land while she was away. When she asked to move home, he refused to acknowledge her right to the land. Ikiror was frustrated. Starting over and finding herself responsible for her son meant she needed a place to live. But she had no living parents or siblings, so her social support was limited. She didn’t know what to do.

Joyce Ikiror has found new joy and reconciled relationships through the peacemaking and education efforts of her local church.

Then Ikiror heard about some community meetings being facilitated by World Renew’s local partner to increase awareness about land and property rights, dispute resolution, demarcations, and legal documentation. In areas where communication can take time, literacy rates are low, and hiring a lawyer is too expensive, it is especially difficult to educate oneself on ever-changing regional laws. Ikiror reached out for support and was directed to the local Cluster Level Association chairperson, Betty Apako.

The CLA consists of members from different communities who have been trained in advocacy and mediation by World Renew. Apako agreed to discuss Ikiror’s problem with the executive members of the CLA, including Simon Oyange, a CLA member in Ikiror’s village. Oyange was tasked with calling a meeting that included the local political leader, CLA mediation members, and Ikiror’s relatives and neighbors.

At the meeting, Joyce and her uncle were given the opportunity to voice their grievances. Once each had a chance to speak, the CLA shared information about land demarcation and the rights of women under Ugandan law. Understanding he had wronged his niece, Francis apologized to her in front of all the meeting attendees.

After the mediation, three hectares of land (about 7.4 acres) were officially demarcated and given to Ikiror. Today, she and Bernard live happily on her land.

World Renew works in land rights advocacy and education in various regions throughout Asia, Africa, and Latin America. This work has a significant positive impact on food security, safety, health, and development opportunities. With God’s help and guidance for right relationships, conflicts such as those between Ikiror and her uncle can be resolved and turned into opportunities.

A Step Toward Healing for First Nations Communities in Ontario

Tensions and mistreatment between people from different ethnicities and cultures can result in deep pain and generational trauma. Resonate Global Mission partners Anthony and Barbara Pennings witness trauma from conflict every day in their ministry with First Nations communities in Canada—and they’re working to provide steps to healing.

The Penningses work with the DayStar Centre on Manitoulin Island, Ont., to share the gospel with First Nations people by building friendships and encouraging those they disciple to reach out to their own families, friends, and neighbors.

The Penningses witness the effects of generational trauma on Indigenous populations. Forced relocation, land

dispossession, boarding schools, and loss of language and culture have lingering effects, and the communities still face prejudice and racism.

"I see generational trauma, which outpours a lot of other issues," Barbara Pennings said, noting children in single-parent families, youth with low self-esteem, and the many First Nations people who struggle with addictions, depression, anxiety, and other mental illnesses.

When the Penningses learned that Resonate missionary George de Vuyst was leading a Healing Hearts, Transforming Nations workshop, they knew they needed to join. Barbara especially knew the workshop would be helpful in overcoming her own personal trauma, but the Penningses soon realized how valuable the workshop would be for their ministry with First Nations communities.

"It was a stepping stone in my own healing journey," Barbara Pennings shared. "It resonated with me. ... I'm better able to understand just a little bit about what the First Nations people have gone through. I could see how Healing Hearts, Transforming Nations would help our First Nations friends."




Resonate partners Anthony and Barbara Pennings work alongside First Nations communities on Manitoulin Island, Ont.

The Penningses have been able to use the tools they learned from the workshops in their daily work and interactions. While visiting a community in Northern Ontario, Anthony Pennings had an opportunity to minister on a local radio station.

"After sharing about the gospel and singing some songs, a community member called in to the radio expressing hurt from the historical wrongs people who came in the name of Jesus inflicted on his people," he said. "After the man expressed his pain and mistrust of Christianity, I had the opportunity to share an apology over the air on behalf of the greater body of believers for the atrocities that had happened and, in some cases, still happens."

De Vuyst said that's the kind of ministry he hopes to see from Healing Hearts, Transforming Nations.

"I hope and pray that Anthony's awareness of the pain of others and willingness to identify himself with the perpetrators and ask forgiveness will break down walls and lead to the healing of many hearts and lives," De Vuyst said.

Whether it's apologizing for harm and wrongdoing, working toward justice, or striving to be more inclusive, peacemakers continue to bless our world. Peacemaking is also an important part of the work of Resonate, World Renew, and the Christian Reformed Church, as we confess in *Our World Belongs to God*: "Anointed and sent by the Spirit, the church is thrust into the world, ambassadors of God's peace, announcing forgiveness and reconciliation, proclaiming the good news of grace" (Art. 30). 

