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# BANNER

## BY THE NUMBERS

The Church Order Review Task Force in its report to Synod 2024 noted some big changes in the ways pastors in the Christian Reformed Church serve the denomination. The number of ministers of the Word serving outside of congregational ministry in 2023 is more than nine times greater than in 1950. Here's the historical breakdown of pastors' callings:

### Pastors' Callings

"Other called positions" includes "chaplains, educators, denominational personnel, and other similar positions," the task force said.

	1950	1975	2000	2023
Congregational Ministry	283	580	612	808
Missions	34	57	45	34
Other called positions	29	147	236	273
Eligible for call but not serving	0	19	48	93
Emeritus (retired)	42	169	368	786

Source: *Agenda for Synod 2024*, p. 81. Original data source: CRC Yearbook for years shown.

## 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: Toronto's The Meeting House Closes
- » Streaming review: *Living Big in a Tiny House*
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**Cover:** Stranded on the side of the highway with her family, Jenna Hoff turned to a community she knew would have the ingenuity and resources to help. It's a community many don't consider.

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**BANNER**

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# The Elder Brother

Though both ways are equally wrong, the elder brother's lostness is more dangerous because most elder brothers are blind to their condition.



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](http://TheBanner.org).

이 기사의 한글번역은 [TheBanner.org/korean](http://TheBanner.org/korean)에서 보실 수 있습니다.

Este artículo está disponible en español en [TheBanner.org/spanish](http://TheBanner.org/spanish).

**MY FAVORITE BOOK** by the late Timothy Keller is *The Prodigal God* (2008). In it, Keller dives into the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32) or, as Keller calls it, the parable of the two lost sons. For Keller, both the younger brother and the elder brother in Jesus' parable are lost, but in different ways. The younger brother is spiritually lost due to his rebellious "wild living" with prostitutes (v. 13). But the elder brother, who says he has never disobeyed his father (v. 29), is also spiritually lost. According to Keller, the younger brother represents the way of self-discovery, while the elder brother represents the way of moral conformity (p. 29). Both are ways by which people try to find happiness and fulfillment in life. But both ways are wrong because they are ultimately projects of self-salvation: "There are two ways to be your own Savior and Lord," Keller wrote. "One is by breaking all the moral laws and setting your own course, and one is by keeping all the moral laws and being very, very good" (p. 44). Elder brothers obey God's laws not out of love for God, but because deep down, perhaps unconsciously, they are using God to get what they really want.


Of course, not everyone maps neatly onto one or the other. Some people flip-flop between the two ways. Many more try both ways in different parts of their lives. For example, it is not uncommon for moral elder-brother types to have secret younger-brother behaviors. Likewise, many irreligious people can be morally self-righteous against religious folks.

Here is where Keller's book really hit home for me: "There is a big difference between an elder brother and a real, gospel-believing Christian. But there are also many genuine Christians who are elder brother-ish. If you came to Christ out of being a younger

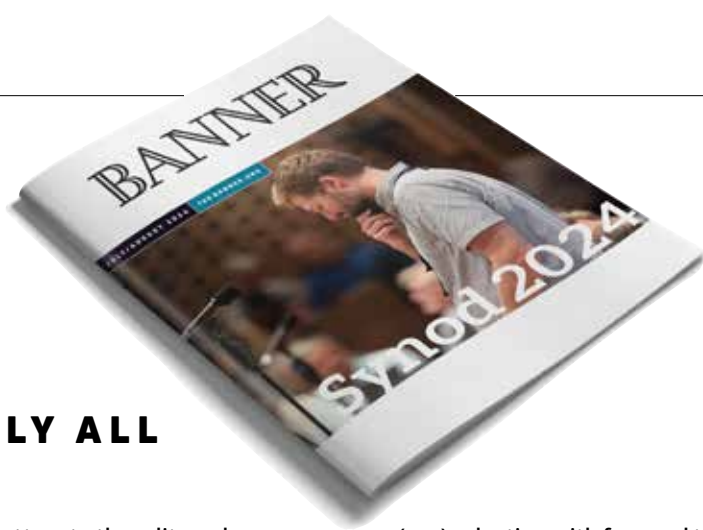
brother, there is always the danger of partially relapsing into addictions or other younger-brother sins. But if you've become a Christian out of being an elder brother, you can even more easily slide back into elder-brother attitudes and spiritual deadness. If you have not grasped the gospel fully and deeply, you will return to being condescending, condemning, anxious, insecure, joyless, and angry all the time" (p. 70).

