

BANNER

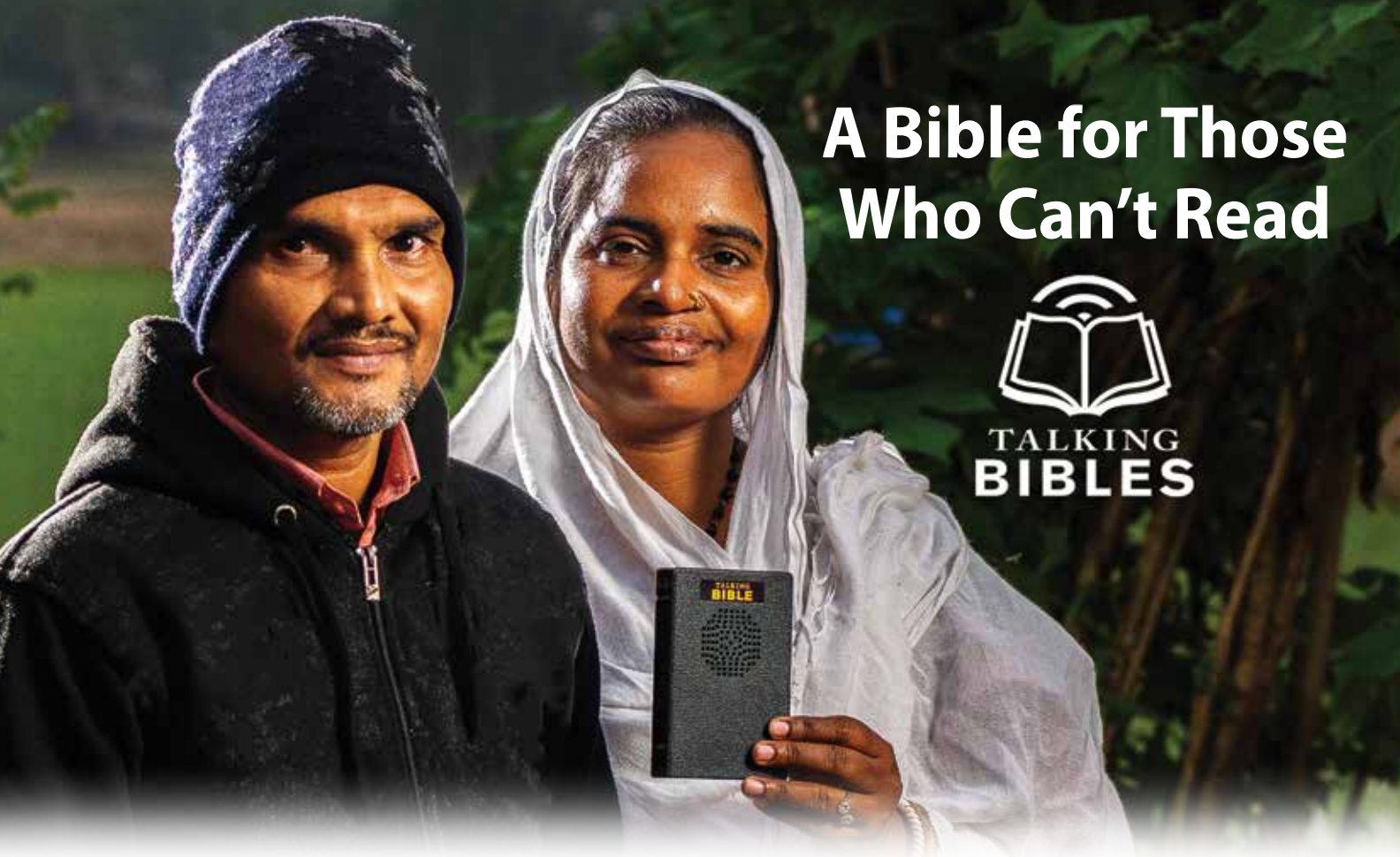
OCTOBER 2024

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Disagree

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BANNER

BY THE NUMBERS

Oct. 31 is marked as Reformation Day in Protestant churches to remember the onset of the Protestant Reformation that began in 1517. Here are some events from the history of the Christian Reformed Church in North America that happened in October:

This Month in History

1865 Oct. 4: The first meeting of the denominational general assembly that in 1880 became known as “synod.” It took place in Graafschap, Mich.

1866 Oct. 16: The first permanent CRC in Wisconsin is organized (Gibbsville, now Oostburg).

1890 Oct. 21: Classis Hackensack is organized.

1926 Oct. 21: The first CRC is organized in British Columbia (First Vancouver).

1930 Oct. 29: Calvin Seminary's building at the corner of Benjamin Ave. and Franklin St. SE in Grand Rapids, Mich., is dedicated.

1959 Oct. 17: The CRC breaks ground for a new seminary building on the Knollcrest campus.

1962 Oct. 11: Scott Redhouse ordained as the first Native American CRC minister.

This small selection of historical facts is from crcna.org/welcome/history/memorable-events.

WHAT'S ONLINE

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

- » Church Worldwide: Almost Half of World's Migrants are Christian, Pew Research Shows
- » Book review: *Indigo Girl*
- » Streaming review: *All the Light We Cannot See*
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Corrections:

» In "Classis Watch: Spring/Summer 2024" (Sept. 2024, p. 20) the notice about Friendship Community Church in Toronto, Ont., should have said Classis Toronto approved its amalgamation with All Nations Christian Fellowship and approved disbanding Friendship Community Church "at the time of amalgamation" (Classis Toronto meeting minutes, May 25, 2024).

» September's Word Play (p. 41) should have included this clue for 16 Across: "It is a ____ to grow old."

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Director of CRCNA Communications and Marketing



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The Banner is the magazine of the Christian Reformed Church. Opinions expressed in *The Banner* are not necessarily those of the editor or the CRCNA.

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Classified Advertising 616-224-0725 classifieds@TheBanner.org

Display Advertising 616-224-5882 ads@TheBanner.org

Editorial 616-224-0824 editorial@TheBanner.org

News news@TheBanner.org

To Advertise: Place your classified ads, including obituaries, online at thebanner.org/classifieds, or email ads@TheBanner.org, or fax it 616-224-0725.

Published monthly (except August). Periodicals postage paid at Grand Rapids, Mich. Postmaster, send address changes to: *The Banner*, 1700 28th St. SE, Grand Rapids, MI, 49508-1407. Canadian publications mail agreement #40063614. Return undeliverable Canadian addresses to: *The Banner*, 3475 Mainway, PO Box 5070, STN LCD 1, Burlington, ON, L7R 3Y8. Copyright 2022, Christian Reformed Church in North America. Printed in U.S.A. *The Banner* (ISSN0005-5557). Vol. 159, No. 9, 2024.

Member of the Associated Church Press and Evangelical Press Association.

SNICKERDOODLE COOKIES

INGREDIENTS

1 ½ c white sugar
1 c softened butter
2 large eggs
2 ¾ c all-purpose flour

2 tsp cream of tartar
**1 HEART FULL OF
THE LOVE OF JESUS**
1 tsp baking soda

¼ tsp salt
2 tbsp white sugar
2 tbsp ground cinnamon



What do snickerdoodles have to do with mission?

Read the full story here:

ResonateGlobalMission.org/cookies

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A Ministry of the Christian Reformed Church

Elephants in the Room

We often think
our rider, our
conscious
reasoning, is in
control, but really
our elephant, our
subconscious
intuition, rules.



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.

I HAVE BEEN THINKING a lot recently about Jonathan Haidt's book, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion* (2012). Although I don't agree with everything in his book, I do think there is a lot of truth in the moral psychologist's central metaphor about the human mind: "The mind is divided, like a rider on an elephant, and the rider's job is to serve the elephant" (p. 12). The rider, in this metaphor, is our conscious reasoning, while the elephant is "the other 99 percent of mental processes—the ones that occur outside of awareness but that actually govern most of our behavior" (p. 12). We often think our rider, our conscious reasoning, is in control, but really our elephant, our subconscious intuition, rules. The elephants go where they want to go, and the riders only pretend to be in control by intellectually justifying the elephants' choices.


This is true even of our moral and theological positions. Our minds' elephants create biases in us to favor some biblical themes or truths over others. We intuit that some biblical passages are "clearer" or "more authoritative" than others. Then our rational rider gets busy intellectually justifying our choices as "right." But we delude ourselves that we arrived at our theological convictions solely on objective reasoning from Scripture. All of this happens subconsciously. Those of us who have similar elephants—similar intuitive biases—will tend to land on similar positions.

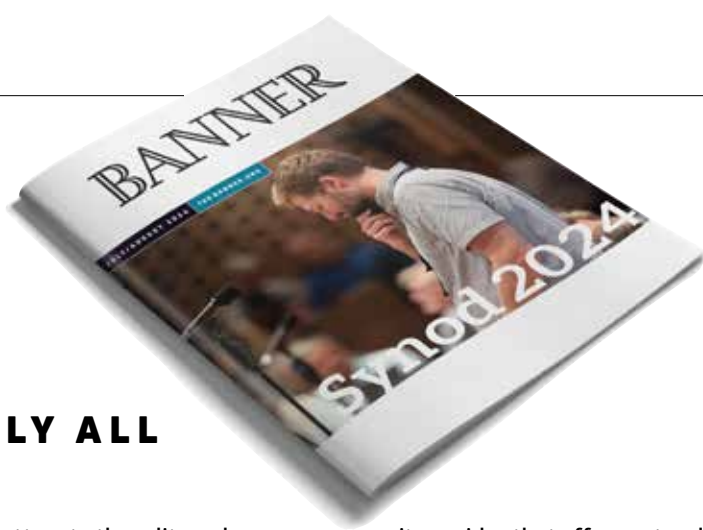
A big part of the problem in our disagreements, then, is that we use only our rational riders when we argue but ignore the role of our elephants, the ones that are really making the choices. So we often end up stuck in intractable conflict, seeing each other as either idiots or hypocrites who can't or won't see the truth.

I think all of us, no matter where we fall on the theological spectrum, need to humble ourselves and recognize that none of us is without biased elephants influencing and even determining our biblical understandings and convictions.

How are our elephants formed or deformed? Here, I will riff on Christian philosopher James K.A. Smith's book *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit* (2016). Smith's main point is that we are what we love. What we love, then, shapes our subconscious elephants' choices, and our rational rider then finds arguments to support those choices.

The sobering caution is that what our rider says we love—Jesus, for example—might not be what we actually love. It's not reason, but our experiences—especially repeated, habitual experiences—that shape what we love. Hence, Smith argues, Christian discipleship must involve more than simply downloading spiritual information to people. Discipleship must include long-term spiritual habits, especially through a church community, to reshape our hearts' ultimate love toward God so that the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23) become second nature to us. When the fruit of the Spirit is our second nature, our elephants, so to speak, will be biased toward Christlikeness and Christlike choices. For example, kind people do not consciously choose to be kind at every turn. Rather, kind people are habitually kind; kindness is second nature to them.

All of this is to say there are no quick fixes for our polarized disagreements. Our theological polarization is driven not only by our reasoning but by our powerful subconscious moral and spiritual intuitions that have been shaped by lifelong habits. Can we, therefore, be more gracious and patient with those who have different convictions from us? 



REPLY ALL

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

Synod 2024

The following letters to the editor are referring to a variety of news articles published in the July/August 2024 issue about the decisions of Synod 2024:

The *Banner* July/August issue's article "Resounding Words" describes our unflinching belief: marriage is between one man and one woman. Unity is most important (John 17:21) so that we can reason together and speak in truth when the LGBTQ+ community comes to church.
» George Lieuwen // Langley, B.C.

Synod has now institutionalized hypocrisy in the Christian Reformed Church. On the one hand, it has legislated firm accountability for conformity to the confessional position on human sexuality. On the other hand, there is not even the tiniest bit of accountability concerning the human sexuality report's call to provide pastoral care and hospitality toward members of the LGBTQ+ community and their family/social networks. Synod has cherry-picked the HSR to suit its own tastes while ignoring major biblical callings. Imagine if the new accountability requirements given to classes included this one: "Once a year, every congregation will give a brief listing of the three most important practices

it provides that offer pastoral care and hospitality to the LGBTQ+ community and their family/social networks." This brief practice once per year per church would counter this hypocrisy. It seems simple and obvious. Instead we are left with an institutionalized hypocrisy that will bedevil our denomination for many years to come.

» Syd Hielema // Ancaster, Ont.

In your article "Discipline for CRC Churches Acting Contrary to CRC Teachings," you mention Classis Quinte delegate Greg Harnden's remark "I don't want to see anyone leave, but as Abraham was willing to offer up Isaac in obedience to faith, I see this as an act of obedience to faith." I had the synod webcast on at home at the time he spoke. Harnden contextualized his analogy by saying that someone had asked him how many churches he was willing to sacrifice. Two things are striking to me. First, Abraham was considered righteous because he was willing to sacrifice "his only son, whom he loved." In this way Abraham is contrasted with the priests of Moloch, who sacrificed other people's children. Second, in the end, God didn't actually want human sacrifice. Harnden seems to be willing to sacrifice other people's churches, but not his own. Where then is the proper place for him in his own analogy?

» David Koene // Bowmanville, Ont.

I was a delegate to Synod 2024, and for the most part I found that sadness was noticeably absent. There was no lament to speak of in terms of empathy toward those in the CRC who will be disaffiliated from our denomination without choice. The experience of these people is painful and obvious. Those who are

required to leave now face the hardship of grieving deeply. Seeing things differently has become costly. ... The sense of being together as we face the challenges of bringing the gospel to our society has been taken away. Nevertheless, there was little sign of lament with the powers of the majority. I wonder what this means for the good and historical strength of the CRC in terms of her capacity to hold and carry differences of interpretation, always informed by a careful Reformed hermeneutic. Sometimes I am sad when people are not sad.

» Ron Nydam // Denver, Colo.

Instead of worrying about homosexuality, the CRC should spend its time on more fundamental issues, such as why people should believe Christianity in the first place. Why should people believe in a creation account when science now presents a compelling alternative origin story for our world? Why should people believe that it is a human's fault that we sin? ... In the face of these fundamental and existential arguments about Christianity, the arguments about homosexuality seem almost trivial.

» Paul Holtrop // Glen Arbor, Mich.

The Banner reporters seemed to do fair and balanced reporting in *The Banner's* synod issue on the various actions synod took. But I was left disheartened and dejected by the decisions (and) especially by some of the quotes from speakers at synod. One seemed to argue for works righteousness, and if what another said was true, no one would be in heaven. ... After reading these articles I better understood what Jesus and the disciples went through before the Sanhedrin. Then I read the *Today* devotional of Aug. 6 discussing the meeting between Jesus

3 Ways to Share the Light of Christ

and the woman at the well. Here in the richness of the gospel message we see the Savior's love and grace to one of his fallen lambs. The Spirit fully revealed how we are to reach out in love to sinners who seek a richer life in Christ.

» David Boersma // Tinley Park, Ill.

For all the insistence of the HSR and the majority of delegates at recent synods that the authority and demands of Scripture be faithfully upheld, there is one major theme of Paul's letters that is being ignored. He insists that in the body of Christ, one part cannot say to another part, "I don't need you." And the result when that happens: "If one part suffers, all parts suffer with it" (1 Cor. 12:12-26). The actions of synod have denied that the parts of the body of Christ need each other. I feel there is a basic lack of servant humility at work here.

» Doug Porter // Orillia, Ont.

As I Was Saying

Find the latest posts from our award-winning blog online at TheBanner.org.