Borderline of Hope and Heartbreak

AN INTERGENERATIONAL GROUP of 14 people representing different churches, most from the West Michigan area, spent their 2023 spring break in Texas—not on a relaxing beach but on the grim border between the United States and Mexico. They wanted to learn more about immigration and the circumstances that bring people to this border. Through the experience, they caught glimpses of hope in this area of conflict and controversy.

The group was hosted by the organization Abara: Borderland Connections (abara.org), a community of peace builders in the twin cities of Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, and El Paso, Texas.

“The staff of Abara are impressive, ethical, caring, knowledgeable, justice oriented, and sensitive,” said Karen Helder of Eastern Avenue Christian Reformed Church in Grand Rapids, Mich., “and the shelter staff on both sides of the border give their lives to this work in 40+ shelters that give (refuge) to those who have given up their safety, belongings, and health for the sake of hope for a better future for themselves and their families.”

Bev Abma of Friendship CRC in Grand Rapids led the group. It was her second time organizing a trip to the area through Abara, and she noted some changes since her first trip in January 2022.

“The 14 of us were part of a Border Encounter, and the itinerary was essentially the same on both trips,” Abma said. “However, the atmosphere and intensity seemed sadder this year.”

During its four-day stay in early April, the group met with border patrol officers, shelter workers, migrant advocates, retired government officials, pastors, and leaders from organizations such as Save the Children.

The group was told that there were 12 migrant shelters in Juarez housing about 2,000 people, but at least 8,000 more people live on the streets because of limited shelter space. Women and children get priority in the shelters, while the men get blankets from the Red Cross and fend for themselves outdoors. Officials warned the group many times that the streets in Juarez were very dangerous.

On one day the group helped organize clothes, towels, shoes, underwear, and other supplies in two different migrant shelters on the El Paso side of the border. Another afternoon they visited a migrant shelter in Juarez. There, Diane Dykgraaf from Friendship CRC sat at a table with Demar, an 11-year-old from Venezuela. They played board games with several other children from Venezuela and El Salvador, communicating simply through the knowledge of how to play the games and a desire to have fun.



An intergenerational group of 14 people spent their spring break learning about immigration at the border between the United States and Mexico.

“That day we were just people doing something fun and enjoying each others’ presence,” Dykgraaf said. “We saw past the barriers of language, culture, skin color, and country.”

“The most impactful thing for me was going to the shelter in Juarez,” said Roman Burns, a 17-year-old from Allendale, Mich., who also played games with children at the shelter. “It was fun interacting with the people, playing Memory, and getting to know Demar and some of the other kids who were there.”

Border patrol officers told the West Michigan group that on average they have 1,270 daily encounters in the El Paso sector with people crossing through openings in the fence, coming over the fence, or crossing the river. And that number is only going up.

After hearing the statistics and experiencing the conditions on the border, Dykgraaf concluded, “My mind could spin itself into a state of total hopelessness when thinking about all I learned. But even in this, I know that with God there is hope.” **B**

—Kevin Hoeksema,
Thrive

The View From Here

Conflict, Car Accidents, and the Courage to Surrender

IT WAS TIME for a new car. As missionaries working for Resonate Global Mission in Haiti, we needed to raise funds for six months to purchase a new truck for our mission. Finally we brought home a new Nissan Patrol SUV—the reliable, four-wheel-drive transportation we needed to do our work. To emotionally prepare myself for the inevitable fender-bender, I joked that the vehicle was “God’s car” (if you’ve ever been to Haiti, you will know that car crashes happen constantly). A week later I was stuck in a torrential rainstorm. I watched with dismay as a taxi with failing brakes rolled down the steep hill, crossed the centerline, and crashed headlong into God’s new car. The ensuing moments were some of the most stressful of my life as I managed my own frustration while being surrounded by an angry crowd whipped into a frenzy by the screaming taxi driver.

We love our churches, our programs, our reputation, our cherished theology or beliefs, and even (most of the time) our denomination. We are constantly washing, waxing, and buffing out the scratches on the things we love. After all, they are *ours*. And when someone or something threatens them, our heart starts pounding and our blood pressure skyrockets. Sometimes we become apoplectic. We say things we regret. We post things we shouldn’t. We see those who disagree with us as our enemies. In short, we are deeply afraid and anxious to lose the things we love—*our* things.