Elder brother-ish. That's me. Or at least it was and is an ever-present temptation to me. Even this year I have occasionally slid into an elder-brother attitude with God. By God's grace, I have been more aware of and sensitive to this dark, self-righteous side of me. Perhaps because of this, I might be hypersensitive to elder-brother attitudes in the church.

For Keller, though both ways are equally wrong, the elder brother's lostness is more dangerous because most elder brothers are blind to their condition. Younger brothers' sinfulness is obvious, but since elder brothers are blind to their lostness, it is "a more spiritually desperate condition" (p. 47).

By ancient Middle Eastern expectations, the elder brother in Jesus' parable should have been the one to go out in search of his lost younger brother to bring him home. Instead, the elder brother resented his father's prodigal (recklessly extravagant) grace to the younger brother. Jesus points to himself as the true elder brother who seeks the lost, paying the extreme cost on the cross to redeem them. It is through deeply understanding Christ's love and grace to us that we will be transformed into his likeness. "Selfless love destroys the mistrust in our hearts toward God that makes us either younger brothers or elder brothers" (p. 88). 





## REPLY ALL

To send letters to the editor, please see our guidelines at [thebanner.org/letters](http://thebanner.org/letters).

### Disciplinary Measures

In *The Banner* article "Synod 2024 Declared Disciplinary Measures for Those 'In Protest,'" it says, "Synod made this decision, recognizing ... 'There is no category in Church Order for members, officebearers, councils, or classes to be "in protest" regarding settled and binding synodical decisions concerning confessional matters.'" Shouldn't the question be "What provision of Church Order prohibits members and officebearers from protesting such decisions?" One such binding synodical decision declares the right to disagree with such decisions. The decision, which was misconstrued by Synod 2022 (see *Acts of Synod 2022*, p. 922, citing *Acts of Synod 1975*, p. 603), says synodical pronouncements on confessional matters do not have "the status of the confessions" (*Acts of Synod 1975*, p. 598), and officebearers are not required to subscribe to such pronouncements (pp. 601-2). According to Synod 1975, officebearers and members may disagree with synod's decisions concerning confessional matters; this decision, which Synod 2022 claimed to follow, has never been reversed.

» Doug Rooks // Holland, Mich.

### Soft on Sin

Thank you for your editorial "Soft on Sin" (June 2024). Jesus' actions and words guide and challenge us to love and inclusion. I feel great sadness that our church is conflicted over whom to include. Anyone who has a child or grandchild or someone they know who is gay knows they are created by God and that God loves them. It is important that we wrestle with our theology and "work out

(our) salvation with fear and trembling" (Phil. 2:12). We have to have the opportunity to discuss and sometimes even disagree with the body of believers. When the 2024 decisions at synod tell us what we may and may not think if we are to be on council and function as part of the church, something feels very uncomfortable to me.

» Linda Siebenga // Lacombe County, Alta.

### Accessibility

Thanks for your thoughtful article on "Breaking Barriers to Accessibility in Ministry" (June 2024). I couldn't help but notice that there was no reference made to dementia, which is also considered a disability that requires support. According to the World Health Organization, 47.5 million people worldwide live with dementia, including Alzheimer's disease. In Canada, that amounts to over 400,000 individuals, and in the U.S., 7 million. Our church has committed to becoming a Dementia Friendly Community, and training our public-facing staff has begun. The largest percentage of our congregation's members are between the ages of 51 and 64. We must consider this population when making churches more accessible.

» Monique DeBrouwer // Courtice, Ont.

### Science and Religion

I appreciated this article; it is an increasingly important topic ("Can Science Ever Replace Religion?", Sept. 2024). Besides the items listed in the article that science cannot answer today are the following: What was the cause of the beginning of the universe? What causes gravity? What

is the origin of all the laws that govern the universe? How did life start?

» Gary Mulder // Elmhurst, Mich.