» Why Christian Adoption Agencies Should Have the Right to Deny Jewish Couples

» You Need to Know What Is Happening in Nigeria

WHEN THE APOSTLE Andrew met Jesus through John the Baptist, he was immediately captivated by the light of Christ. He couldn't wait to introduce Jesus to his brother Peter, who then left everything and dedicated his life to following Jesus. These first disciples of Jesus shared a message that has lived for centuries in the hearts of believers.

Andrew's story teaches us the value of sharing our love of Christ with others. Here are some simple suggestions for how to be a light:

Be an encouragement. Each day we have the chance to bring Christ's light to someone else, such as the cashier who is slow when you are in a hurry, the waitress juggling so many orders, or the people you work with. It's easy to give a little light and grace, to be patient with the cashier or to tip the waitress well. Doesn't it make the day brighter when someone says something nice about your efforts? The opportunities to share Christ's light are endless.

Forgive easily. Sometimes the hardest people to forgive are those closest to us. However, nothing is more healing and shows the light and love of Christ more dramatically than to forgive easily. When the prodigal son came to his father, the father ran to him. His father didn't scold him or remind him of how he had failed. He immediately called for a celebration. When Jesus met the woman caught in adultery he did not chastise her. He said to her accusers, "Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." Then he told the woman to leave her life of sin. Likewise, when someone comes to us with a sincere apology, our hearts should fill with love, not condemnation. It takes courage to make an apology.

Make your life a prayer. Take time to live the Bible verse "Be still, and know

These first disciples of Jesus shared a message that has lived for centuries in the hearts of believers.

that I am God" (Ps. 46:10). Spend quiet time with God. Remember that God is with you always. Talk to God. Pray for the people you see as you drive, those in the ambulance whose siren you hear, and your friends and family. Meditate on the actions of Jesus. Give thanks to God always for great and small blessings. When you live like this, all things become an occasion for prayer.

"The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it" (John 1:5). Jesus Christ is the light. We are to be like Jesus for the world. Our world is in great need of an outpouring of random acts of kindness, songs of praise and gentle melodies, prayer, and helping hands.

It's time to let our lights shine. **B**



Linda Marie is from Pensacola, Fla., and is the author of *Forty Footsteps* and *The Adventures of Cleo the Cloud*, available on Amazon. She is a licensed cosmetologist and a Stephen Minister with a certificate of spiritual direction/theology from Spring Hill College.



8 Ways to Talk to People With Whom You Disagree

By Todd Pheifer

Most of us do not start each day hoping to have tough conversations. Why would we? We have enough stress without adding difficult dialogue. We can be particularly intentional about avoiding conflict with friends and loved ones with whom we have invested years of relationship cultivation. Why mess with success—or at least the status quo? Avoidance, accommodation, and compromise are all ways people minimize disagreement, and those choices can have value in certain situations.

Yet God made us to have deep relationships (Prov. 27:17). Though sin will always erect barriers, Christians should never completely sidestep disagreement. There are many opportunities for productive dialogue that can develop unity as we collectively share the gospel, and we can't always wait for an ideal environment. Some conversations will be awkward no matter how much we desire smooth interactions. So how can we have hard conversations without wrecking relationships or deepening divides? Here are a few tips.

Prioritize depth

Anyone who has experienced long-term relationships knows that eventually there will be conflict. These are not pleasant phases, but when navigated with love, grace, and forgiveness, they can build depth in the relationship. The same goes for the church. Exchanging cheerful pleasantries on a Sunday morning can be a warm expression of welcome, but they should be a precursor to richer conversations. Spiritual growth, discipleship, and harmony are the goals. *Tip:* Seek depth in your relationships and accept that in order to reach that level there might be some conflict along the way.

Assess goals

Admittedly, it can be difficult for us to embrace difficult conversations, particularly with people we have disagreed with for some time. Even so, we should start from a mindset of hope and belief that God can bring harmony to any relationship. If we are honest, we know we sometimes approach dialogue in the same way we pursue sports or other competitions. We want to win—or more specifically, we want to defeat our opponent. But a win-at-all-costs attitude does not foster mutual understanding. Dialogue is not a duel. *Tip:* Honestly

assess whether you want to make a point or want to make progress.

Confess without caveats

A former colleague of mine regularly critiques Christians and the church at large on social media. Mostly I do not respond, but occasionally I will post a comment. Sometimes I express a differing opinion; other times I acknowledge his critique and apologize on behalf of my fellow believers. It's important to note that I am not apologizing for the gospel (Rom. 1:16-17). I'm confessing our collective failures as the body of Christ and acknowledging the gap between biblical teachings and our behaviors as sinful people. When I hurt others—and I have, many times—I have to own my choices and apologize without excuses. *Tip:* Instead of saying, "I'm sorry there has been conflict between us," try saying, "I'm sorry for how I have contributed to conflict between us."

Build on commonality

Early on in a recent meeting of a book group that had worked together for years, two people verbalized their very different political opinions. These viewpoints unfolded as we discussed, but we also were able to identify many

shared beliefs, including some core values. Finding commonality is not just an exercise in avoiding conflict. It's an opportunity to build on existing agreement rather than having no foundation for dialogue. *Tip:* When you engage in awkward conversations, make a point to note common viewpoints, particularly if they are key aspects of worldviews.

Agree on definitions

Despite diligent efforts by translators, linguists, and teachers, there still are barriers to understanding the nuances of language. In my next article for *The Banner*, I will address certain words that can cause conversational problems, but for now it is important to note that in difficult conversations, some time should be given to defining terms. It might seem inefficient to spend time on what is essentially a conversational glossary, but it might add needed clarity as the dialogue continues. Obviously some terms are hard to easily explain, but God has given us unique abilities to reason and articulate, and we should employ them. *Tip:* If the meaning of a word or phrase is not clear, humbly and politely ask your conversation partner for a definition.

Listen intently

James 1:22-25 addresses our tendency to forget God's word almost immediately and highlights our shortcomings when it comes to listening. Scientists confirm that the human brain can struggle with processing multiple pieces of information at once. Our minds might start formulating a response to something a speaker said while that person is still talking. This means our brains will likely fail to process the rest of what's being said while we wait for the speaker to pause. We might even miss the speaker addressing what we're thinking about.

Though sin will
always erect
barriers,
Christians should
never completely
sidestep
disagreement.

Lest we assume that our listening is adequate, there might be value in conducting an experiment. *Tip:* Ask those who know you and will give you an honest answer if you are a good listener.

Value learning


You do not know everything. Sorry. If it makes you feel any better, neither do I. When it comes to dialogue, it's vital for us to allow that our perspective might be flawed or even incorrect. This is another opportunity to reflect: Do you want to learn? Do you consider the possibility that your perspective is misguided, incomplete, and in some cases simply wrong? Could you have been believing and sharing the wrong perspective for years or even decades? Confess your failures to God, and pray for humility in your conversations. *Tip:* Instead of being quick to verbally express disagreement, try asking people to explain their perspective.

Pursue patient progress

Sometimes people feel as if they aren't progressing, particularly with difficult dialogue. This is understandable, but it can be shortsighted. Trust takes time, and breaking through barriers might not happen with one conversation. We must be patient, accept that there will be setbacks, and maintain long-term goals. The phrase "agree to disagree"

can be expressed all too soon in a conversation. There are biblical principles that have no middle ground, but we can still continue our scriptural pursuit of harmony in the church. *Tip:* At the end of a difficult conversation, say "Let's talk again!" Then take a moment to set a time to do that.

These suggestions are not one-size-fits-all. Even with such mindful dialogue, some relationships still cause deep hurt. Interactions with those people should be done with great care and could benefit from support from others. Other relationships are not as traumatic, but there might still be wisdom in pausing for a time before engaging in further dialogue. While paused, we should fervently pray for wisdom and consult with people who can give us counsel on next steps.

May you hold unwaveringly to the hope we profess (Heb. 10:23-25), and even if the conversation is awkward at times, keep meeting together! 



Todd Pheifer teaches in the School of Business and Management at Azusa Pacific University and is director of development at Kingdom Causes Bellflower. He lives in southern California and attends Bethany Christian Reformed Church in Bellflower.

This article is the first in a three-part series by Todd Pheifer, the author of *Let's Talk!: A Guide to Awkward Conversations and Unifying Dialogue in the Church*. Pick up the book on Amazon and follow along on *The Banner's* Facebook and X pages for discussion about the book and its important topic.

BOOK CLUB **THE BANNER**

BIG QUESTIONS

Digital Life

My mom took a phone call from someone claiming to be her granddaughter, saying she was in jail and needed help. Thankfully Mom figured out it wasn't her grandchild and hung up. How do we guard ourselves against scammers?

People taking advantage of others is nothing new, but it seems the methods tricksters use are getting more sophisticated. And they're not just technologically more sophisticated; they're also getting more clever at quickly building a believable story on the clues we give them during the conversation.

Here are a few approaches to dealing with the miscreants you're sure to encounter online or on the phone:

- » **Who's calling whom?** It's rare to get through when you want to reach a person at a bank or credit card company, so be cautious when they seem to be calling you. In fact, a good habit when you get such a call is to hang up and call the bank or company yourself and ask them about the call you just received.
- » **No numbers.** Unless you initiated the call, never give out personal information, credit card numbers, or account numbers. And if you are contacting your bank or buying something online, make sure the phone number or web address you're using was taken from something official, such as the back of your credit card or bank statement.
- » **Spelling matters.** In time, especially with the help of artificial intelligence, scammers will use better



Illustration for *The Banner* by Gisela Bohórquez

English, but for now, misspellings in business emails should be a red flag.

- » **Who's the sender?** Fraudulent email or web addresses will look legitimate but are often off by a character or two.
- » **Check hyperlinks.** Within most email applications you can use your mouse cursor to hover over a link without clicking and see a preview of the page it will open. If the preview looks suspicious, mark the email as spam and delete it. When texting, avoid clicking on links from unknown senders, and don't respond.

Perhaps the most helpful advice is to talk to others—at church, in small groups, with family—about the time you were scammed or almost scammed. There should be no shame when your experience helps another.

Dean Heetderks is co-director of Ministry Support Services of the Christian Reformed Church and art director of *The Banner*. Have a tip to share? Tell him at dean.heetderks@gmail.com.

Science

Are aliens real? What would extraterrestrial intelligence mean for our faith?

Occasionally we hear news reports about strange sightings in the sky and possible aliens, and many blockbuster movies are entertaining stories about alien life.

But scientific evidence for intelligent life elsewhere is so far inconclusive. Conspiracy theories aside, the

general consensus is that extraterrestrials have not visited our planet. Astronomers have listened for decades for radio signals from aliens, but they have not heard anything yet. We do know that there are earth-like planets around other stars, but we can't detect whether aliens are living on them.

If intelligent aliens exist, and if we overcome the challenges of communication with them, how, as Christians, should we understand them? Sadly, most science fiction leaves out God entirely. But theologians from many Christian denominations have thought deeply about this.

The discovery of aliens would not invalidate the Bible. While the Bible doesn't say anything about intelligent life on other planets, it also doesn't say anything about many Earth-based species. Scripture is intentionally focused on the work of God in one small geographic region of our planet. Yet the claims of Scripture are cosmic in scope. John 1 and Colossians 1 speak of God as Creator of all things. That includes all stars and galaxies. If alien life exists, God created it.

The existence of aliens cannot change our place before God. In Christian theology, the significance of humanity is centered on God's actions toward us. On this planet, God chose to become incarnate as a human being and to sacrifice himself to save us. Whether there are aliens or not, we are precious in God's eyes.

Just like life on Earth, aliens might be friendly, indifferent, or violent toward

humans. But we can treat them with respect and care as fellow creatures. We can stay curious about life beyond Earth and celebrate all life that God chooses to create.

A longer version of this article appears at BioLogos.org.

Deborah B. Haarsma is president of BioLogos (biologos.org). Loren Haarsma is a professor of physics and astronomy at Calvin University. The two are scientists who together wrote the book *Origins* (Faith Alive, 2011). They are members of the Christian Reformed Church.

Bible/Doctrine

When our pastor prays, he uses the words “Lord” or “Father God” in nearly every sentence, sometimes more. Is it wrong for me to be annoyed by this? I think we should talk to God like we talk with a good friend.

While “friendship” captures an important aspect of our relationship with God (in Isaiah 41:8, for example, Abraham is spoken of as God’s friend), the relationship is better described in familial terms. In the Lord’s Prayer we are taught to pray to “our Father in heaven” (Matt. 6:9). The plural pronoun reminds us of our union with Christ. As the only begotten Son, he is the only one with the right to call God “Father.” But what Christ possesses by nature he gives to us by grace (John 1:12). In prayer, we speak to God as Father (“Abba, Father”) and Christ as our elder brother from whom we learn to live in trust, obedience, and love.

The stunning familiarity of this address is balanced by the phrase “in heaven.” Remembering that God is in heaven respects the distance between our ways and God’s ways, our thoughts and God’s thoughts (Isa. 55:8). To pray after this pattern is to pray in a way that acknowledges God’s

fatherly heart toward us alongside our smallness, short-sightedness, and sinfulness.

What this looks like in practice may vary, and prayer becomes more complicated when it becomes public. Public prayer has an important function in corporate worship: putting a congregation’s concerns into words, orienting the things we care about, and presenting our requests to God (1 Tim. 2:8). Yet public prayer is always in danger of becoming performative, where phrases intended to express familiarity or respect (“Father God”) seem like nothing more than vocal fillers. We should not be too hard on those who pray publicly unless their spirit reflects that of the religious leaders of Jesus’s day (Matt. 6:5).

The great comfort is that even when our language feels repetitive or empty, God hears the prayers of God’s people and joins them to the groans of the Spirit, too deep for words (Rom. 8:26).

Justin Ariel Bailey is assistant professor of theology at Dordt University. He, his wife, and their two children are members of Covenant Christian Reformed Church in Sioux Center, Iowa.

Vocation

A number of people around me are switching jobs. How do I know if I ought to do the same?

My mother used to tell me that just because other people are doing something doesn’t mean you should do it. Yet we should be curious when unexpected things happen. Jobs, work, and expectations have changed a lot in the past 50 years (and even in the past five!).

When we first start working, switching jobs is fairly normal. A new job can help us develop skills and determine the best fit for our gifts and passions. As we gain experience, there are new

opportunities. We might be able to find a position that fits better with our values and passions, provides better hours, pay, and stability, or allows us to better support those we care about. Such opportunities can even feel as if God is opening up doors for us.

Switching jobs may be necessary sometimes. While no job is perfect and work is often “painful toil” (see Gen. 3), there can be signs that our job is harming ourselves and others, such as being constantly angry, overwhelmed, or even depressed. A job that might once have brought us joy or meaning might no longer give us space for our beliefs and passions, or we might no longer be able to change things that are going wrong. In these situations, we can ask others to join us in praying for strength and wisdom about what to do next.

Some of us love the excitement and challenge of a new job. Others crave stability. Neither is bad in itself, but both require an awareness of how these desires can lead to joy or hardship for the others in our life. We might be lured by the prestige of a job, but others around us recognize that it’s not actually a good fit. Even if we see a new position as a means of getting better pay, is it worth other potential costs, such as more hours, more stress, or even moving? It is helpful to invite people who know you well to help you discern your motivations and what the wiser choice might be.

Brenda Kronemeijer-Heyink is the Christian Reformed chaplain at the University of Toronto. She attends Willowdale CRC in Toronto, Ont.



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

Leadership Transitions: Thrive Co-director Resigns, Director of Ecclesiastical Governance Sought

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Chris Schoon

Chris Schoon, an ordained minister in the Christian Reformed Church who served as co-director of Thrive (previously Congregational Ministries) has resigned, effective Sept. 20. Schoon was ordained in 2003 and pastored Plymouth Heights CRC in Grand Rapids, Mich., and First CRC in Hamilton, Ont., before becoming team leader for Faith Formation Ministries with the denomination in 2019. He was named co-director of Congregational Ministries in October 2022.