Like car crashes in Haiti, conflicts are constant in ministry. When faced with conflicts over our cherished things, we

Our cherished
congregations,
our theology,
our beliefs,
our children—
whatever
beloved things
they are—
belong to God.

often default to either “fight” or “flight.” Either we knock out our adversaries, or we take our ball and run home. As I get older and grow deeper in my faith, I’ve learned that healthier options are available to me only if I do something contrary to my nature: recognize that my beloved things are actually God’s beloved things.

This is a lesson I’m learning from Abraham. When asked by God to do the unthinkable, Abraham climbed Mount Moriah and prepared to sacrifice his son Isaac (Gen. 22). Isaac was the hope for Abraham and Sarah’s promised future. Yet Abraham surrendered Isaac to God, accepting that all he had, including his precious son, belonged to God. God then spared Isaac and rewarded Abraham for his faith (Heb. 11:17-19). The more we recognize God’s ownership and rule over everything we love, the more we bless God and bless others. In the words of another famous prophet, “The LORD gave and the LORD has taken

away; may the name of the Lord be praised (Job 1:21).”

We are facing much conflict in our denomination today. I would contend that before we can address this conflict in a God-honoring way, we must recognize that our beloved things are God’s beloved things. Our cherished congregations, our theology, our beliefs, our children—whatever beloved things they are—belong to God. God defends the church. God multiplies the Word. And God loves his children. Recognizing this is the non-negotiable first step in overcoming the temptation to choose “fight” or “flight” in times of conflict. This movement allows us to deal with conflict from a prayerful, discerning, and gracious posture instead of fearful reactivity.

Like Paul, I often face the “pressure of my concern for all the churches” (2 Cor. 11:28). Maybe you do too. As we face conflict over the future of our churches, may we entrust them to God’s grace and courageously surrender ourselves to God’s will. **B**



Rev. Zachary King is the general secretary of the CRCNA. He is a member of Fuller Avenue CRC in Grand Rapids, Mich.

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

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Calvin's Call to Care for Creation

ONE OF GOD'S FIRST commandments to humankind was to “cultivate and care” for creation (Gen. 2:15, NASB). That’s why Calvin University biology professor Dave Warners says the concept of creation care shouldn’t be political or divisive.

Warners explains that God, the ultimate creator, found joy in his creation. Our fundamental responsibility of caring for this creation is meant to provide us with purpose, meaning, and joy as God’s image bearers. This is not a burden, but an opportunity and a gift.

The Reformer John Calvin also had a lot to say about caring for creation. He emphasized its essential place in Reformed Christianity in his commentary on Genesis, where he said, “The custody of the garden was given in charge to Adam, to show that we possess the things which God has committed to our hands, on the condition that, being content with the frugal and moderate use of them, we should take care of what shall remain ... let everyone regard himself as the steward of God in all things which he possesses.”

Having been born out of the Reformed tradition, Calvin University has made caring for creation a priority and continues to make it a pillar of its educational experience for students, faculty, and the local community and invites high schoolers to join a creation-care Green Team each summer.

The 12-student Green Team learns about native Michigan habitats and watershed ecology, works on bioswales and rain gardens, and undertakes large-scale restoration



Calvin professor Dave Warners said the concept of creation care shouldn't be political or divisive. It was one of God's first commandments to humanity.

projects throughout the Plaster Creek Watershed, formerly the most contaminated watershed in Western Michigan. The group is led by Warners, who earned a bachelor's degree in biology at Calvin in 1985 and a doctorate at the University of Michigan.

Each summer, Warners challenges his students and the Calvin community to incorporate creation care into their everyday lives: “Be mindful of how blessed we are by creation,” he says, “and let that blessing fuel you to find ways to give back when it gives so much. Each of us on this earth is capable of enhancing creation; our impact does not need to be negative.”

Warners believes the Green Team is not only an investment in the lives of the students who participate, but a way for Calvin to unite and give back to the Grand Rapids community and challenge future generations to embody John Calvin’s appeal to “let everyone regard himself as the steward of God in all things which he possesses.”

—*Calvin University Communications*

Intercultural Engagement and Conflicts

WE LIVE IN a beautifully diverse world where differences are everywhere. We celebrate a variety of foods, music, languages, cultural practices, and ethnicities. This diversity not only enriches our lives, but is essential for our survival and flourishing. Yet when we are surrounded by people from different backgrounds, conflicts are inevitable and necessary.