### The Lord's Supper

I really appreciated your article on how the Lord's Supper is distributed ("Big Questions," Sept. 2024). As a pastor in the Reformed Church in America, this issue has been an important question in my career. Reflecting on our shared tradition of serving the elements in the pew, I often wondered if we were making the sacrament too individualistic. ... In my retirement in the Philippines, I couldn't find a church that was remotely Reformed, so I attend the Roman Catholic church. They follow the same order of worship the RCA does with the exception that the Eucharist is shared at every Mass, as John Calvin wanted to keep. To me this has been very spiritually enriching, to the point that I have a hard time thinking of worship without Word and sacrament. ... It is participation and communion with the eternally living Christ, who feeds us, through the Holy Spirit, with his life according to our need. It is a celebration of the life that counts—the eternal one which Jesus Christ alone can give.

» Paul Nulton // Puerto Galera, Oriental Mindoro, Philippines

### Slippery Slope

I'm writing in response to Shiao Chong's editorial "Slippery Slope?" in the September 2024 *Banner*. The truth of God's Word does not change. It is the same today as it was 100 years ago and as it was 1,000 years ago. Scripture is clear that God designed sex to be exclusively within marriage between a man and a woman. This article, as it explored



## Thankful for Adoption

**MY WIFE AND I** adopted an infant daughter more than 50 years ago. A couple of years later, we adopted another. They have brought great joy into our lives and are wonderful, caring wives and mothers.

When she was quite young, our oldest daughter heard a mention of abortion during a newscast and asked me what the word meant. How does one explain such a horrible thing to a child still in elementary school? I prayed for help as I groped for the right words.


My wife and I had been concerned that the girls might someday hear negative comments about adoption or their “real” (biological) mothers. Consequently, by this time my wife and I had explained to the girls that their birth mothers loved them but had been unable to care for them, so we had frequently used terms such as “sweet adopted daughter” and “birth mother” in positive ways. Now I would have to put my arm around this daughter of ours, or at least hold her hand, as I told her something like this.

“Sometimes a baby starts to grow in a woman’s tummy. The woman might love the baby so much that when he or she is born, the woman, whom we call the birth mother, takes the baby to an adoption agency. Then people who don’t have a baby and want to be a mom and dad can adopt the baby. That’s how we got you and your sister. Sometimes, though, the woman who is growing the baby doesn’t want the baby and will pay a doctor to take the baby out of her tummy before it is ready to be born, and it dies. That is called abortion.”

### I prayed for help as I groped for the right words.

Our dear daughter was understandably horrified. Looking at me, she emphatically stated, “I’m sure glad my birth mother didn’t ‘abortion’ me!”

I replied, “Mom and I are, too.”

That daughter has given us four outstanding grandchildren, and her sister has given us one, a grandson who recently graduated from Calvin University and is newly contracted to be a teacher, like his parents and Gram and me. Yes, we are eternally grateful our daughters’ birth mothers chose life. 



Kenneth Van Dellen has master’s degrees in invertebrate zoology and geology. He taught geology and environmental science at Macomb Community College in Warren, Mich. He and his wife, Pearl, are members of Faith Community Christian Reformed Church in Wyoming, Mich.

synod’s discipline, implied that obeying God’s commands is equivalent to “drawing boundaries on God’s love” and “anxiously policing ourselves.” And yet, Jesus says, “If you love me, keep my commands” (John 14:15).

» Laurel Dykema // Grand Rapids, Mich.

Thank you for your wise and thoughtful editorial. I too wonder about taking disciplinary measures that could forbid members with leadership gifts from serving in their congregations. I wonder how grace will be demonstrated in a process designed to enforce this discipline. Let’s pause to reflect and practice grace.

» Pat Vanderkooy // Guelph, Ont.

### As I Was Saying

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» Your Worldview Is Showing

» Shepherd and Sheepdogs: A Leadership Analogy

» The Search for a Church



# 9 Words That Can Cause Division (and How to Approach Them)

By Todd Pheifer

**L**anguage is an imperfect means of human communication, and societies are constantly assessing or adding words to convey complex ideas. Suggesting that words can be ambiguous or have multiple interpretations might be an understatement. Some ambiguities are humorous, while others can cause deep hurt if used without contextual awareness. Many are familiar with the rhyme “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me.” Unfortunately, words can cause great pain and contribute to division in the church.

Some might believe that segments of society have become sensitive. Others believe people should consistently research the origins and impacts of certain words. Similarly, we should routinely engage in apologetics so that we are well-versed in the origin of our beliefs. Sometimes words are deemed unacceptable because of cultural sensitivities; other times a shift in acceptability stems from a broader understanding that a word was a poor descriptor from the beginning. Here are some words that can cause strife in the church and some recommendations for how people can approach them.