“While I remain committed to the Reformed faith and the theology that has shaped and molded me throughout my life, the decisions of synod over the past few years have set a direction for the denomination that I do not agree with,” Schoon said. “I feel that I can no longer carry out my responsibilities as co-director of a CRCNA denominational ministry with integrity to my own convictions.”

An internal announcement informed CRCNA staff of Schoon’s resignation Sept. 3. “Thrive will be moving forward with a single directorship rather than a co-directorship,” the announcement said, noting that Lesli van Milligen, previously Thrive’s co-director in Canada, will be Thrive’s sole director.

Other leadership transitions expected this fall include the announcement of a candidate for the new role of director

of ecclesiastical governance. The position, which closed for applications Aug. 30, replaces the position of director of synodical services, last filled by Scott DeVries. DeVries died April 27, a few days after entering hospice care after doctors discovered in March that he had cancer. The Council of Delegates appointed Joel Vande Werken as interim associate director of synodical services in May.

CRCNA general secretary Zachary King said the new senior leadership role will focus on supporting and resourcing the “ecclesiastical governance” of the denomination’s “assemblies—council, classis, synod, and the Council of Delegates—instead of the processes and logistics of synod and the COD.” The role will “emphasize the spiritual dimension of governance and ministry in general,” King said.

Some operational duties will be passed to other staff in the department of synodical services, while duties related to classis support and renewal will be picked up by this new position.

“CRCNA leadership recognizes that our ecclesiastical assemblies have been and will continue to deal with weighty and difficult governance matters,” King said, and denominational leadership recognizes that “these assemblies need resourcing and support.”

The director of ecclesiastical governance, who may be based in either the Burlington, Ont., or Grand Rapids, Mich., denominational offices, will serve as the meeting officer for synod and the Council of Delegates and will be a member of the Office of General Secretary along with general secretary King and chief administrative officer Shirley De Vries.

The search team expects to have a candidate to present to the Council of Delegates for consideration and approval at the Council’s Oct. 16-18 meeting.

—Alissa Vernon,
News Editor

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Global Coffee Break Experiments With All-ages Conference



Global Coffee Break hosted an all-ages conference for the first time in English from July 12 to 14.

Global Coffee Break, a ministry of the Christian Reformed Church's Resonate Global Mission, hosted its first all-ages English-language conference in July at Gordon College in Wenham, Mass.

The gathering offered Bible studies for men, women, and children on the theme "Inspired by Hope," based on 1 Thessalonians 1:3.

"This was an experiment," said Diane Averill, the small group representative and local mission leader at Global Coffee Break for the East Coast. While Global Coffee Break has had women's retreats for a number of years, this was the first time such an event included men and children.

Grace Community Chapel in Teaneck, N.J., home church of Sora Suh, one of the conference speakers, developed Bible study materials for elementary children. Teens and adults attending the conference used the original materials, which invite participants to ask questions of a Bible text and apply what they learn to their lives.

Suh, who leads the adult education team at the English- and Korean-speaking Grace Community Chapel, was joined by other keynote speakers Kevin DeRaaf, Resonate's director, and Tim Sheridan, a Resonate leader in church planting.

About 60 people, including 15 children and five teens, attended. Averill called it "a great experience" and was thankful for the "tools to engage everyone with the Bible, inspiring worship, and outstanding speakers."

Global Coffee Break ministers in 30 countries and 11 languages. It was folded into Resonate Global Mission in August 2023.

—Callie Feyen

Pastor's 4 a.m. Prayer Leads to Through-the-Night Vigils



The Alanis family is among the people committed to praying together every morning with Grace and Peace Church.

After being invited and encouraged by their pastor, attendees of Grace and Peace Church, a Christian Reformed congregation in Chicago, Ill., are waking up early in the morning to read their Bibles, pray, and encourage one another.

John Zayas, associate pastor at Grace and Peace, said that over a month before starting the ministry he "had a dream that the Lord was calling and inviting me specifically to meet him in prayer at 4 a.m." Discerning "that this was an invitation from God, and it was bigger than myself," Zayas said he was willing to leave his comfort zone.

Grace and Peace hosted the first 4 a.m. prayer time July 29 through the church's app. People joined a live chat to share Scripture, prayer requests, and encouraging words while they prayed. By the end of the first week, Zayas said, more than 100 people were participating—about half the average attendance at Sunday worship.

"People were seeing personal breakthroughs," Zayas said. After that first week, Grace and Peace expanded the 4 a.m. prayer to hour-long time slots from midnight to 6 a.m. Prayer leaders, acting as accountability partners for those in the church who want to deepen their prayer life, committed to be online for an hour during their assigned time.

"We've always been a church that heavily believes in prayer and the leading of the Spirit," Zayas said, and this time of prayer "feels like it's becoming part of the fabric of our ministries' life." Zayas said participants pray for their families, their church, and their city.

—Kristen Parker

Deacons Share Stories of Service at Synod

Deacon delegates to Synod 2024 gathered one evening to share stories of their Christian Reformed congregations' work to serve God and their neighbors. The dinner was organized by Jodi Koeman of World Renew and Mark Vanderwees of Diaconal Ministries Canada.

Cherri LeForestier, a deacon from Classis Quinte, shared the story of how a penny collection at her church in Whitby, Ont., benefitted a local pregnancy center with a \$3,500 donation.

LeForestier was forwarded an email from an anonymous congregant who said he collected pennies and was willing to donate 25 cents to Hebron CRC's deacons for every penny found and contributed.

Pennies have been out of circulation in Canada since 2013.

LeForestier said the donor agreed to align the penny collection with the deacons' offering series for the pregnancy help center, a local partner.

In six weeks, with the help of a display in the church's foyer and promotion on social media, the church amassed nearly 14,000 pennies. "It was something everyone could participate in," LeForestier said.

Elizabeth Koning, Classis Chicago South, spoke of an effort at Hessel Park CRC in Champaign, Ill., to provide Thanksgiving baskets to local refugee families. Deacons from the church asked a local



Photo by Steven Herppich

Grace Miedema, Cherri LeForestier, Eric Tisch, and Elizabeth Koning were deacon delegates to Synod 2024 who shared their stories of helping neighbors.

refugee center where families were coming from and what would be culturally appropriate to receive in a basket.

"We put together a basket so that they would have a first or second Thanksgiving in the U.S. that was really festive but also recognized where they were coming from," Koning said.

A family from Afghanistan, for example, received lamb instead of the traditional Thanksgiving turkey.

Grace Miedema, Classis Alberta South/Saskatchewan, shared her experience of befriending a refugee mother from the Democratic Republic of the Congo who lived in the community with her nine children. Miedema made regular visits to the family, helped with rides, and helped some of the woman's children find employment. Another member of Brooks (Alta.) CRC helped the family find housing.

"You come with who you are," Miedema told the gathered deacons. "Don't be afraid to reach out to people. ... Whatever gifts you have, those are the ones you use."

The refugee family returned Miedema's hospitality by helping Miedema and her husband move house.

Eric Tisch, Classis Hamilton, shared how his congregation, Immanuel CRC in Hamilton, Ont., built a community refrigerator and pantry that is connected to the church.

"We said to the church, it'd be a good opportunity for our congregants to actively put something in (the refrigerator) and for people to take something out," Tisch said.

The story of the community refrigerator was picked up by a local newspaper and then by a larger paper. As a result, other congregations contacted Tisch to learn how to start up a similar ministry.

"It really spurred on a lot of conversation in our classis about community fridges," Tisch said.

—Greg Chandler

IN MEMORIAM



*Rev. Dr. Donald
(Don) J. Griffioen*

1932-2024

Don Griffioen was heavily involved in social justice issues, including civil rights movements. He worked hard to help churches become more racially diverse and inclusive. Until his death May 26 at age 92, Don continued to encourage all people to love one another.

A graduate of Calvin College (now University) and Seminary, Don studied an additional year at Westminster Seminary in Philadelphia, Pa. In 1984, he received his Doctorate of Ministry from Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, Calif.

Ordained in 1958, Don served Madison Avenue Christian Reformed Church in Paterson, N.J., before being called by Christian Reformed Home Missions (now part of Resonate Global Mission) to be the regional missionary for the East Coast with a focus on church planting. He then became missionary-at-large for the Grand Rapids Board of Evangelism and later became director of Grand Rapids Area Ministries. From 1993 until his retirement in 1997, Don pastored Archer Ave. CRC in Summit, Ill.

Over the next 17 years Don served 18 different congregations across the U.S. as a specialized transitional minister. He retired for the second time at age 80.

Predeceased by a son and by Martheen, his wife of 63 years, Don is survived by two children and their spouses, nine grandchildren, and 10 great-grandchildren.

—Janet A. Greidanus

IN MEMORIAM



*Rev. Anthonie
Vanden Ende*

1926-2024

Anthonie Vanden Ende is remembered for pastoring with gentle conversations on eternal matters. He died June 18 at age 97.

Born and raised in the Netherlands, Vanden Ende graduated in 1954 from seminary at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. He served a church in the farming village of Munnekeburen, Friesland, then spent a year in the Royal Dutch Army.

After immigrating to Canada in 1959 with his wife and children, Vanden Ende was ordained in the Christian Reformed Church. He pastored Brooks (Alta.) CRC; Grace CRC, Welland Junction, Ont.; and Fredericton (N.B.) CRC. He found “Dominee” or “Reverend” Vanden Ende “didn’t really fit with the Maritime (provinces) vibe,” his family said, so “Pastor Tony” became his title, and it remained. Pastor Tony went on to serve Westmount CRC (now Compass Community Church) in Strathroy, Ont., then Immanuel CRC, Brampton, Ont.

The Vanden Endes retired to Strathroy in 1995. Pastor Tony enjoyed singing, playing piano and organ, gardening, painting, carving, doing leatherwork, creating birthday cards, and cooking. His raisin bread, it is said, was legendary.

Predeceased by a granddaughter and his first wife, Ank, Vanden Ende is survived by his second wife, Helen, and their combined family of 10 children, 32 grandchildren, and 32 great-grandchildren.

—Janet A. Greidanus

IN MEMORIAM



*Herman (Herm)
Van Niejenhuis*

1949-2024

If Herm Van Niejenhuis had to describe his work, said one of his brothers, “he would say he was a Storyteller with a capital ‘S.’ He simply tried to tell the story (of the Christian faith)—to help us enter in and explore the wonder of it, the mystery of it, the truth of it.” Herm died July 24 after living for three years with pancreatic cancer.

An infant when his family immigrated from the Netherlands to Edmonton, Alta., Herm later graduated from Dordt College (now University) and Calvin Theological Seminary. He was ordained in 1975 and served Maranatha Christian Reformed Church in Lethbridge, Alta.; First CRC in Kingston, Ont.; Bethel CRC in Saskatoon, Sask.; Willowdale (Ont.) CRC; and Covenant CRC in Sioux Center, Iowa. Herm retired in 2012 and then served as an interim pastor for many congregations in the United States and Canada. An edited collection of his sermons, *The Posture of Grace*, was published in 2022.

Herm was an excellent hockey player who also enjoyed golf and reading. He loved to cook and was happy preparing meals with a tea towel slung over one shoulder. As his illness progressed, watching cooking shows on TV became a favorite activity.

Herm is survived by his wife, Dee; three sons and a daughter-in-law; two grandchildren; and four great-grandchildren.

—Janet A. Greidanus

Are Canadian CRCs Moving ‘Toward CRC Canada’? It’s Too Early to Tell

Toward CRC Canada, a group advocating for a separate Canadian Christian Reformed Church, argues that “the time is right for the CRCNA to birth a distinct, independent Christian Reformed denomination in Canada.” The Canada Ministry Board, representing Canadian churches in the CRCNA, believes this isn’t necessary. We don’t yet know what CRCNA members across Canada think, but the topic is likely to come up in congregations’ fall council meetings.

The Case

Toward CRC Canada is a grassroots group with a steering committee that includes pastors and former CRC leaders. Outlining its case in three working documents—“CRC History and Culture in Canada,” “Contextual Ministry in Canada,” and “Accountability to Canadians”—the group advocates for two distinct yet collaborative denominations in the United States and Canada. It has hosted video conferences and published reactions from Canadian CRC participants on its website. The group intensified its efforts after Synod 2024.

“Recent actions by successive synods have shown a growing cultural divide between Canadian and American churches,” the group said in a July 12 statement. “We love and cherish much of what is in the CRC. ... We seek to maintain these rich traditions and ministries in our unique Canadian context where our united desire to follow Jesus is not bound by uniformity but by love and compassion.”

Currently the Canadian congregations of the CRCNA are part of one binational synod that is the ecclesiastical governing body for the denomination—an assembly of delegates from all 49 classes, 11 of which are Canadian and one of which is binational. All of the CRCNA congregations are bound by Synod 2022’s decision to declare as confessional that homosexual sex is unchaste and a violation of the seventh commandment. Synod 2023 upheld that ruling, and Synod 2024 set a

course of discipline for churches acting publicly against that teaching.

In Canada about 3% of congregations (seven of 242) have a published statement that affirms the full participation of LGBTQ+ people regardless of their relationship status. In the U.S. about 2% (14 of 758 congregations) do.

“The path proposed by the TCRC will prevent the impending loss of significant parts of the body,” Toward CRC Canada said in an August open letter. “We seek to be the home for all Canadian members of the CRC. ... Those who find themselves disenfranchised or despondent will find a home in the Canadian CRC,” the group’s July 12 statement said.

On July 17 the group sent an email communication to every Christian Reformed congregation in Canada that has a public email address and invited church councils to consider and adopt its “Declaration of Readiness for a Distinct Christian Reformed Church of Canada.”

The Response

The Canada Ministry Board, addressing inquiries from churches, clarified that Toward CRC Canada is not part of CRCNA leadership and that councils are under

no obligation to respond to the group’s request. While appreciating the group’s contributions, the board believes the current denominational governance structure allows for contextualized ministry in Canada, and therefore it does not support the movement toward ecclesiastical separation. “We already are a separate Canadian entity, legally,” board chair Greta Luimes said.

Toward CRC Canada acknowledges the separate Canadian legal entity, but says that doesn’t go far enough.

“We want the full authority, by way of a Canadian synod, to make united decisions for ministry in Canada while also respecting the authority and wisdom of each council called to pursue local ministry in their own context,” said steering committee chair Everett Vander Horst.

Canadians’ Reactions

When asked about the separation movement, many Canadian CRC members said they were not in a position to comment. Those who did comment had mixed opinions.

Amy Field, 33, a CRC member in St. Albert, Alta., said she’s supportive of forming an independent Canadian CRC. “I don’t think we should be governed (ecclesiastically) by a group of people that are primarily from a different country,” she said. Though organizational governance is carried out by the fully Canadian ministry board, ecclesiastical decisions on theological and Church Order matters happen at synod, which is three-quarters American. “Canada’s the minority, and we can see that in how the decisions are made and how our voices are heard,” Field said.

Ken Benjamins, 60, a pastor in Dundas, Ont., said he appreciates the fellow pastors in Toward CRC Canada but has concerns about pursuing this approach. “I’m not convinced we have a unified identity or vision as a Canadian CRC,” Benjamins said. “We are all quite diverse



Source: towardcrccanada.net

and different—Alberta is different from Ontario, which is different from Quebec. Even churches within the individual classes are diverse and different.”

Confessionally, “we are no different than the U.S. churches,” Benjamins continued. “Some people are assuming that Americans vote one way and Canadians vote another,” he said, but he doesn’t think that’s the case. In an era of waning denominational loyalty, he concludes, “we need the Americans.”

John Hiemstra, 68, a CRC member in Edmonton, Alta., and a retired professor of political studies at The King’s University, has thought for decades that the Christian Reformed churches in Canada would be better served by an independent Canadian denomination.