My work in the realm of intercultural engagement lives in this complexity. We begin with the belief that God has created a diverse world and that God loves diversity. We acknowledge that when there is only uniformity, there is something profoundly wrong. And we also acknowledge that when there is diversity, there will be conflict.

Good conflicts are welcomed and encouraged. Even though there may be friction, and even though we may experience tense emotions, conflict can help us learn to appreciate various perspectives, know more about our own biases and limited views, and seek to do ministry in much more effective and creative ways that would benefit all.

Healthy conflicts invite us into deeper understanding of each other. They can broaden our understanding of God by exposing us to new ways to experience God and the world. After all, no one cultural group can hold the whole truth of God and the world.

Despite all the benefits that good conflict can bring to us, we tend to view conflict negatively because we have witnessed how conflicts can bring division and harm. A Protestant church in Paraguay provides an example. I witnessed two groups of members within this church debating whether lighting candles during worship services was right or wrong.

One group deeply believed that the practice was against Christian faith.



Pablo Sun Kim serves as the senior leader for anti-racism and intercultural conciliation for the CRCNA in Canada.

They pointed to the use of candles in Roman Catholic services and expressed worries about the syncretism that can result when symbols become idols. The other group argued that the Bible does not say anything specific against lighting candles. In fact, they pointed out, there are cases in the Bible where faithful believers would light candles or lanterns. Moreover, in Paraguayan culture, lighting a candle was a common practice because electricity was not always reliable.

While the conflict began with a minor disagreement, the people from both sides began to criticize the worst sides of their opponents while highlighting the best sides of themselves. As a result, even though there was much commonality between these two groups, it quickly became an “us versus them” dynamic. In this process, both sides dehumanized the other and many people were deeply hurt.

To truly enjoy all the gifts and benefits that good conflict can bring, people

involved in conflicts need to make sure that their struggles do not escalate to high conflict. This requires at least three important ingredients: cultural humility, nonviolent communication, and aiming for a magic ratio.

Cultural humility is a lifelong commitment to self-evaluation and self-critique. An individual not only learns about another’s culture, but examines one’s own beliefs and cultural identities.

Nonviolent communication seeks to increase empathy and communicate our human need for connection without inducing fear, guilt, and shame.

Lastly, in any engagement, we need a magic ratio of positive interactions outweighing negative interactions so that conflict can remain healthy. According to research, in marriage the magic ratio is five to one. The ratio may be slightly different for other situations, but making sure that positive interaction outweighs the negative is key to maintaining a healthy intercultural engagement.

Whether or not one’s local congregation is culturally diverse, the Christian Reformed denomination is a richly diverse body of Christ. When we do not fully embrace people who are different from ourselves, it disrupts our church’s ecosystem. In other words, by excluding others, we harm ourselves and, ultimately, the whole body of Christ.

As a way to grow in diversity and attain the fullness of Christ, I invite all of us to work on our cultural humility, practice nonviolent communication, and aim for the magic ratio for healthy intercultural engagement.

— Pablo Kim Sun

Sharing Christ with the Next Generation

SIENA SPENT HER FREE TIME fixing up an old motorcycle to be sold at a charity auction to feed people who are hungry.

Abigail led her third-grade classmates to create and sell bookmarks, then donated the profits to those affected by the war in Ukraine.

Landon prepared to play the role of young David in his community's play about the biblical king.

These stories might not make it into any mainstream news headlines, but thanks to ministry shares and other support from the Christian Reformed Church, kids who are putting their Christian faith into action have been sharing their experiences with their peers.

The stories—and many more like them—are featured in ReFrame Ministries' *Kids in Action* video series from ReFrame's *Kids Corner* ministry.

"Each episode tells the story of different kids who are sharing God's story in a unique way," said Kurt Selles, ReFrame's director. "The videos also include a biblical lesson that relates to the story and demonstrates Scripture's call to share Christ with others through the use of our gifts."

The videos and other biblical resources for children are available on YouTube and social media platforms.

One Family's Story

In Michigan, the Holman family has been using Kids Corner resources together for many years. Ten-year-old Luke has been a fan of the audio program *Liz and Friends* since his sister played it for him. He's listened to most of the show's 20 seasons multiple times, both with his family and on his own.

"I believe he may be the biggest *Kids Corner* fan that ever existed," said



ReFrame Ministries' *Kids in Action* videos show how kids like Siena are using their gifts in service to God's kingdom.