## Left/Right

This two-for-one pairing is common in political discussions and loosely associated with particular parties. But this pairing is inherently positioned to cause division, which does not make it desirable for use in the church. We can think of the left/right spectrum like a game of tug-of-war in which each group is trying to drag the other toward their own ideological side. Today it is common for people to lament *the left* or *the right* even though neither is a measurable group. *Recommendation:* Consider removing this pairing from your vocabulary. No one is asking you to compromise your beliefs, but keep your evaluative focus on issues, individuals, or defined groups. Avoid referencing an abstract ideology that has no membership, website, or published creed (Rom. 16:17-18).

## Liberal/Conservative

This pairing has ideological similarities to left/right but differences in application. Both words are associated loosely with political parties, but the dictionary definitions are far less divisive. All of us have some openness to new ideas while at the same time experiencing thoughtful contentment with other beliefs or practices that do not

need constant revisiting. Therefore, it is fair to suggest that we are all both liberal and conservative. If we evaluate our thoughts and behaviors over time, it is likely that we will discover that we are hybrids of these two words. *Recommendation:* Before using these words, consider whether they move the conversation forward or merely entrench people on a particular side. Are these words definable enough to promote dialogue and seek harmony, or are they used as weapons?

## Evangelical

The word “evangelical” is admittedly a tough one. We don’t want to feel like we have to surrender this word with theological origins because it has been sufficiently tainted or confused by society (Rom. 12:2). But the word “evangelical,” at least in the U.S., has become associated with particular views on political and social issues. These days, perhaps there might be value in self-labeling instead as a “Christ follower.” Make it about Jesus alone—*solus Christus*. We might be part of a denomination or support a particular theological system, but that is not our core identity as children of God. *Recommendation:* Consider whether “evangelical” is the best word for personal identification and for

labeling the church. When it comes to faith, how do you most want to be described?

### Church

We know the church is not a building; neither is it limited to weekly corporate worship. That hasn't stopped us from consistently describing the bride of Christ as an event or as a structure that will eventually need a new roof. We encourage people to go to church rather than striving to *be* church. Is that how we want the church to be known? Another challenge is that the church does not always have a reputation for extending love, grace, and forgiveness. We cannot build our faith and practices merely around the criticisms of an unbelieving world, and we must be aware that the church has in many instances not mirrored Christ. *Recommendation:* Boldly invite people to join your congregation, but recognize and understand the baggage that may come with the word "church." Ask people to describe their encounters with the church, and do not be shocked if their perceptions are different from your own.

### Truth

God is truth, and truthfully our spoken language fails to adequately capture the sheer magnitude of that statement. We try to find truth in other parts of life with various degrees of failure. We seek truth in theology, politics, our particular interpretations of science, societal leaders, or the consensus of a voting body. Divisions can arise when we put our faith in these human constructs rather than reserving the powerful word "truth" for God. *Recommendation:* Be careful with the word "truth" and evaluate whether its use is a sign that we are seeking comfort or security in something other than God.

Unfortunately,  
words can cause  
great pain and  
contribute to  
division in  
the church.

### Biblical


As with "truth," the problem with "biblical" is not the word itself but some of the ways it's used. The Bible is the inspired Word of God, useful for teaching, rebuking, and training in righteousness (2 Tim. 3:16). As we read Scripture, we interpret and apply. This should be done prayerfully, through thoughtful discussion, and in consultation with scholarly commentaries. The challenge is that we are sinners, so we must be wary of our own self-assurance. Sometimes we seek to compensate for doubt with consensus. Though like-mindedness can have value, it can also cause division and the weaponization of the word "biblical," especially when it would be more accurate to say "my preferred interpretation." *Recommendation:* Evaluate your use of "biblical" and prayerfully reflect on whether you use Scripture as a standalone authority or as a means to justify other beliefs.

### Justice

"Justice" is one of those words that tends to get a positive response from a broad audience. When someone says, "Justice must prevail," everyone nods, but "justice" can be an incredibly ambiguous word. Justice for whom? Through what means or system? Our sinful nature means we most often look to our own benefit, and our

perspective on what is fair or equitable is inherently biased. Justice might be served at times, but not everyone gets an equal share. *Recommendation:* When speaking about justice, provide qualifiers and frameworks while admitting limitations in knowledge of history, context, and culture.