“What I’ve seen over time is that the substantial difference that exists in the cultures and political cultures of our two countries really does affect how you see things and how you act on things, and the church has to be in tune with what’s going on right in front of it,” he said.

“There’s a spiritual thrust to what’s going on in our culture, and that has to be discerned by people who live and experience and move in that culture,” Hiemstra continued. “Those are different—not better or worse, just different—in the two countries, and we need to take those things seriously.”

Johannes Schouten, 56, a pastor in Burnaby, B.C., said he first heard of the Toward CRC Canada group last fall when it sent a letter to the Canada Ministry Board calling for “distinct and separate national denominations.” Schouten said

he has some knowledge of the group’s work and could have seen himself supporting the movement earlier in his ministry. “I still feel pretty Canadian and love serving in Canada and being part of the Canadian culture, but maybe I’ve just gotten used to pastoring in this binational church,” he said. “There’s a distinct identity in Canada, but I don’t feel as though we have to do this as (much as) maybe I would have thought 25 years ago.”

Schouten said part of his hesitation comes from perceptions of what supporting that move might mean to others. “Other pastors might say, ‘Oh, I know why you’re in favor of an independent Canadian CRC; (it’s) because you want to have a different decision about human sexuality and the HSR’ (the human sexuality report received by Synod 2022),” he said, so “it’s a bit of a challenging time to take a stand on this.” Still, Schouten wants his council to talk about it. “I don’t think it’s wrong to talk about it. I welcome that,” he said. “I think it’s a time of soul searching for the denomination, so maybe this group will help us do that.”

Toward CRC Canada continues to seek support from Canadian congregations. Meanwhile, the Canada Ministry Board is exploring ways to better reflect Canadian churches’ voices within the current structure. The board meets later this month.

—Alissa Vernon,
News Editor

A longer version of this article was published Aug. 16 on thebanner.org.

READ MORE ONLINE

Congregation Members Create Sermon Illustrations



A felt collage by Selah Talstra illustrated Joel Ringma’s May 5 sermon on the parable of the great banquet.

Invited by Terrace (B.C.) Christian Reformed Church’s visuals committee, congregation members contributed nine different pieces of original art to illustrate pastor Joel Ringma’s spring sermon series on the parables of Jesus.

The contributors, who volunteered through a sign-up sheet in the church hall, included both professional artists and young children. “The ages ranged from an 8-year-old girl to a 79-year-old woman who (had) used her sewing skills to create beautiful banners that we still use,” said visuals committee member Yvonne Warcup.

Each sermon illustrator was provided with a 23-inch square of painter’s cloth to work on. They employed a variety of media, including paper collage, felt collage, acrylic paint, quilting, and stitchery. The collection was displayed at the front of the sanctuary during the series, then reassembled in the church’s fellowship hall.

“The weekly artwork illustrates and creates interest in the parable being taught,” Warcup said. “All of this showcases the talents and gifts of a congregation and what we can create when we work together.”

Illustrations for the series included “The Hidden Treasure,” by Kaylyn Braam, “The Rich Man and Lazarus,” by Casey Braam, and “The Pharisee and the Tax Collector,” by the grade 4-7 Sunday school class.

—Dan Veeneman

Noteworthy

Calvin University's **Nagel Institute for the Study of World Christianity** received a **\$1.9 million grant from the Templeton Religion Trust** in July to support a **multiyear research project on the impact of religious education on the spiritual, character, and virtue development of Christian leaders worldwide**. Project lead David Wang, from Fuller Theological Seminary, is continuing earlier research focused in North America.



Damaris Parsitau, director of the Nagel Institute since August 2023, is a sub-grantee on the project and will focus her portion of the work on studying women's spiritual formation in parts of Africa.

Damaris Parsitau,

Beginning in Kenya this past summer, Parsitau engaged "a team of highly qualified women from East, West, Central, South, and the Horn of Africa to examine women's spiritual formation from their own experiences," she said.

Alameda (Calif.) Christian Reformed Church celebrated 100 years of ministry in June. The congregation installed new pastor Matt McClure during the anniversary worship service and heard preaching from its past and present ministers.



Together for Alameda CRC's anniversary were (from left) pastor Andrew Narm, pastor Matthew McClure, classically licensed exhorter Mark Hewitt, pastor Jack Huttinga, and pastor Mark Hofman.

New Federal Rules Affect International Students in Canada

New rules that limit the number of international students admitted to undergraduate university programs in Canada took effect this fall, reducing the total number of undergraduate international students by about 35%. Two schools with ties to the Christian Reformed Church—The King's University in Edmonton, Alta., and Redeemer University in Ancaster, Ont.—made some adjustments to prepare for the changes, but at King's the number of international undergraduates actually went up.

The restrictions include a two-year cap on study permit applications and stricter eligibility criteria for post-graduation work permits. Every study permit application also now requires an attestation letter from a province or territory. According to a January 2024 news release announcing the changes, the steps are to ensure "the integrity of our immigration system while setting students up for the success they hope for" and to alleviate some pressure on housing, health care, and other services.

"At first, we were worried that it might really affect international students," said Gbemi Adegbesan, director of admissions and student recruitment at The King's University. But "despite all of the roadblocks," Adegbesan said, King's saw a 90% increase in international student enrollment at the school compared to last year. International students now make up about 10% of the total student body of over 900.

Adegbesan said the Alberta Provincial Government provided more than 100 letters of attestation for the 2024-25 academic year—more than the number of undergraduate international students enrolled as of August, meaning King's has enough for students still working on applications or figuring out logistics.

"We continue to stay hopeful, and we're proud of what we've done so far," Adegbesan said. She cited Edmonton's relative affordability for a city with an international airport as one reason international students from as far away as West Africa and South Asia are attracted to King's.

At Redeemer, international students make up between 2% to 5% of the student body each year. In the 2023/24 academic year, Redeemer welcomed international students from 32 countries, with most coming from the United States. Eighteen of those students were newly enrolled international students. For the 2024/25 academic year, Ontario issued only 16 letters of attestation to Redeemer, meaning the university can accept slightly fewer new international students this year.

A statement from Josh Sieders, Redeemer's associate vice president of marketing and communications, said that international students are "an important and valued part" of the school's student body. Not only do they contribute significantly to Redeemer's revenue—international student tuition is \$19,494 while domestic student tuition is \$9,987—but the students add "to the richness that a diversity of cultures and experiences contributes to the learning environment," the statement said.

"Redeemer has been careful about international recruitment, understanding the significant resources needed to care for and support these students well," the statement said. For this year's attestation letters, Redeemer is "pleased that the Province sees the value of welcoming international students to Ontario to experience the integration of faith and learning at Redeemer." While the cap on incoming international students might affect the bottom line, it "also creates significant concern for international student applicants who are applying for their study permit," the statement continued.

"The university will continue to support international applicants individually as they navigate this challenging situation," Redeemer said.

—Kristen Parker



PHOTO: CALVIN UNIVERSITY

Always Discovering

As Christians, we are called to be agents of renewal in the world. The 4 agencies, 2 educational institutions, and 3 uniquely Canadian ministries of the Christian Reformed Church come alongside you to support you in that call—whether it is equipping undergraduates in 100+ fields of study, supporting congregations in faith formation for people of all ages, or finding new ways to share the gospel around the world. We are here to partner with you.

crcna.org/Ministries



Engaging in Renewal



By Cassie Marcionetti, Resonate Global Mission, and Kristyn DeNooyer, Thrive.

“Participating with God in God’s mission in the local church or supporting renewal throughout the denomination requires discernment,” said Elaine May, ministry consultant with Thrive, the Christian Reformed Church’s congregational support agency. “The capacity to see God’s redemptive activity in the world and to align ourselves with what God is doing can grow as we learn together in community.”

In fact, renewal is a key facet of the Christian life. The Holy Spirit works in us individually and corporately to transform us through Christ to do good work for God’s kingdom. As we look at the ministries of the CRCNA, we see renewal happening in countless ways at multiple levels.

Take Gather, for example. In February 2024, the CRCNA announced a new initiative to host a replicable grassroots storytelling forum to help churches learn from one another. The Gather initiative includes 10 regional events with lay and ordained leaders throughout the United States and Canada. Each event is prayerfully designed with the hope of fostering a spirit of fellowship, encouragement, and renewal—celebrating the ways God is actively working within Christian Reformed congregations and providing a platform for members to learn from each other and share their journeys.

“This project will strengthen our corporate discernment practices so that together we can evaluate, clarify, and align the churches of the CRCNA with God’s ongoing missional purposes,” explained May, Gather’s project manager.

Since then, a pilot event took place in Minneapolis, Minn., gathering one classis from each region of the CRCNA. There were also events in Vancouver, B.C., and Calgary, Alta., in September, with several more planned for later in 2024.

Collective Discernment

Gather intentionally emphasizes the importance of worship, prayer, and discernment. In contrast to classis or synod meetings, which often are centered around decision making and operate with more formality, Gather’s meetings encourage open sharing and deep reflection, allowing leaders to draw strength from one another and from their collective faith.

After Gather Minneapolis, one attendee said, “I had hoped that it would be a unifying, rejuvenating, inspiring event, and it was all of that. I loved that there was not a sense of polarization. ... I love that we could celebrate how much we

Monique Tolsma from Ebenezer CRC said that supporting Resonate missionaries Jesse and Jari Rodriguez’s work in Nicaragua is a good reminder for their church that they can witness the gospel at work in every aspect of their lives.



The pilot event for Gather took place in Minneapolis, Minn. and had about 70 attendees.

have in common and how our journeys can be both so similar and so different. We all have similar goals and dreams for our churches.”

Shared Experiences and Camaraderie

Gather also aims to highlight the common threads running through the joys and challenges churches face. Through facilitated storytelling in small groups, participants discuss how God is bringing life into their congregations, explore methods to encourage greater participation, and discern where God is leading them in the coming months and years. This collaborative approach ensures that attendees not only gain insights but also feel connected to a broader community that understands their experiences.

Another attendee shared that they left Gather Minneapolis feeling “a deeper connection to (their) classis, appreciation for regional challenges, new friends, and gratitude for all God is doing in the Christian Reformed Church!”

These feelings were widely echoed among participants. A post-event survey showed that 79% of respondents left with feelings of thankfulness, highlighting the gratitude that emerges from such enriching encounters. Additionally, 74% reported feelings of encouragement, and 71% departed with a renewed sense of hope.

To learn more and to watch video stories about Gather, or to find out when members of your classis have been or will be invited to attend, visit crcna.org/Gather.

Fully Engaged in Mission

God also is using and renewing congregations through engaging mission—including through supporting

missionaries around the world. When Ebenezer CRC in Leduc, Alta., was looking for missionaries to support, they connected with Resonate Global Mission, the CRC's mission agency.

Resonate sends missionaries, plants churches, and equips established congregations to join God on mission in their neighborhoods and throughout the world.

"Our desire as Resonate is to see churches fully engaged in mission—and part of that is supporting a missionary. When you support a missionary, that's an extension of your church's ministry," said Carolyn Meraji, who works in donor relations with Resonate and sees how support for mission can renew and revitalize congregations.

Many members of the rural Ebenezer congregation work in and are passionate about agriculture. That's why Meraji connected the church's mission committee with Resonate missionaries Jesse and Jari Rodriguez, who work with farmers in Jinotega, Nicaragua.

Nestled in the mountains, Jinotega is rich in vegetable farming and coffee production, but the community lacks access to training, new technology, and healthy seeds. The Rodriguezes meet those needs by providing biblically based training for farmers, entrepreneurs, and pastors as well as access to farming equipment and seeds. They also encourage farmers to see their business as a way they can share their faith.

"Jesse and Jari are very involved with the farming community in Jinotega and have a passion to share their Christian faith through different programs," said Monique Tolsma, Ebenezer's secretary of deacons. "Their love for their farming community was exciting to hear about."

When members of Ebenezer connect with the Rodriguezes, they are able to easily understand one another's work and share ideas. Ebenezer makes the ministry in Jinotega possible, and members know firsthand how important it is, for instance, to provide and maintain equipment like a threshing machine.

"It's really important," Jesse Rodriguez said. "It makes it possible for farmers to harvest a crop in one day rather than five days. (Ebenezer) is a congregation of farmers. They share a heart for what we're doing here. ... It's an encouragement for the people who work here in Nicaragua, and I know it's an encouragement for the church as well that we can be sharing the same love for the gospel and mission."

While providing financial support is an important way for churches to partner with missionaries, such relationships



Many members of Ebenezer CRC work in agriculture. When the church was looking for missionaries to support, they connected with Resonate Global Mission and started a partnership with Resonate missionaries Jesse and Jari Rodriguez, who work with farmers in Nicaragua.


involve much more: "It means praying for them, visiting them on the field, and when they're here in the region, hosting them and welcoming them," Meraji said.

Ebenezer and the Rodriguezes are often in touch and pray for one another's ministries.

"Ebenezer CRC is just one small church in this big world," Tolsma said. "(But) by being part of the greater church, by supporting Jesse and Jari in Jinotega, we are contributing to furthering God's kingdom."

And while the church is making a difference in Nicaragua, Tolsma added that hearing about the Rodriguezes' daily work is an encouragement to the members of Ebenezer. It reminds them that church members can make a difference in their own community by living out their faith.

"Their mentorship in helping churches create a marketplace ministry and disciple Christians to witness the gospel wherever they find themselves working is a good reminder for us all to take into our own daily lives," Tolsma said.

"Our God doesn't know any borders or cultures," Jesse Rodriguez said. "His Word transcends everything." 

Gratitude in the Body of Christ

HAVE YOU EVER experienced a long wait at a doctor's office? Now imagine waiting more than a year for your treatment.

As one of millions of internally displaced persons in Burkina Faso, that's exactly what Omar* faced. Because of violence from extremist terrorist groups in his home village, Omar fled to the city of Kaya. When he severely hurt his leg in a motorcycle accident, he knew he would be up against unimaginable obstacles to access the medical care he needed.

In fact, he almost gave up hope.

Yet throughout that period of facing despair, Omar was able to find solace through his radio. The hours he spent listening to broadcasts became Omar's lifeline—gospel messages of hope that the CRC's churches and individuals made possible through its media ministry, ReFrame Ministries.

Through a series of biblical radio messages made especially for displaced people, Omar encountered the life-changing message of hope and redemption despite his poor health.

These radio messages encouraged him to make a commitment to follow Christ. And that decision to embrace Christianity not only brought him personal salvation but also sparked a ripple effect of transformation within his family and community.

"Omar didn't keep the good news a secret," said Rev. Marc Nabié, ReFrame's French-ministry leader. "He began sharing with his mother and other family members too, and they accepted Christ as well!"

A Thriving Church in Kaya

In Kaya, Omar connected with David Compaore, a discipleship team member from ReFrame's French partner ministry team who has been



The Christian Reformed Church's support has helped to establish a thriving church in Kaya, where more than 100 individuals—mainly from Muslim backgrounds—have embraced the Christian faith and have joined a church in a place filled with people who are in turmoil.

helping to answer questions about the Christian faith and connecting believers to a church plant for internally displaced people.

Through personal outreach and pastoral care, Compaore has helped nurture a vibrant community of believers, offering them a sanctuary of hope amid turmoil.

"As a church family, the group of believers in Kaya rallied together to fund Omar's surgery," shared Nabié. "Today he is doing much better and is surely giving thanks to God this season for his new life in Christ and his newly healed leg."

The CRC's continued partnership with ReFrame ensures that stories like Omar's can be multiplied in the new areas where your partners are broadcasting to internally displaced people in Burkina Faso.