There are 20 seasons of the *Kids Corner* audio series, *Liz and Friends*.

Luke's dad, Harland. "He listens to it all the time."

In addition to listening to the program together, the Holman family spends time doing other activities that help young families grow in faith, such as enjoying family dinners together,

going on walks, volunteering, and going to church.

Reaching the Next Generation

As more people learn about the many resources available from Kids Corner, ReFrame plans to develop a new smartphone app with interactive Bible lessons and more devotions for children and parents.

"We are old enough to remember the 'old days' of the *Back to God Hour*—way back," shared one family of supporters who wished to remain anonymous. "You are the new generation that builds upon the past and finds the present and future limitless. Keep up the excellent work, and we want you to know we have been supporters for a long time and pray for you every day."

— Brian Clark,
ReFrame Ministries

DEADLINES: Ads for the September issue are due July 31, 2023; October issue: September 4, 2023. Subject to availability. Details online at thebanner.org/classifieds, or for display ads see thebanner.org/ads. Advertising in *The Banner* does not imply editorial endorsement.

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Church Positions Available

ACTON BETHEL CRC A vibrant, multi-generational congregation in southern Ontario, is prayerfully seeking the Senior Pastor that God has prepared for us. This individual will encourage the congregation of Bethel to further develop and grow in our relationship with Christ through His Word. Acton CRC requires a Senior Pastor gifted in preaching to provide our church and community with authentic, current, meaningful and Biblically based messages. For more information please contact Ron Terpstra at crterps@gmail.com

ASSOCIATE PASTOR/MINISTRY FACILITATOR Is God calling you to a new adventure serving Him in the spectacular foothills of the Rockies? First Christian Reformed Church in Rocky Mountain House, Alberta is searching for a full time Ministry Facilitator with a heart to serve. The successful candidate will work with the senior pastor, be a liaison and support person for church ministry leaders, facilitate small group development and outreach, and welcome and enfold newcomers. It is not essential that the successful candidate be ordained, but does require a strong grounding in Scripture with a Reformed perspective. Please check out our website at firstcrrcrocky.ca and contact us at rockyfirstcrrcsearch@gmail.com.

EVERGREEN CRC IN FORT MCMURRAY, ALBERTA is looking for a full-time pastor to lead our congregation in faithful obedience to God the Father and serve as teaching and preaching pastor deepening our understanding of what Jesus has done for us and how the Holy Spirit is working in us. For more information e-mail board@eccrc.ca or call (587) 646-8887.

FULL TIME YOUTH DIRECTOR: Faith CRC in Sioux Center, IA is a growing and dynamic congregation looking to hire a full time Youth Director. This individual must be organized with attention to details and ability to articulate and exhibit strong genuine faith, hope and love in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. Primary responsibility would be to provide vision and leadership for the youth group, Jr. high students, and other youth education in the church. A full job description of the position can be located at www.faith-crc.org. Send cover letter and resume to office@faith-crc.org or contact us for additional details.

GGCRC (ggcrc.org) is seeking a FT Sr. Pastor to provide leadership, direction and vision. Must be a committed Christ follower to serve Him and His people. Qual: M.Div. accredited

theological seminary. Min 5 yrs church pastor exp. Proficient in English; fluent in Mandarin or Cantonese. Authorized to work in the US. Inquire at srpastorsearch@ggcrcc.org.

HIRING FULL-TIME SENIOR PASTOR Tacoma Christian Reformed Community Church (TCRCC) is seeking a full-time Senior Pastor passionate about preaching the word of God and engaging a multi-generational congregation in pastoral care. Located in Tacoma, Washington of the Great Pacific Northwest—with views of the Puget Sound and Mt. Rainier—TCRCC emphasizes selfless service. This senior pastor will lead the TCRCC congregation in the Christian Reformed Church tradition. If interested in applying, visit www.tacomacrcc.org.

LEAD PASTOR POSITION Immanuel CRC located in the beautiful Hudson Valley of NY, seeks a Lead Pastor to take our growing congregation into the future. Please contact Michael Tooth, Secretary of the Search Committee, at (347) 415-4969 or email him at mi.toth@yahoo.com.

NEW LIFE CRC IN GUELPH, ONTARIO is prayerfully seeking a relational, welcoming, youth and community focused leader who can walk with our congregation as we seek to follow Christ. We would love to speak with you! For more details including a job description and a church profile please reach out to Brad Wallace at: searchcommittee@newlifecrc.net

SENIOR PASTOR POSITION Martin Reformed Church (Martin, MI) is seeking a full time senior pastor to lead our congregation with gifts in preaching, engagement through all generations and equipping the church to impact the world for Jesus. If interested, please go to www.martinreformed.org/pastoralsearch for more information.

SENIOR PASTOR REQUIRED Hebron CRC requires an experienced pastor to lead, teach and encourage our members in fulfilling the great commission in the fast growing multi-ethnic community of Whitby, ON Canada. Please contact Fred Engelage at fredengelage@gmail.com for more information.

WORSHIP COORDINATOR Lakeside Community Church is a healthy and growing church in Alto, MI searching for a gifted part-time worship coordinator. Guitar skills are preferred. For more info, contact Dave Bosscher at pastordave@lakeside.church or 616-821-4548

Church Anniversary 100 Years



A CHURCH ON THE MOVE First Christian Reformed Church of Sioux Falls, SD will celebrate their centennial, 100 Years of Memories and Ministry, on September 9 & 10, 2023. For more information go to firstchristianreformed.org.

Anniversary

WEDDING ANNIVERSARY 60 YEARS



STRUYK, On Aug 9, 2023, John and Andrea Struyk (Benschop) hope to celebrate their 60th wedding anniversary. Children Calvin (Anita), Angela (Mark), Christina (Eric), and 10 grandchildren thank God for His faithfulness, grace and blessings in their parents' lives. Address: Unit 111-20 Fourth Ave., Trenton, ON K8V 5N3

WAGENVELD, Louis and Maryanne will be celebrating their 60th wedding anniversary on August 2nd. They met while they were students at Calvin University. Lou and Mary-Anne spent many years on the mission field in Argentina, Sun Valley Ca, El Salvador and Mexico. After retirement the couple now splits their time between Holland MI and Escondido CA. The couple has 5 children, 14 grandchildren and 3 great grandchildren. We are thankful for the many years of faithfulness and blessings.



WILDEBOER, Henry and Jan thank God for 60 years of marriage on August 29, 2023. God has blessed us with five children: Judy (Edwin) VanScheper, Barbara (Andre) Mathieu, Doug (Sharon), John (Grace), and Rob (Christine), 13 grandchildren, and 1 great grandchild. He also blessed us with a wonderful life of ministry. Henryjanwildeboer@gmail.com 45 Padfield Dr. Bowmanville, ON, Canada L1C 5E7

WEDDING ANNIVERSARY 75 YEARS

DE WAAL MALEFYT, Karel and Catherine of Franklin Lakes, NJ celebrated their 75th anniversary on June 26. Family and friends thank God for His faithfulness to them and for the blessing they are.



TELLING - HUISEN, Ray and Sadie will celebrate their 75th wedding anniversary on August 24. Children are Marge & Perry Breems and Phyllis & Paul Moes. Blessed with 11 grandchildren and 11 great grandchildren. Their family is grateful for the Christian example they have shown over the years and thankful to God for his love to generations. 402 Kandiyohe Ave, Prinsburg, MN 56281

Birthdays

BIRTHDAY 100 YEARS

RUTH FONDSE, July 25 (1612 N 2nd St, Sheboygan, WI 53081) Her life shows God's Spirit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Her family, fellow-worshippers, friends and neighbors all know this truth. She continues to praise God at Christ Community Church in Sheboygan.

BIRTHDAY 90 YEARS



WILLIAM & CLARA (BOSMAN) BUIKEMA of Denver, CO are celebrating 90th birthdays this year, Bill on June 21 and Clara on Aug 16. Their children, 11 grandchildren, & 17 great grandchildren love them and are excited to celebrate with them. Congratulations can be sent to Bill & Clara at 8040 E Dartmouth Ave#1 Denver, CO 80231.

Obituaries



KAMP, Henry, age 88, June 7, 2023. Beloved husband for 68 years to Grace, nee Voss. Loving father of Ruth (Richard) Baas, Lambert (Lori) Kamp, Robert (Judy) Kamp, Judy (Ted) VanderWall, Brenda (Dennis) Harms, Mary (Robert) Vos and the late Henry Kamp, Jr. Grandfather of 23, Great-Grandfather of 21.