Thank you for helping believers around the world experience the love of the body of Christ. As we thank God for new faith, baptisms, and connections with local churches, we invite

you to continue uplifting new church plants for internally displaced people like the one in Kaya through your prayers and support. **B**

**Last name is omitted for security reasons.*

— Brian Clark,
ReFrame Ministries

You're Invited!

You can join a special online event Oct. 24 to hear more about how God is working in ReFrame's French-language ministry. Marc Nabié, ReFrame's French-language ministry leader in Burkina Faso, will share more about his reflections published in October's *Today* devotional booklet (todaydevotional.com) and about images from West Africa that illustrate his devotions even further.

Visit ReFrameMinistries.org/Events to sign up for the live event or to receive the recording after it takes place.

The View From Here

Reflections on Gardening and God

I AM A CITY BOY, but I love green and growing things. At one time, my wife and I had more than 150 potted and garden plants. We had many delicate orchids, several types of colorful hibiscus, palm trees, a wide variety of cacti, massive creeping pothos plants with plate-sized leaves, lilies, variegated crotons, bright bromeliads, and more. Since we were living in Haiti at the time, these plants thrived outside in the tropical climate.

Until they didn't. Our plants were always infested with mites, aphids, scale insects, and leaf-devouring snails. The tropical sun would quickly dry and wilt them, and the monsoon rains would often rot the roots. Our plants were in constant need of fertilizer, pesticide, watering, repotting, and renewal.

Plants are apt metaphors for the church. The psalms compare the righteous to trees (Ps. 1). Isaiah compared Israel to a vineyard (Isa. 5). Jesus talked constantly about seeds and growth as a metaphor for God's people (Mark 4; Matt. 13). Paul saw himself as a gardener planting seeds (1 Cor. 3:5-9).

Like our gardens and houseplants, the church is vibrant and fragile. At times it amazes us. Members come together around hurting members. Believers share Christ's love with nonbelievers through words and acts of mercy. Seniors and youth encourage and mentor one another.

Yet the church is often wracked by divisions and stymied by sin. Pastors and leaders publicly and privately struggle. The church loses sight of its mission. Often it slides into cynical apathy, going through the motions

Like our gardens
and houseplants,
the church
is vibrant
and fragile.

of preaching and worship without conviction. Slowly but surely, roots rot and leaves wilt.


Here is where the metaphor breaks down. Wise and experienced gardeners with the right chemicals and soils can usually coax an ailing plant back to health. With a complex system like a congregation, it's not so simple. Perhaps at one time we thought it was. With our books, conference certificates, and theological degrees in hand, we thought we could solve the problem of church decline.

But even while we tried to balance the equation, the variables and constants were changing. Our culture's affinity with Christianity waned. Society unleashed cultural and moral changes on the church. The climate in which the church lives is in many cases unrecognizable to preceding generations. The church needs to be renewed. But how?

Maybe we should start by reevaluating our metaphor. We leaders often see ourselves as gardeners. But who plants the seeds and sends the sun and rain? The sooner we remember that Jesus is the planter, gardener, and grower of the church, the sooner we can take the first step of renewal: surrender.

When confronted by wilting and root-rot in the church, we must first surrender ourselves to the Lord. In his book *In Dying We Are Born: The Challenge and the Hope for Congregations*, Peter Bush writes that for renewal to take root, a congregation must "move from praying 'Take this cup from us' to praying 'Not our will, but thine be done.'" It is at that moment that our faithful Gardener's rehabilitation begins in earnest.

My constant prayer and hope for our Christian Reformed congregations is that they surrender themselves more and more to the Gardener. Perhaps upheaval in our cultures and churches will help us get there. I don't know what renewal looks like, though I'm sure in many cases there isn't a straight line from wilted leaf to mighty tree. In fact, often it's more like the banana tree—the stem has to die for a new shoot to come to life.

But here's what I do know: When God plants and nurtures the seed, it produces a crop, "some thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times what was sown" (Mark 4:20). 



Rev. Zachary King is the general secretary of the Christian Reformed Church in North America. He is a member of Fuller Avenue CRC in Grand Rapids, Mich.

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

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

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

Coming Your Way From CRC Ministries

THE CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH

in North America has four agencies, two educational institutions, and three uniquely Canadian ministries that were all started over the past 160 years as a way to extend your ministry, support your congregation, and encourage you individually as a member of the CRC. Here is a small sample of some of the resources or events that are available to you this fall.



ReFrame Ministries is the CRC's media outreach ministry. On Thursday, Oct. 24, you can join an online event hosted by Marc Nabié, ReFrame's French-language ministry leader in Burkina Faso. Nabié will speak about gratitude—the theme he writes about in October's *Today* devotional—and share images from West Africa that he mentions in the devotions. Visit ReFrameMinistries.org/Events for details.



Resonate Global Mission is the CRC's mission agency. While we might not all be full-time missionaries, Jesus calls all of us to live out and proclaim the gospel in the spaces where God has placed us. Resonate's *Witness: Equipped to Share the Good News* is a self-guided course for individuals or small groups to learn how to join in God's work in their neighborhoods. *Witness* includes videos, a small-group discussion guide, and a personal journal that will help you reflect on what it means to be a witness for Christ—and then to take practical steps to share the love of Christ in your community. Access this free resource from Resonate at resonateglobalmission.org/witness.



Thrive equips and supports Christian Reformed congregations. Every year, they provide 52 faith formation tips for you to easily distribute in your church bulletin, post on your website or social media, or email to your congregation. To receive these weekly tips in your email, subscribe to the CRCNA's weekly bulletin announcement service email by signing up at shorturl.at/jjV6z. You'll receive one tip per week along with other CRCNA-related announcements.



World Renew is the disaster response, justice, and community development agency of the CRCNA. Its gift catalog gives you the opportunity to choose how you want to support families around the world achieve sustainably healthy lives. Whether it be a goat, a chicken, a handwashing station, or empowerment training for at-risk youth, your gift could be just what someone needs to move forward with hope. This season, you can help World Renew share God's love with people who experience hunger, disaster, and oppression by giving them opportunities to improve their lives by increasing their income to better meet their needs. Learn more at worldrenew.net/gift-catalog (U.S.) or worldrenew.ca/gifts (Canada).



Since 1876, **Calvin Theological Seminary** has been preparing students in the CRCNA to follow their call in ministry. Almost 150 years later, its enrollment includes students from more than 25 countries, representing diverse theological and ecumenical

backgrounds, who value our Reformed foundation. Its emphasis on whole-person education reaches beyond pastoral training to provide resources for the whole church. To discover some of the seminary's recent resources, visit calvinseminary.edu/blog.



Calvin University is the official university of the CRCNA. In addition to equipping students to be agents of renewal, ready to step into the public square and renew all things for the glory of Christ, Calvin also offers opportunities for learning to people of all ages. Join its free award-winning lecture series in January, in person or online. Check out calvin.edu/January-Series to see the full lineup of speakers.



Canadian Justice Ministries include the Centre for Public Dialogue, Canadian Indigenous Ministries, and Canadian Intercultural Ministries, agencies designed to equip and support Canadian CRCs in justice and reconciliation. Hearts Exchanged (crcna.org/Hearts-Exchanged) is an eight-month learning and action journey focused on helping churches become places of belonging and embrace God's call to reconciliation with Indigenous neighbors. Cohorts for individuals and churches will start this fall.

After 40 Years, CRC Loan Fund at a Crossroads

BOTH THE DENOMINATION and the Christian Reformed Church Loan Fund are at a difficult transition point. After almost 40 years of operation, the Loan Fund experienced a sharp decline in loan requests in 2021 due in part to COVID, and it remained without a director for two years after the sudden retirement of David Veen in May of 2022. Since that time, the Loan Fund's direction has been uncertain, its committed investor population is aging, and the requests for capital have changed as churches evolve.

The Loan Fund is an independent nonprofit started at the direction of synod to help churches purchase real estate or finance capital improvement projects. Funds for those lending activities come mostly from investments in the Loan Fund by CRC members, congregations, and classes or other people and organizations affiliated with the CRC. The Fund is governed by a six-member board appointed by synod.

During the gap between executive directors, the Loan Fund's board considered potential new directions such as merging with another fund, winding down, or reenvisioning the Loan Fund. Ultimately, the board decided to revisit the Loan Fund's mission and create a strategic plan to ensure its future success.

After an extensive search they hired me, Layla Kuhl, as the fund's executive director. I started in April, but have been involved with the Loan Fund since 2018, when I sought a loan for Madison Church in Grand Rapids, Mich. Synod appointed me to the Loan Fund board in 2021. I am a licensed



Image by Wirestock on Freepik.

attorney and have been a member of the denomination since 2004, drawn by the genuine sense of love for all people that I experienced at River Terrace Church in East Lansing, Mich., and the thoughtful discernment and discussion that took place regarding matters of spirituality and morality.

I desire to see the Loan Fund grow and continue to provide access to capital for churches and organizations acting out of Christ's love for all people. I also want to provide values-based investment opportunities to people hoping to make an impact.

The Loan Fund has an opportunity to be a catalyst for churches and parachurch ministries that are acting on their Christian values to benefit their communities. But to do so, the Loan Fund would have to expand and redefine its mission and address these changes in its bylaws and articles of incorporation with the approval of synod. Notably, some of the proposed additional facility uses that could be supported by lending, such as Christian education and early

childhood education, are revenue-generating, making lending less risky.

Christians have established some of the most enduring humanitarian institutions, including churches, schools, hospitals, community groups, and aid programs, and I hope the Loan Fund can be a part of this positive Christian influence. My experience has shown that the financial sector is particularly susceptible to greed, and financial institutions tend to benefit the wealthy, while less affluent people and organizations (including churches) have more difficulty accessing capital and competitive interest rates. I hope the Loan Fund can be an institution of change in this regard. I hope to build upon the lending and investing policies already in existence and engage stakeholders in envisioning the future of the Loan Fund.

For more information about the Loan Fund or to request an offering circular for investment certificates, please visit crcna.org/loanfund.

— Layla Kuhl,
CRC Loan Fund

Learning with World Renew

MOST OF US LEARN best by doing. Sometimes a thing we've learned doesn't seem real until we've done it in practice. The work of World Renew can seem distant and unclear to those of us who haven't spent time in the midst of it, but opportunities abound to literally get our hands dirty. And you're invited!



A DRS volunteer works on home reconstruction as part of disaster response efforts in North Carolina.

Perhaps the most well-known way that North Americans can participate in the work of World Renew is through Disaster Response Services. Those faithful volunteers who assist communities devastated by floods and hurricanes are in constant learning mode, from practicing their drywall skills to listening to homeowners tell about their experiences.

Another learning path with World Renew is through Discovery Tours—visits to international communities working with World Renew to transform themselves through community health, food security, and economic opportunities. Dorothy Verduyn participated in a 2024 Discovery Tour to Tanzania and Kenya. "It is truly



Visitors from The King's University in Edmonton, Alta., and community members in Honduras listen to World Renew staff on a trip earlier in 2024.



Jonathan River (left) and William Salgado of Nicaragua show Eden Brocklebank of Drayton (Ont.) Christian Reformed Church how to sift dirt to plant seedlings.

inspiring to see the work that World Renew is accomplishing here in God's name," she says. "The World Renew people are showing such love and passion for their work. It is not work for them; it is a calling! It is amazing and humbling to see how hard the

Tanzanian people work, and yet they are smiling, happy, and friendly all the time. We could learn a lot from them!"

But not everyone has the time or means to travel, so we bring the world to you, too. Last year, World Renew launched a classroom curriculum with resources catered to three learning levels (preschool-grade 6, grades 7-9, and grades 10-12). The Equipped to Educate resources include three units: food security, refugee resettlement, and water. Designed to engage students to live into the call of Micah 6:8, this curriculum will encourage learners to live justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with Christ.

— Naomi Bula,
World Renew

To sign up to be a Disaster Response Services volunteer or to participate in a Discovery Tour, visit worldrenew.net/volunteer (U.S.) or worldrenew.ca/volunteer (Canada).

Access the Equipped to Educate curriculum at worldrenew.ca/educate.

The Banner Team



Shiao Chong



Alissa Vernon



Sarah Heth Sundt



Lorilee Craker



Dean Heetderks



Pete Euwema



Kristen deRoo VanderBerg



Lyndee Zeigler

WONDER WHO makes up the team putting together the news, features, media reviews, and ads that make up *The Banner* in print and online each month?

Shiao Chong (who goes by “Chong”) became *The Banner’s* editor-in-chief in 2016 after 15 years in campus ministry. Born and raised in Malaysia, Chong studied in Canada and immigrated there after graduation. He lives in Mississauga, Ont., with his brilliant scientist wife, Martha, and three daughters. Due to his experiences and having a daughter with Down syndrome, Chong has soft spots for cross-cultural issues and disability concerns in Christianity.

Alissa Vernon, with experience from CBC Radio, Discovery Channel-Canada, and four years as a *Banner* news correspondent, joined the team as news editor in 2017. Her family of two high schoolers, a teacher husband, and a son studying at military college live in Ontario. The Christian Reformed Church is her second spiritual home. She was drawn by the CRC’s emphasis on Christian education, sovereignty theology, and covenant community.

Sarah Heth Sundt became the associate editor for *The Banner* in 2019 after a decade of working for newspapers. She edits everything published in *The Banner* except the ads and helps decide which articles and topics to accept. She, her husband, their two young children, and one fluffy dog live in Michigan. She loves stories in all forms, crafting and sewing, and being outside.

Lorilee Craker is the Mixed Media editor of *The Banner*, the ideal job for her after 17 years as an entertainment writer for *The Grand Rapids Press*. Craker, a native of Winnipeg, Man., lives with her husband in Michigan and is the parent of three young adults. She is the author of 16 books, including *Eat Like a Heroine: Nourish and Flourish*

with *Bookish Stars* from *Anne of Green Gables* to *Zora Neale Hurston*.

Dean Heetderks is co-director of Ministry Support Services, a group that provides all kinds of support for the ministries of the CRC. He’s also the art director of *The Banner*. Trained as an illustrator, he loves pictures only slightly more than he loves words. Heetderks and his wife, a designer, live in West Michigan and can’t get enough of their adult children and two grandkids.

Pete Euwema is the graphic designer for *The Banner*. He started his career working for *The Grand Rapids Press*, then began working for the CRC in 1981. He has worked on various parts of *The Banner* for more than 40 years and is currently in charge of the final layout and production of the magazine and website. Married for 43 years, he has four children and five grandchildren. He enjoys hunting, fishing, and gardening and spends a lot of time tending to animals on his hobby farm.

Kristen deRoo VanderBerg became the director of communications and marketing for the CRC in 2016 after serving with World Renew’s communications department for 17 years. Part of her job is editing the Our Shared Ministry section of *The Banner* and telling stories of what the people of the CRC are doing together through our shared denominational ministries. VanderBerg lives in Brampton, Ont., with her husband, two daughters, a dog, a cat, and a gecko.

Lyndee Zeigler is one of the newest additions to *The Banner* team, joining as the sales representative and working with all things advertising. Zeigler lives near the Mackinac Bridge in Cheboygan, Mich., with her husband, daughter, and two Samoyed pups. In her spare time, Zeigler enjoys shopping at the farmer’s market, crafting something in the kitchen, tending to her garden, snuggling up with a good book, traveling, or hiking. **B**

The Miracle of Hearing

EEEEEE! Do you ever hear a high-pitched whine? You can't see what is making the sound, but you hear it. It sounds as if it's coming from inside your ear—and it is! That sound is one of your sensory hair cells dying. (Don't worry, you have plenty more.) When I hear that sound, it reminds me how amazingly God created my ears to be able to process sounds.

Most of us can see the outer part of our ears when we look in a mirror. God created its shape to funnel sound into our inner ears. We help our outer ears funnel sound when we cup our ears to hear someone better.