MEMMELAAR, Marion Sarah Memmelaar, age 91, of Grand Rapids, MI, formerly of North Haledon and Toms River, NJ, passed into the arms of Jesus on Tuesday, May 9, 2023. She enjoyed being a librarian and exercised her faith through a Christian card ministry. Most important to her, she was a loving wife, mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother.

er. Lovingly remembering Marion is her husband of 72 years, Bern; children, Bernie Jr. (Pam) Memmelaar, Edward (Anna) Memmelaar, Donna (Philip) Michaelson, Robin (Gary) Stadlander, Todd (Dale) Memmelaar, 17 grandchildren, and 24 great grandchildren. A memorial service will be held at a later date. Interment will be in Fairlawn Memorial Cemetery (NJ). Memorial contributions may be made to Eastern Christian Schools.



STEENWYK, Ronald, 74, of Grand Rapids, Michigan, passed away on April 12, 2023. He is survived by his wife of 51 years Kathy, and his children Mark (Sherry), Emily Romero (David) and 6 grandchildren. Ron was a dedicated disciple of Christ. He and Kathy loved and supported the ministry of Jubilee Centers International which their daughter Emily and David started in La Era, Honduras. They visited the ministry many times. Memorials in Ron's honor may be sent to Jubilee Centers Int. PO Box 7758, Grand Rapids, MI 49510.

TOGTMAN, Clara, age 105, of Orland Park, IL. Beloved daughter of the late John and Sieke Togtman. Loving fiancé of the late Gerritt Van Der Schoot (1944). Preceded in death by her sisters and brothers; Martha DeGroot, Marguerite Togtman, Edna Huisenga, Nettie Ebbens, Grace Boersma, Raymond Togtman Sr., and Hoddy Togtman Sr. Dearest aunt and great aunt of many nieces and nephews.

WICHERS, Wilbert SR., age 98, went to be with his Lord on June 7, 2023. Predeceased by beloved wife Dina. Nurtured and prayed daily for his children: Louis (Charis), Sandra (Fred) Olthuis, Deborah (Don)Kiner, Wilbert Jr., and Thomas(Tara). 12 grandchildren and 26 great grandchildren, A faithful and unselfish servant. Will's generosity, humor, and positivity blessed many.

Employment

FULL TIME YOUTH PASTOR/DIRECTOR Maranatha CRC of York, ON (25 min south of Hamilton) is a congregation blessed with growing youth programs, and is seeking a dynamic full-time Youth Pastor or Youth Ministries Director. If interested, please email office.york-crc@gmail.com or call (289) 757 4114 or visit our website www.maranathacrcyork.ca

NONPROFIT SEEKS BOARD MEMBERS Tent Schools International (TSI), a nonprofit organization, seeks new members for its Board of Directors. TSI's mission is to demonstrate the love of Jesus for displaced children through safe schools. Learn more at www.tentschoolsint.org. Contact President Scott Vander Kooy with inquiries: svanderkooy@tentschoolsint.org or (616) 531-9102.

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A Seat at the Table

How do we,
the college
students, belong?



Kendy DeHaan grew up in Bradenton, Fla., and is a member of Bradenton Christian Reformed Church. She is currently studying secondary education, English, and French at Calvin University in Grand Rapids, Mich.

Distanced from the rest of the congregation's wooden tables by a horde of tussling children, I know the plastic table is for us long before I can read the hastily-taped sheet with bolded Arial font: "College Students, Sit Here."

My inner high-schooler pushes my chin up—I, the capable college student, get to sit where no child has ever gone before. Yet loneliness creeps over my shoulder and insecurity settles on my chest as I squeeze into a folding chair.

It's the second Sunday of the year and the first Sunday of the spring semester. Between the pandemic, a few months abroad, and a patchwork of vacation plans, my church attendance has been far from stellar. Though my heart eagerly awaits these precious hours in the company of other Christians, the easy community church attendance constructed when I was in high school doesn't come as naturally.

Now, 1,283 miles away and three years into college, when my alarm sounds on Sunday mornings, enthusiasm deflates into dread.

This morning, though, I hope to change that.

After a plate of pasta and a debate over the merits of watching kids' television, a deacon slowly approaches us. Looming above the table, he singles out Karen, the unpaid head of college events.

"Some people were upset that the college students got to eat first today, you know," he booms, leaning forward like a parent scolding a naughty child. "They're wondering why we don't see any college kids serving in church."

Shame, fiery and begrudging, blooms in my chest.

A moment passes. Two. The scrape of forks against plates echoes in our silence.

This isn't a new question. We taste it when we accept communion from a

familiar stranger. It burns our pockets as we pass the offering plate.