Once a sound reaches the middle and inner parts of our ears, things get really interesting. God created sound to make things vibrate. Your middle ear contains an eardrum with a membrane that vibrates when sound waves hit it. You can model this by stretching a balloon over a can opening like a drum and sprinkling sugar on it. When you ring a tuning fork near the can, the balloon will vibrate with the tuning fork sound, and the sugar will bounce. Your eardrum, also called the *tympanic membrane*, makes three tiny bones in your middle ear vibrate. These three small bones, called *ossicles*, are so small they can be placed

together on a penny! The last bone transfers vibrations to an oval window in your inner ear.

Your inner ear, or *cochlea*, is a fluid-filled chamber shaped like a snail shell. Inside the cochlea are tiny hairs called *cilia*. Vibrations from the oval window go through the cochlear fluid, hitting cilia along the way. Hairs near the opening of the cochlea detect high sounds, and hairs near the center detect low sounds. When these hair cells die, you hear that high-pitched sound.

But so far God's design for your ear has just transferred vibrations to a fluid that causes your sensory hair cells to vibrate. More has to happen in order for you to hear.

Each time a vibration hits a cilium (a single hair), it transfers an electrical message to the brain telling the brain you hear something. Your brain then changes these electrical signals into something you will recognize. Your brain decodes these electrical signals into music, birdsong, or your teacher's words. Amazing!

The last step of God's design for your ear is understanding the messages sounds give you. But this has nothing to do with your ear. This has to do with your heart. Jesus said "Whoever has ears, let them hear" seven times in the gospels. Jesus wasn't referring to the physical way your body hears things—sound waves to eardrums to ossicles to cochlea to cilia to your brain. Jesus was referring to the "ears" of your heart. Do you understand that Jesus loves you and wants you to live your life differently for him? The way our ears work is amazing, but Jesus' love for you and the way he wants you to live your life for him are even more amazing! **B**



Albert Kok teaches eighth grade at Beacon Christian School in St. Catharines, Ont. He loves teaching science and exploring God's order in creation as he hikes the Bruce Trail with his family.

Reformed and Always Reforming

By Jeff Fisher

Variations of the saying “reformed and always reforming” have been expressed for centuries, with a breadth of meaning and intent. While it is often identified as a Reformation slogan, we have no written evidence that the Reformers themselves used these words together this way. They seem to have first appeared more than 150 years after Luther’s 95 Theses and more than a century after John Calvin’s death. Yet Reformed theologians such as Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck did use versions of the slogan in the 19th century, and Karl Barth popularized the phrase in the 20th century. They used it to convey that Reformed Christians should continually examine their doctrine and practice to ensure its purity and faithfulness, just as Luther, Calvin, and others did in the 16th century.

However, the use of “reformed and always reforming” and its variations exploded after World War II with the purpose of justifying doctrinal change (see Busch, “Calvin and the Reformanda Sayings,” and Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms*). The updated Foundations of Presbyterian Polity of the Presbyterian Church (USA), for example, includes, “The church reformed, always to be reformed according to the Word of God” as the reason for its openness to reforming its doctrinal standards and governance (F-2.02). Additionally, *Reformed and Always Reforming* is the title of a book by Roger Olson, the Arminian author of *Against Calvinism*. So the slogan’s use apparently does not even need to communicate that one has to be or remain Reformed theologically. With this broad spectrum of application, what does it mean for Reformed people and churches to be “reformed and always reforming”? A brief look at the phrase’s origins and historical

context can help us understand the kind of reforming sought then and its relevance to more clearly seeing our own contexts.

Origins of the Saying

“Reformed and always reforming” first appears in a 1674 devotional by Jodocus van Lodenstein, a Reformed pastor involved with the Nadere Reformatie (Dutch Second Reformation). He expressed concern that an overemphasis on right doctrine had overshadowed attention to personal piety. From van Lodenstein’s perspective, people in the Reformed church needed not only to hold right beliefs, but to experience transformation in everyday lives and practices. He sought reform that would awaken the inner dimensions of faith—the genuine religion of the heart. His historical situation shaped the particular kind of reforming in the Reformed churches he desired.

Scholars of European history refer to the period from the late 1550s to the 1720s as the Age of Confessionalism. Near the beginning of this era, the various branches of Protestant Christianity published confessions to distinguish themselves from one another and from Roman Catholicism. This includes the Belgic Confession (1561) and the Heidelberg Catechism (1563). As Protestantism spread in the 17th century, each group sought to define, defend, articulate, and clarify their beliefs even more, often resulting in the formation of further confessions, such as the Canons of Dort (1619) and the Westminster Standards (1646-47). Confessional solidification intensified, sparking numerous debates within communities.

Between the 1640s and 1720s, the heightened emphasis on right doctrine led to divisions among those interpreting the Reformed confessions

differently. During this era of “high orthodoxy,” van Lodenstein expressed that the Reformed church should always be reforming. At the same time, German Pietism emerged from within Lutheranism, sparked by Philipp Jakob Spener’s *Pia desideria* (1675), published only a year after van Lodenstein’s devotional. What Spener did for Pietism among German Lutherans van Lodenstein had already begun among the Dutch Reformed. Confessional entrenchment instigated a call to reform piety, paralleling previous Reformers calling for doctrinal reformation.

A renewed focus on piety ushered in a period of deconfessionalization, when doctrinal differences and boundaries were downplayed and minimized. Among the many significant events during this time was the revival in the 1730s and 1740s now referred to as the First Great Awakening, led most notably by John and Charles Wesley (Anglicans influenced by Pietism who started Methodism) and Calvinist theologians George Whitefield and Jonathan Edwards. The reforming envisioned by Spener and van Lodenstein bore fruit, but the subsequent shift that prioritized emotions over intellect and the heart over the head prompted many in the next generation to advocate for a returned focus on doctrine. And so continued the oscillation between confessionalism and pietism, each emphasizing either doctrine or practice, too often at the expense of the other. I believe we are in one of these swings again, although the diversity of church experiences leads some to advocate for a return to doctrinal purity while others seek faithfulness in practice.

In addition to the historic origins of “reformed and always reforming,” its linguistic origins will help us better understand its proper use. The

earliest version—*reformata semper reformanda*—was in Latin, the shared theological language of the time. Many today who want to clarify its meaning point out that *reformanda* is a passive participle, indicating that the reforming must happen *to* a person or church and is not an action done *by* the person or church. Critics of this slogan say some churches use it to justify new ideas that seemingly go against the Reformed faith or even blend un-Christian cultural and societal influences with Christianity. They insist that true reforming can be initiated only by God. Though not exactly the same, the verbal form is similar to what is translated in 2 Corinthians 3:18 as “being transformed” into Christ’s image. This observation helpfully reminds us that any transforming or reforming only happens by God, and *semper reformanda* does not give us license to make whatever changes we think will benefit us or the church. Rather, as an individual Christian is justified and yet always in the process of sanctification, the Reformed church is reformed and yet always in the process of reformation. Both are the already-but-not-yet work of God.

“Always Reforming” in Recent History

The church being reformed and always in the process of reform remains a reality and a necessity to this day. Obviously we live in a different time and context than those who wrote the Reformed confessions. Not all of their controversies are ours, and many controversies we face today never occurred to them. Much has changed and required reforming since then. Even the term “reformed” presents challenges. Not only does it describe the many branches that came out of the Reformation, such as Presbyterians (who adhere to different confessions from ours), but it is also used by certain groups of Baptists

In the moment we
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of reforming.

today who embrace teachings related to predestination but reject the historically Reformed views on covenant and the sacraments.

The combination of our confessions and the corresponding practices of faith and life we developed locate our particular Christian Reformed branch on the much bigger tree of Christianity. But we are not immune to the broader cultural movements in society or the church, whether in the past or the present, so we regularly find ourselves in need of reforming.

At present, our denomination finds itself in a time when some calling for “reformation” want a return to ways of our past, while others seek reform that would take us on a different trajectory. What could or should “always reforming” look like for us as Reformed Christians? Reflecting on some of the many changes in our own denomination can help us identify the reforming that is continually necessary. The following characteristics exemplify thoughtful application of “always reforming” that neither holds tightly to the way things are or were nor grabs at the latest fads, gimmicks, or innovations.

» **Humility to recognize that all theology and practice is historically and culturally situated.** Not

only are our Reformed confessions historically and culturally rooted, but so are many of our liturgical and spiritual practices. In fact, so is the Bible itself. This does not make any of it untrue or wrong. But it should remind us that we need to do the necessary work of distinguishing between enduring truths and the contextual ways those truths have been implemented. Church history is filled with massive overhauls and inconspicuous adjustments to what Christians believe and how they behave. Our denomination’s position on card playing, theatergoing, dancing, and other “worldly amusements” is just one example of this. Christian Reformed members were urgently warned that these were contrary to an appropriate lived expression of the Reformed faith. Over decades, upon further reflection on Scripture and its application, reforming happened on these matters. Similarly, we revisited long-held interpretations of Scripture regarding divorce and remarriage, children at the Lord’s Supper, creation and science, and many other topics.

» **Openness to incorporate insights from other Christian traditions.**

In addition to matters of practice, many theological positions have experienced reform too, especially because of interactions with Christians who have other perspectives. The Christian Reformed Church, for example, recognized that it could still be Reformed even while embracing certain views on spiritual gifts from the Pentecostals and Charismatics that we had previously believed to be wrong. Similarly, Reformed Christians have incorporated or reincorporated certain liturgical and spiritual practices in recent decades that had previously been rejected as too Catholic.

Perhaps most significantly, our revision of Article 36 of the Belgic Confession on the relationship between church and state and of Q&A 80 of the Heidelberg Catechism on the Roman Catholic Mass happened in part because of interactions with other Christians. Changes, updates, and revisions like this do not undermine or subvert what it means to be Reformed. Rather, they demonstrate a reforming posture that is open to considering and evaluating these gifts from other Christians.

» **Readiness to correct abuses and errors in the institutional church.**

This includes confessing and repenting of previous wrongdoing, not just individually but collectively. Following the stunning survey results from the early 1990s on the extent of abuse within the CRCNA, our denomination developed what is now Thrive's Safe Church Ministry to provide training and support regarding abuse awareness, prevention, and response. We rightly confessed that the CRCNA had not always addressed abuse justly, compassionately, and adequately, and we did something about it. Additionally, in our attempts to articulate and implement our position on same-sex marriage, we have repeatedly called for repentance of the way people who are LGBTQ+ have been treated. Undoubtedly our actions, even when we have good intentions, do not always live up to our beliefs. We must continually seek the Spirit's work of reforming where we have strayed.

Always Reforming Today

In the moment we find ourselves today, one could point out numerous places in society, the broader church, our denomination, our individual churches, and our own lives that are in need of reforming. Perhaps the broadest meaning for "always reforming" is

the recurring need to refocus on the mission and purposes of the church. Christians often have found themselves enamored with power, status, influence, grandeur, and privilege to the detriment of remaining grounded in worship, fellowship, discipleship, and evangelism. Presently, it seems we need a renewed engagement with God's Word, personally and communally, for theological understanding and its lived expression. I contend that, for all its positive outcomes, the influence of the Church Growth Movement's emphasis on experience, community, and success measured by attendance unfortunately contributed to deficient discipling. Both the plummeting of biblical and theological literacy and the increase of behavior inconsistent with the redemptive story of the gospel indicates the need for significant reforming. For us to remain grounded in our beliefs and open to change, we need to have meaningful, accessible training in Scripture and theology that empowers people to go deeper than what Sunday mornings can offer. Undoubtedly this will look different from evening services or Sunday School of the past, but its continued absence will perpetuate many of the problems and challenges the church faces today that require reforming among the Reformed.

The thread running through all uses of the phrase "reformed and always reforming" is the notion of change, modification, or alteration intended to make one's faith better, truer, and more living and active. It conveys the need to regularly revisit areas where we might be susceptible to de-emphasizing an important aspect of faith and to seek renewal there. It challenges the status quo, whether that is seen as capitulating too much to cultural influence or exhibiting doctrinal obstinance. The slogan evokes the tension between a return

to previous theological formulations and a renewal of faith experiences. For good reason, the apostle Paul contends, "Watch your life and doctrine closely" (1 Tim. 4:16). The two should not be separated or imbalanced. Like the two pedals on a bicycle, they should operate in tandem. Otherwise we lose our balance and potentially even fall.

In its best usage, "reformed and always reforming" urges constant critical reflection about whether our practices and doctrines truly reflect the gospel and the teachings of Jesus. Our Reformed doctrine teaches that all of us, individually and collectively, are contaminated by sin and its effects, but Jesus' promise to build his church gives us hope as we eagerly await his return. Until that day, reforming will always be necessary. As we follow Jesus between now and then, let us be reformed and always seeking the reforming work of the Spirit in our lives and our churches.



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editor for the Isaiah volumes in the Reformation Commentary on Scripture series (IVP) and the author of *A Christoscopic Reading of Scripture*, a book based on his doctoral dissertation from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School.

1. What has been your experience with the phrase "reformed and always reforming"? How have you understood it?
2. Has the article's brief survey of the phrase's history given you new insights? Why or why not?

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Shovels Galore

As I turn over the earth, mostly I relish the exercise, the rich soil and earthworms, and the sun or wind on my face.

THE BEST MOTHER'S DAY present I ever received was a garden shovel. It's the gift that keeps on giving: digging up our perennial flower gardens in the spring and again in the fall has become a ritual.

As I turn over the earth, mostly I relish the exercise, the rich soil and earthworms, and the sun or wind on my face. In the spring, the anticipation of sprouting seedlings and persistent perennials often energizes my digging, and ordinarily in the fall a sense of fruition motivates me as I put the garden to bed for the winter.

But when the hard ground battles my efforts, when the soil seems exhausted and the earthworms are absent, or when the sun is too hot or the wind too blustery, digging is a burden, and, frustrated, I put the shovel away and wait for a more promising day.

Maybe you're not a gardener and would never consider receiving a shovel as a reason for thanksgiving. Maybe you are unable to wield a shovel because of physical limitations. Or maybe you would much rather read a book. Whatever the case, I believe the Holy Spirit has metaphorical shovels galore with which to bless God's children.

In *Winning the War in Your Mind for Teens*, author Craig Groeschel discusses the necessity of confronting the lies Satan tells God's children, not just by trying to change the behavior that results from acting on those lies, but by replacing the lies with God's truth. He points out that this necessitates creating new neural pathways with the Holy Spirit's guidance "to help us rewire our brains and renew our minds." Groeschel employs the metaphors of ruts and trenches to make his point: "A rut is typically formed in mud and becomes a nuisance, even a danger. A rut is unintentionally created, has no purpose, and requires repair. A trench is intentionally dug to

deliver a necessary resource. A trench has a specific purpose and fixes an existing problem."

The morning after I read Groeschel's words, I woke with a prayer of gratitude: "It's a great day because the kingdom is yours and I am your child." Wait a minute! What a switch from the rut-like thoughts that had been plaguing me many nights as I lay awake or first thing in the morning before rising—worries about family, the church, societal problems, and harrowing situations in God's beautiful but broken world.

Unbeknownst to me, the Holy Spirit was handing me a shovel—a metaphorical one. And so began the digging of a trench. In the nights ahead, or the early morning hours just before I got out of bed, a vague, yet persistent thought lingered: "Today is a great day because ..."

Each time, an imaginary shovelful of soil was flung aside as I asked the Holy Spirit to fill in the blank and provide the words to complete the sentence. A pattern emerged. The reason each day is a great day—notice the verb tense—is because of God and God's work in the world. The answers I received didn't focus on my circumstances or those of my family, the church, society, or the world. The focus was and always is on God, first and foremost!

Are you mired in a rut? Is the Holy Spirit handing you a metaphorical shovel with which to dig a trench—one that will become a channel where God's grace, mercy, and healing will flow? The apostle Paul's words to the Roman Christians assure us even today that, though we are weak and unable to dig new trenches in our own power, the Holy Spirit helps us in our weakness and intercedes for us with "wordless groans" (Rom. 8:26). Through the Holy Spirit's intervention, we will experience that "the mind governed by the Spirit is life and peace" (Rom. 8:6). **B**



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Why People Read the Bible Differently

Our attempts to apply Scripture shape what we observe as we reread Scripture.



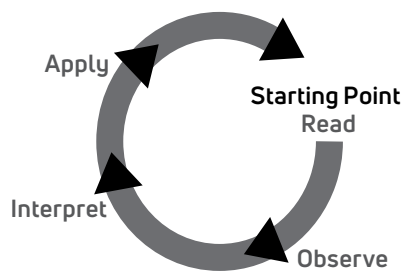
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SEVERAL YEARS AGO, I was reading the parable of the Good Samaritan and trying to live it out in my life. The parable shapes and expands our definition of “neighbor.” Later that week, while walking through San José, Costa Rica (where I live), I came across a man lying in the gutter. It looked like he was dead. What was my responsibility to my neighbor? As I approached the man, some men called to me from the opposite side of the street, where they were sitting in the shade. “Don’t worry,” they said. “He’s just drunk.” I blushed and hurried on.

I’m still not sure if that was the right thing for me to do in that situation, but I returned to the parable with a new question: How did the Samaritan know that the man he was helping wasn’t just drunk? The answer leaped off the page: The man was naked and had been badly beaten!

Our attempts to apply Scripture shape what we observe as we reread Scripture. The stakes are high. There’s a lot of pressure to interpret God’s word correctly. Disagreements about the meaning of Scripture can make us feel as if the very foundations of our faith are being undermined. It can be easy to conclude that the person in disagreement with me has stopped treating the Bible as authoritative.

Have you ever noticed something new in a passage you were trying to apply to your life? Latin American theologians have been talking about this phenomenon for a while. The image below comes from a book by Catalina Padilla that has become a classic in



Latin American theology: *La Palabra de Dios para el pueblo de Dios* (*The Word of God for the People of God*).

I grew up thinking of Bible reading as linear. You start off with the correct beliefs about the Bible. Then you read, guided by those beliefs. Once you have the correct answer, the only thing left to do is to apply that answer. Then you’re done! Just keep applying that answer.

But I think a more cyclical understanding of Bible reading better represents what actually happens when we read the Bible. If you have been applying Scripture to your life, the Holy Spirit’s work in you will cause you to change. With time, the things you notice about Scripture will also change. A person who devotes a year to living out the Sermon on the Mount will read it differently from someone else. Our experiences applying Scripture shape the sorts of things we observe as we reread Scripture.

This gives us options when we contemplate how two different people sometimes read the same text so differently. Has one of them abandoned a high view of Scripture? Are they using different principles when they read?

Perhaps. Or maybe they are just living in a radically different context that results in radically different experiences of applying Scripture, which leads them to observe different things as they read Scripture.

A pastor working in a conservative setting is more likely to have positive experiences applying the traditional view of human sexuality in their life and ministry. These pastors often see the fruits of the Spirit blossoming in the lives of same-sex-attracted people who commit themselves to celibacy. They also say they have an easier time pushing back on things like pornography use and polyamory. These pastors naturally

bring these positive experiences with them to Scripture as they reread it.

Likewise, a pastor working in a more liberal setting often sees negative things resulting from the application of the traditional view of human sexuality, such as anxiety, bullying, depression, and self-harm. In a context in which those sorts of experiences are dominant, a pastor will be much more likely to return to Scripture with new questions: “Wait, are we missing something here? Is there something we’ve overlooked?”

The most basic rule of reading the Bible is that Scripture interprets Scripture. My professors covered this on literally my first day of seminary. According to this rule, we ought to use clear texts to interpret unclear texts. But I’ve seen precious little that defines what qualities make a text clear or unclear. It seems pretty subjective. Which texts are clearer: those that talk about sexual holiness, or those that show Jesus’ compassion toward the marginalized sinners of his day? Which “clear” texts do we use to interpret other “unclear” texts?

When we disagree with someone about what Scripture teaches, it could be that they have different beliefs about the authority of Scripture. But the difference might be the product of the fact that we’re working in different contexts, observing different things, and using different passages to be the “clear” ones that we use to interpret other passages.

Some might not be convinced. Here I’ll address some common criticisms:

1. *“I prefer a more linear way of reading.”*

If Padilla is correct—and I think she is—even people who think they read the Bible linearly are in reality doing something more circular. Your context shapes what you observe, whether you are aware of it or not.

2. *“Won’t this result in a postmodern free-for-all where truth is anything you want it to be?”*

Not necessarily. The old rules for Bible reading still apply. We just have a greater responsibility to be aware of how our context shapes what we read. Postmodernism in small doses is a helpful antidote to some of the less-helpful parts of modernism still flowing in our bloodstream. Absolute faith in our own objectivity doesn’t make us better readers of the Bible.

3. *“Isn’t this just going to make us more worldly? We shouldn’t be adapting to accommodate the values of the culture.”*

This is a valid concern. Worldliness is indeed a problem in all churches, including those that view their Bible reading as linear. But increasing our awareness of how our contexts shape our reading of Scripture won’t make us more susceptible to worldliness. It should actually make us more resistant.


I’ve read the Bible with people from all over the world. Without exception, everyone brings their cultural values with them as they interpret the Bible. People from more individualistic cultures end up with more individualistic interpretations of the Bible. The same goes for people from more community-focused cultures. There is nothing quite like listening to a dedicated capitalist and a committed Marxist try to talk together about what Jesus had to say about money. Denying the fact that our contexts influence our readings of Scripture is no protection from worldliness.

It’s important for us to be aware of how our own contexts affect our reading of Scripture. Juan Stam, another Latino theologian, regularly compared reading the Bible to looking through a dirty window. You need to clean your own side (understand your own context)

and the other side (understand the historical context) to see clearly.

My own beliefs about human sexuality lean traditional. But I recognize that has a lot to do with my living and working in a conservative environment. I’ve largely been insulated from seeing the sort of suffering among LGBTQ+ Christians that my more liberal colleagues have seen. But I am starting to see this suffering more clearly.

For now, traditionalists (myself included) are saying that this suffering is a result of bad application. It isn’t that we are interpreting the Bible poorly; it’s that we’re applying it poorly. The logic is that some small changes (e.g., better pastoral care, intentional inclusion of singles, and not treating same-sex relationships like an extra-evil sin) will make it easier for LGBTQ+ Christians to thrive in conservative churches. The window of opportunity is closing for the conservative church to show that this is indeed true.

The best available data currently show that people who are LGBTQ+ experience a higher risk of depression and self-harm when in non-affirming spaces. If that doesn’t change soon, a growing stream of people will return to the Bible to ask, “Wait, are we missing something here?” 

1. Describe an instance when your understanding of a Scripture passage changed. How did your reading change? What influenced your reading?

2. What do you know about the rule of “Scripture interprets Scripture”? How have you used it before? Do you agree with the author’s difficulties with the rule? Why or why not?

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A Gentleman in Moscow: Comparing the Read to the Watch

The Book



A Gentleman in Moscow, by Amor Towles, is one of those books that most people adore. It was a huge bestseller when it came out in 2016, but some people did not finish it. After finally diving into its 462 pages, I understood both types of readers. It takes a minute to get moving, and it devotes pages and pages to topics such as absinthe and Chekhov. But when the second inciting incident of the book takes place, I became so invested in


the main characters and what would happen to them that I read faster and faster until the end.

Count Alexander Ilyich Rostov is an aristocrat whose family lost everything in the 1917 Russian Revolution. The Bolsheviks are in charge, and though they hate the count for everything he represents, his life is spared, and he is sentenced to permanent house arrest in Moscow's lush Metropol Hotel. It's a slap on the wrist compared to the Gulag, but the count's freedoms—access to fresh air, sunshine, or any change of scenery whatsoever—are severely curtailed. He is tossed from his luxury suite into barren attic accommodations, where he, like Sara Crewe in *A Little Princess*, rises above his limitations and makes the best of things. I fell in love with the count and his delightful way of facing hardship with grace and joy. Part historical fiction, part spy novel, and part love story (the devotion between him and his charge, Sofia, moved me to tears), this exceptional novel teaches readers about Russian history, but more importantly it reminds us of the power of love, courage, and friendship in our darkest days.

The Series



How does the TV adaptation compare to the book? Everyone knows as a rule the book is better, but in this case, the eight-part TV series starring Ewan McGregor as Count Rostov comes close to the excellence of the book. Written and produced by Ben Vanstone (*All Creatures Great and Small*), the series brings the elegant and glamorous Metropol Hotel, its occupants, and its employees to life.

McGregor is terrific in his role as a nobleman who must adapt to massive upheaval in his own life and more broadly in his beloved Russia, now part of the emerging Soviet Union. Will he retain dignity through terrible losses and keep his wits through daunting challenges? He can't do it alone, and the supporting cast of characters—his "comrade" keeper, Osip (Johnny Harris), the glamorous actress Anna (McGregor's real-life wife, Mary Elizabeth Winstead), and Nina (Alexa Goodall), a child guest at the hotel with as little supervision as Eloise had at *The Plaza*—are essential allies. Purists may grumble at some of the changes made in the TV adaptation, but those changes made the series snappier and more suspenseful than the book. It's a gripping and heart-filling watch whether you've read the book or not (my husband concurs). Christian viewers will appreciate the themes of commitment, courage, and sacrifice. (Rated TV-14. Watch *A Gentleman in Moscow* with a subscription to Paramount+, or buy it on Fandango at Home, Amazon Prime Video, or Apple TV+.) 



Lorilee Craker, a native of Winnipeg, Man., lives in Grand Rapids, Mich. The author of 16 books, she is the Mixed Media editor of *The Banner*. Her latest book is called *Eat Like a Heroine: Nourish and Flourish With Bookish Stars From Anne of Green Gables to Zora Neale Hurston*.



Unsung Hero (The Inspired By Soundtrack)

for *King + Country*

Reviewed by Paul Delger

Brothers Luke and Joel Smallbone of the duo for King + Country place their signature stamp on some Christian contemporary classics and include some new songs on *Unsung Hero (The Inspired By Soundtrack)*, the companion to the popular movie with the same name. Listeners will hear favorites such as “You’re the Voice,” “Place in This World,” “To Hell With the Devil,” and “Lead Me On.” New songs include “Checking In,” “Crazy,” and a stunning ballad titled “You Make Everything Beautiful,” sung by the Smallbones’ sister, Rebecca St. James. The album features an impressive guest artist list besides St. James: Michael W. Smith, Lee Brice, Lecrae, Stryper, Amy Grant, Sleeping at Last, and Hillary Scott. This recording has an irresistible sound and the bonus of good memories of retro Christian contemporary music. (Curb Records)



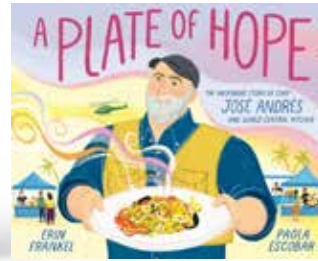
Scamanda

Reviewed by Kristin Parker

I enjoy listening to true crime podcasts, but sometimes I need something that leaves me fascinated by an individual’s actions.

Cue *Scamanda*, which uncovers the story of Amanda C. Riley, a Christian mom and blogger whose cancer journey captured the hearts (and wallets) of her community. The podcast, hosted by journalist Charlie Webster, shares Riley’s story of living with cancer, which quickly takes a turn when investigator Nancy Moscattello gets an anonymous tip that Riley is faking her diagnosis. The eight episodes take you through the investigation from start to finish as the IRS investigates Riley and uncovers a web of lies.

With impressive production quality and a well-balanced mix of interviews, readings, and sound effects, the podcast creates a dynamic listening experience.



A Plate of Hope: The Inspiring Story of Chef José Andrés and World Central Kitchen

By *Erin Frankel*,
illustrated by
Paola Escobar

Reviewed by Sonya
VanderVeen Feddema

Chef José Andrés knows that food is always connected to memory and home. When Andrés moved to America, he took to heart the first words of the preamble to the U.S. Constitution: “We the people.” “Not ME,” Andrés thought; “WE. Everyone deserved a hot meal.”

When Andrés became involved in food preparation for people affected by natural disasters, his vision expanded. “No one should ever go hungry,” he says. “I want to help feed the world.” The name he gave this dream? World Central Kitchen.

Illustrator Paola Escobar’s cheerful, hopeful illustrations complete Erin Frankel’s narrative by capturing the nourishing outcome of Andrés’ magnificent vision. Christian readers will find an example of the fulfillment of Jesus’ command to feed the hungry. (Random House Studio)

The Lowdown

Nourish and Flourish with Bookish Stars:

From *The Banner’s* Mixed Media editor Lorilee Craker and co-author Jenny Williams, *Eat Like a Heroine* asks (and answers), “What can our favorite classic book characters and authors teach us about relishing the food we eat, cook, and serve?” Available online in the U.S. through Amazon or select retailers and in Canada through *Endgamepress.com*.

Faithful Politics:

Miranda Zapor Cruz argues that Christians who share very similar faith convictions can arrive at different political conclusions. There are, however, principles from Scripture and theology that should inform our thinking and remind us that our ultimate citizenship is in the kingdom of God. (IVP Academic)

Highly Anticipated

Season 2: In *Tracker*, starring Justin Hartley, lone-wolf survivalist Colter Shaw roams the country as a reward seeker who uses his expert tracking skills to help private citizens and law enforcement solve all manner of mysteries while contending with his own fractured family. (CBS, Oct. 13)

Understanding God's Sovereignty

If God is completely good—if goodness is who God is—then God cannot create evil.



Mary Hulst is university pastor for Calvin University and teaches at Calvin Theological Seminary, Grand Rapids, Mich.

HOW CAN WE UNDERSTAND God's sovereignty without logically implying that God was the creator of evil?

When Job and his wife lost everything, her advice to him was to “curse God and die.” As she saw it, if God is sovereign, the creator and ruler of all things, then God must also be the one who targeted so much evil against her and her husband. If so, God then deserved to be cursed.

We can understand how she felt. Her words give voice to something that might linger in our own minds in times of tragedy and loss: “Why did God do this? If God is indeed sovereign, then God must be responsible for this. And if God is responsible for this, then God is no longer worthy of my worship. ‘Curse God and die’ sounds exactly right.”

But what if Job's wife was wrong?

The Belgic Confession teaches this about God: “(T)here is a single and simple spiritual being, whom we call God—eternal, incomprehensible, invisible, unchangeable, infinite, almighty; completely wise, just, and good, and *the overflowing source of all good*” (Art. 1, italics mine).

If God is completely good—if goodness is who God is—then God cannot create evil. When we say “God is good all the time,” we are not saying that our experience of God is good all the time. We say “God is good all the time” the way you may say “Mary has green eyes all the time.” Goodness is who God is. God can't not be good. God can't create anything that isn't good.

Evil invaded God's good creation through the deception of Satan, a rebel angel who wooed the two humans to listen to him and not to God. But the introduction of evil did not lead God to throw up his hands and walk away from the world he created.

The Belgic Confession again:

We believe that this good God, after creating all things, did not abandon them to chance or fortune but leads and governs them according to his holy will, in such a way that nothing happens in this world without God's orderly arrangement.

Yet God is not the author of, and cannot be charged with, the sin that occurs. For God's power and goodness are so great and incomprehensible that God arranges and does his works very well and justly even when the devils and the wicked act unjustly (Art. 13).