How do we, the college students, belong?

I feel a nudge at my feet. A puffy, green ball has wedged itself between my shoe and the table leg. Mr. Deacon clears his throat, preparing to list every way that he carries the church on his shoulders. Somewhere between his tithing percentages and his children's Bible study habits, I kick the ball backward and crunch sideways to grab it. My head collides with a shoulder—that of a child hovering just behind me. Beyond her, a cluster of kids is frozen in the gap between dinner tables, their eyes wide as they track their friend's efforts to recover their ball.

Her hands tremble, extended before her in quiet pleading.

I roll the ball back to the other kids and hold a finger up, inviting her to wait. Reaching over the table, I pull a piece of cake—a special treat from Karen to soften us into coming again—onto a paper plate.


The girl beams, and, carefully balancing the frosted peace offering, she patters back to her friends. Warmth blushes through my chest—and dissolves as I'm sucked once again into the conversation at hand.

Liza, a college senior and lifelong church member, cuts in: "What if we opened up our table to the rest of the congregation?"

The deacon pulls back from the table with a start.

"That hardly solves anything," he bristles.

"No," Liza admits, "but if we went first, the congregation would actually want to sit with us."

It's a start. 

Getting Scammed

It sounded fishy to me. It always does.



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

I HAD JUST STARTED pumping gas into the Jeep. On the opposite side of the pump a couple was having a rather intense conversation in their car. Eventually the woman stepped out of the late-model Toyota and approached me rather tentatively. “We’re headed to California and my purse was just stolen,” she said. “We don’t know what to do.” She pulled a gold ring from her finger. “Could I trade you my ring for some gasoline?”

It sounded fishy to me. It always does.

“We can fix our problems once we get to California. We just have to get there somehow, and we’re nearly out of gas.” She was wearing traditional Indian garb, resplendent in a colorful blue sari. He sat crouched behind the steering wheel, a fez perched atop his bowed head. He seemed mournful, deflated. He finally looked up with pleading eyes.

I said to her, “I’ll buy you some gas. You can keep your ring.” The words were out of my mouth before I considered just how much a tank of gas would cost. Once you say it, of course, you can’t take it back.

She continued to thrust the ring toward me. “Please, please take it.”

I shook my head. “It’s fine. Keep your ring.” Meanwhile, my mind was working out the logistics. I didn’t have enough cash and I would have to use my credit card. I stepped around to wave my card in front of the reader, and then shielded my ZIP code from her eyes as I typed it in. She pulled the nozzle from the pump and began to fill her tank. I stepped back around to tend to my own vehicle, hoping there wasn’t a scanner on the pump or some other device that had just captured my credit card number. I reminded myself to check online later to see if there were any unauthorized charges.

She finished filling her tank and bowed toward me. She offered the

sparkling gold ring one last time before getting into the car. I shook my head and smiled. From the front seat he clasped his hands together and bowed as well. I nodded and they drove off.

“Dude, you just got scammed!” He was 30-something with a big, bushy, brown beard and an even bigger voice. His huge black Chevy Silverado was parked behind me and he had watched the whole thing transpire.

“Maybe,” I replied, easily convinced he might be right.

He laughed. “There’s no ‘maybe’ about it. They just ripped you off.”

It’s hard to respond, and I paused a bit while I finished pumping the gas and returned the nozzle to the slot.

It was too long of a pause for him, and he continued: “They probably work that scam everywhere they go. They pay a couple bucks for a worthless ring and they keep finding suckers who fall for the story.”

I was ready to leave, but I just didn’t want him to have the last word, so I smiled and said, “Well, there are worse things in this world than getting scammed.”

He instantly got an incredulous look on his face. “That’s the stupidest thing I’ve heard today. What’s worse than getting scammed?”

I responded with, “Well, one thing would be not being generous to people in need. I think that’s worse than getting scammed.”

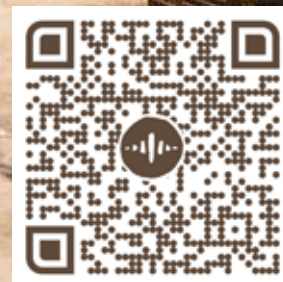
“You are a fool!” was his retort as I climbed into my Jeep, waved, and got back on the highway. He got the last word anyway.

I checked, but there’s been no suspicious activity on my credit card account. I’m out only \$85.32. **B**

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~Matthew 28:19

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