This is something Job understood. To his wife's suggestion, he says, “Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?” (Job 2:10)

This doesn't mean that Job doesn't grieve, or wrestle with God, or wonder why this has all happened. That's the rest of the book. But Job does all of those things knowing that God is sovereign. Job holds both his deep grief and his deep questions before the face of God, as we still do.

But we know more than Job did. As Francis Spufford writes in his book *Unapologetic*, “We don't have an argument that solves the problem of the cruel world, but we have a story.” We have a story of a God who took on our flesh and all of its pain, who lived in this world of betrayal and grief, who loved so deeply that he wept at the grave of a friend. We have the storytellers of font and table reminding us that the God who took on flesh claims us as God's own and prepares a table before us in the presence of evil itself because God is sovereign, and God has won. **B**

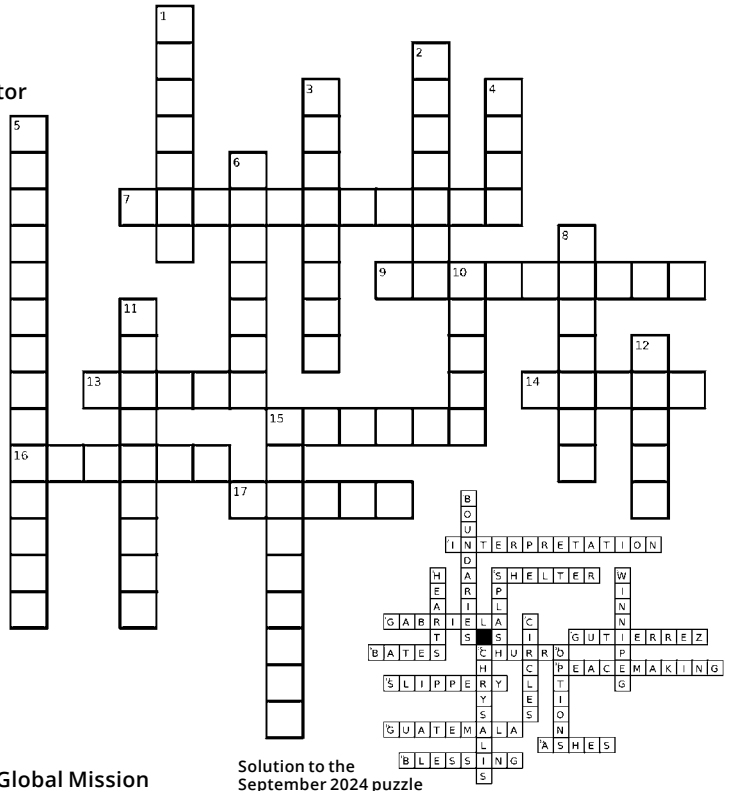
Find the answers to this crossword puzzle in this issue of *The Banner*! See the solutions next month.
(Please note we do not publish Word Play in the July/August issue.)

Down

1. Your inner ear
2. *Eat Like a _____* is a new book by *The Banner's* Mixed Media editor
3. _____ is the name of a true-crime podcast
4. The _____ Fund was started by Synod 1983
5. Instead of a new director of synodical services, the CRCNA wants a director of _____ governance
6. "Reformed and always reforming" is a phrase first seen in this author's devotional
8. What an Ontario church collected in support of a local pregnancy center
10. An institute of Calvin University with a big grant from the Templeton Religion Trust
11. Doing this easily is one way to shine the light of Christ
12. Prioritize this to have better conversations
15. Attempts to apply this affect how we reread it

Across

7. Protestants mark _____ Day Oct. 31
9. A _____ in Moscow is a bestselling novel and a TV series
13. What pastor John Zayas does at 4 a.m.
14. Our conscious reasoning, in Jonathan Haidt's metaphor
15. One author's favorite Mother's Day gift
16. The CRC's congregational support agency
17. Global Coffee _____ is a Bible discovery ministry of Resonate Global Mission



Solution to the September 2024 puzzle



Celebrate All Nations Heritage Sunday

OCT 6

We celebrate the diverse and multicultural church of Christ on All Nations Heritage Sunday throughout the Christian Reformed Church. You can help support growing diversity in leadership and in congregations by giving to Thrive's Multicultural Scholarship Fund.

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TO ADVERTISE: Place your classified ad online at thebanner.org/classifieds or email it to classifieds@thebanner.org or fax it to 616-224-0834. Questions? Call 616-224-0725.

Denominational Announcements

CLASS NORTH CASCADES is meeting on Thursday October 17, 2024 at Bethel CRC, in Lynden, WA from 7-9:30 pm.

Church Positions Available

CROWN POINT CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH IN INDIANA is seeking an ASSOCIATE PASTOR to help fulfill our mission to Radiate God's Love, Raise Christ Followers, and Reach One More. The candidate will have a deep and vibrant faith, teachable spirit, self-starting motivation, organizational skills, effective communication, and relational strength. Visit www.cprc.org or contact of fice@cprc.org with cover letter and resume.

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LUCKNOW COMMUNITY CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH is prayerfully seeking a fulltime Pastor. We are a small rural town in Ontario. Please contact our Search Committee at plbrink13@gmail.com for more information.

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Birthday 100 Years

BIRTHDAY 100 YEARS



GEORGIA (VANDER WEIT) JONKMAN and family anticipate celebrating her 100th birthday on January 20. Cards can be mailed to: 1600 Westbrook Drive, Apt. 932, Richmond, VA 23227. Georgia gives thanks for her children and their families and all the ways she has known God's faithfulness and love.

Anniversary

WEDDING ANNIVERSARY 70 YEARS

MIEDEMA, ANDY AND JO (Van Leeuwen) celebrate their 70th anniversary on Oct. 1. Their 5 children and extended family thank God for His blessings. Address: 301 Hartford Ave. SE Orange City, IA 51041

Obituaries



BOONSTRA, REV. JOHN, faithful servant, age 93, from Kelowna BC, on Thursday, June 20, 2024, went to behold the face of The One he so boldly proclaimed his whole life.

After graduation from Calvin College (University) and Calvin Seminary and ordination in 1962, John, with his wife and partner Carolyn, faithfully served the following congregations in the CRCNA: Brandon Manitoba (1962-1965), Duncan BC (1965-1971), Ottewell, Edmonton Alberta (1971-1980), Maple Ridge BC (1980-1991), and Kelowna BC (1991-1998).

Because of their deep love for the CRC and its people they also served as interim pastor in the following CRCs in North America: Penticton, BC; Thunder Bay, ON; Charlottetown, PEI; Conrad, Montana; Agassiz, BC; and Lethbridge, AB.

Three days before passing away peacefully, and surrounded by his wife and several family members, John and Carolyn celebrated their 66th wedding anniversary together.

John is predeceased by son-in-law Robert Herman and daughter Jacqueline Joy, and leaves behind his wife Carolyn; children Patricia, John (Susan), Deborah (Harvey), Peter (Patricia), and Daniel; thirteen grandchildren, and ten great grandchildren.

~ A celebration of John's life - husband, father, grandfather, great grandfather, pastor, and dominee - occurred on July 2, 2024; a livestream/recording can be found on the Kelowna CRC Youtube video channel.



GEURKINK, VERNON F, age 88, passed away on August 2, 2024 in Carol Stream, IL. Pastored four CRC congregations (Ellsworth, MI; Madison Square and Eastern Ave. in Grand Rapids, Burke, VA). He also served as care chaplain for nine

years at the Christian Health Care in Wyckoff, NJ. He was preceded in death by Pat, his beloved wife of 60 years. Survived by his sons Brett (Brenda) and Eric (Marly), sister Marilyn Larson(Lynwood), brother David (Mary), six grandchildren, and one great-grandchild.

HEINEN, LINDA (nee Visser) beloved wife of Henry Heinen, passed into glory on Wednesday, August 14, 2024, at the age of 80 years. Matthew 6:25-31; Ephesians 6:10-18

POST, DORIS A Dorrie Post, nee Groenleer, age 73, beloved wife for 52 years to John Post. Loving mother of Paul (Kristy) Post and Laura (Bartholomew) Visser. Cherished grandmother of Wyatt and Alli Post; Tara and Faith Visser. Devoted daughter of the late George and Dorothy (nee Palma) Groenleer.

VANDER VLIET, ELOISE (NEE BROERTJES) of Dyer, IN (previously of Denver, CO), age 97, went home peacefully to her Lord and Savior on August 14, 2024.

VUGTEVEEN, MARLENE age 88, died on August 1, 2024. She was preceded in death by her parents, her husband Joe, her son Jon of Grand Ledge, MI, her sisters Betty Vander Schaaf and Annetta Vander Lugt. She will be missed by her children Jane and Bill Bradshaw of Exton, PA, Chuck and Linda Vugteveen and Eric and Angelika Vugteveen all of Richmond, VA, her daughter-in-law Tansley, by her nine grandchildren Cassandra (Josh), John, Bill (Jen), Julianne (Collin), Cory, Lauren (Zac), Casey (Corey), Jeremy and Nadia, her great grandchildren, her sister Joyce and her brother Harold.

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May 5 - 17 | *Jim Bratt & Suzanne Bratt*

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May 27 - Jun 8 | *Dr. Jeffrey A. D. Weima*

COASTAL CROATIA: BY LAND & SEA
Jun 12 - 23 | *Dan & Amy Hermen*

SCOTLAND: HIGHLIGHTS & HIGHLANDS
Aug 8 - 18 | *Eric Van Tassell & Courtney E. Brewster*

SAFARI TOUR OF KENYA & TANZANIA
Nov 3 - 17 | *Nate & Deb Barendse*

MORE INFORMATION COMING SOON:

BIKE & BARGE: AMSTERDAM TO BRUGES
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Celebrate Disability Awareness Sunday

OCT
20

Did you know that simply providing options makes your church more welcoming to people with disabilities? Here are a few ideas:

- Incorporate flags, ribbons, instruments, or sign language during singing.
- Share visual examples along with spoken ones.
- Provide a variety of seating options including tall chairs, chairs with arms, and swivel chairs.
- Provide options where someone who uses a wheelchair or walker can sit, keeping in mind what they can (and cannot) see when people stand.

Learn of some more options at: crcna.org/Disability.



Please join Thrive and their work toward inclusion for people of all abilities by supporting their efforts through your giving.

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God's Calling to the CRC

I had become selective about telling my story because I longed for change in the CRC and it wasn't happening quickly enough.



Denise L. Posie, M.Div., has served in the ministry of discipleship in redemptive kingdom diversity at Calvin Theological Seminary since 2020. Her upcoming memoir is *Called to Remember: Soul Care Through Spiritual Encounters*.

IN JUNE, I attended a presentation by Colin Watson, the former executive director of the Christian Reformed Church in North America and the first graduate of the D.Min. program at Calvin Theological Seminary. His presentation, part of the Theory and Practice: Doctorate of Ministry discussion series, shared key findings from his dissertation, "Leading in White Spaces: The Experience of African American Pastors as Leaders in the CRCNA." Family and friends, community leaders, pastors and congregants, current and prospective seminarians, faculty, and staff filled the auditorium for a panel discussion and audience questions.

When Watson mentioned that the Rev. Eugene Callender was the first ordained African American pastor in the CRC, I remembered meeting Callender in New York with a delegation of inner-city CRC pastors in 2001. It was a privilege and an eye-opening experience. With the help of the Spirit, Callender built a vibrant inner-city ministry in the Harlem neighborhood of New York City in 1952. Like the nine African American participants in Watson's research, Callender said he was called to serve in the CRC. I also was called to the CRC, and I understand how God's calling has played a crucial role in my ministry.

I had a lot to process on my drive home from the seminary event. I recalled panelist Danjuma Gibson, professor of pastoral theology, care, and counseling at CTS, encouraging us to tell our stories. I had become selective about telling my story because I longed for change in the CRC and it wasn't happening quickly enough. I understand the difficulty, slow pace, and painfulness of change in many cases, but it can become frustrating when we miss our stated vision and goals.

Yet I kept the course, partly because God gave me a vision of a church

with diverse kinds of people several times before God called me to go to seminary. Since then, I have had that same vision many times. It has never faded. Remembering this vision and having the encouragement of spiritual companions energize me to press on and finish well. Sometimes I've wanted to give up, but I thank God for his grace and strength in my 25 years of service in the local church, denominational offices, and now the seminary. I am encouraged and hopeful for God's will to be done in the church. One of my greatest joys is to help develop and influence the next generation of church leaders in the CRC and beyond.

God is not finished with me yet. I'm arriving at a new place in my spiritual journey, a place from which to examine and redeem my African American roots and culture. I continue to wrestle with what it means to be Black and Reformed. How do I faithfully serve in the Christian Reformed Church and fully embrace who I am as God's beloved daughter made in God's image? What needs to be redeemed that I had consciously or unconsciously given up? I will tell my story again, but it will be a story of transformation.

Listening to Watson's presentation that evening, I could hardly contain my emotions. I could have shouted. That happens sometimes in the churches of my Baptist heritage when the preacher is speaking the truth. The shouts say we agree. I thought about those individuals involved in racial reconciliation in the CRC for many years, some of whom were in the room and some who were not. I pray for wisdom and strength for them and for those who are beginning this journey of racial reconciliation. You are not alone. May we continue the conversation leading to action with the help of the Holy Spirit. **B**

Broken Beyond Repair

My son looked up, eyes searching for answers. “Can we really fix it, Dad?”

THE ROOM WAS QUIET, save for the subtle clicks and clinks as I delicately maneuvered the broken robot’s pieces. My fingers traced the fractured edges, the tangible evidence of a once-whole toy now reduced to scattered parts on the table. Across from me sat my son, his eyes reflecting a mix of disappointment and hope.

I pulled up a chair and picked up a broken limb. “Let’s see if we can put this back together, shall we?”

An uncertain glance met my gaze. “Do you think we can fix it?”

I offered a reassuring smile. “Absolutely. Things break, but we have a chance to mend them.”

As we navigated the intricacies of wires and connected parts, I couldn’t escape the metaphorical weight of the broken robot. Life, much like this toy, often splinters into fragments that seem irreparable. How frequently do we find ourselves feeling like shattered pieces in need of reconstruction?

My son looked up, eyes searching for answers. “Can we really fix it, Dad?”

Taking a moment, I chose my words with care. “There’s an important idea I want to share with you: redemption. It’s more than just fixing; it’s about making things new, better than they were before.”

A furrowed brow signaled contemplation. “How do we do that, Dad?”

With a deep breath, I seized the chance to convey a profound truth. “Life, my son, is a bit like this broken toy. We make mistakes, we break things, and sometimes it feels like we’re beyond repair. But there’s something that can mend our brokenness in a way we can’t do on our own: It’s God’s redemptive love.”

Interest flickered in searching eyes.


“God loves us so much that he sent his Son, Jesus, to show us the way,” I explained. “Through faith in Christ, we experience redemption—a renewal that heals the broken parts of our lives and makes us whole again.”

I opened the Bible app on my phone to share a verse that reinforced my words. “In 2 Corinthians 5:17, it says, ‘Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!’”

My son absorbed the words, his gaze shifting from the toy to me. “So God fixes us like we’re fixing the robot?”

I nodded. “Exactly. God’s love is the glue that binds our broken pieces together, making us stronger and better. It’s about forgiveness, grace, and a chance to start anew.”

As we completed the reconstruction, my son held up the repaired toy, a smile breaking across the face. “It’s like new again, Dad!”

I tousled his hair in silent appreciation. “And that, my son, is a taste of redemption. No matter how broken things may seem, there’s always hope and a chance for a fresh start.” 



Dan Veeneman works in the dairy industry as a ventilation specialist. He lives in Abbotsford, B.C., with his wife and three children. He is a member of Gateway Community Church.



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