Some of this analysis might feel like an attempt to make the gospel more palatable to a skeptical and sensitive society. That is not the case. Jesus reminds us in Matthew 10 and Luke 12 that division will always follow us, but we must ask ourselves whether our words contribute to conflict. We should never be ashamed of the gospel, but each day and through every interaction, we must ask whether we are moving people closer to Jesus. Do our words divide, or are they an invitation to talk and listen to one another more?

Move forward in boldness with the knowledge that if we consistently meditate on Scripture and constantly focus on Jesus, God will always give us the words to say. 



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.

*Editor's note:* This article is the second 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 *The Banner* on Facebook or X for discussion of the book and its important topic.

**BOOK CLUB** **THE BANNER**



## BIG QUESTIONS

### Ethics

#### Am I Morally Obligated to Vote?

It is election season in the United States. Many Christians know whom they are going to vote for. Others feel torn, viewing the choice as between the lesser of two evils. And some simply want to sit the election out. Yet we are constantly told that voting is our civic duty. Is this true? And if voting is a civic duty, is it also a moral duty?

I believe that as Christians we have a general obligation to vote, but this obligation is not absolute. In Romans 13:7-8, Paul writes, "Give to everyone what you owe them: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor. Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law."

What Paul is teaching us is that the obligations of citizenship arise from our obligation to love our neighbors. When a community holds an election, it is calling citizens to serve one another by choosing wise and just leaders. The more citizens refuse to do so, the more a popular vote lacks integrity. In other words, our neighbors need us. They need us to vote thoughtfully, wisely, and in a way that promotes justice and the common good. To decline this call is to refuse to bear our common burdens. In that sense, it is a failure to love.

However, sometimes love requires that we not vote. For instance, if the only candidates on the ballot for a particular office are likely to govern unjustly, the only ways to signal our opposition to such a choice are by writing in a candidate or declining

to vote. We might also abstain if we have not had the opportunity to determine which candidate would be best for a position or whether a particular ballot initiative would be wise or not. Love demands that we vote wisely, not simply that we vote.

As Paul exhorts us in Galatians 6:10, "as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people." Insofar as voting is such an opportunity, we should do it.

Matthew J. Tuininga is associate professor of Christian ethics and the history of Christianity at Calvin Theological Seminary. He lives in Wyoming, Mich. He is the author of *The Wars of the Lord: The Puritan Conquest of America's First People*.

### Relationships

#### Should we connect with a former daughter-in-law for the sake of our grandkids when our son would feel betrayed by our doing so?

It can be difficult to know how to manage relationships after a divorce. It is understandable to want to preserve relationships, especially for the sake of being involved in your grandkids' lives. They will be hurting after their parents' breakup, and they could really benefit from the stability of a grandparent's love.

While your son and former daughter-in-law might each try to get you to pick sides or win your allegiance, it is important to stay out of their conflict. Do your best to maintain neutrality, and keep loving everyone in the situation, recognizing that in the aftermath

of a dissolved relationship, everyone is hurting and in need of care. Avoid casting blame when only God knows the whole truth. Take time to listen to your son's concerns, and consider them prayerfully. While your son might want you to avoid his ex, that is not his decision. We all get to choose whom we interact with in life.

People who have been through a relationship breakup might feel abandoned, alone, and unloved. Help your son to see that you love him. Offer reassurance that your connection with his ex is not an act of betrayal, but an act of care for your grandchildren. It is not uncommon for hurting people to lash out at others, so try not to take it personally. Though your son might be upset in the moment, he might come around when he sees your care for his children.

Communicate honestly and directly. Never put children in the position of being messengers. If needed to set clear expectations, put information in writing through texts or email. We should be honest about what we are doing.

God calls us to treat everyone with respect and dignity as people made in God's image. We should never belittle or demean anyone, so be mindful of the words you use. Be gracious in your words and actions so that others experience the love of Jesus.

Deb Koster leads the Christian Reformed Church's family and marriage ministry, *FamilyFire.com*, at ReFrame Ministries. She and her husband, Steven, worship at Grace CRC in Grand Rapids, Mich.



Illustration for The Banner by Gisela Bohórquez

**Faith Formation**

**Occasionally I cannot honestly sing all the words of a song. With “Amazing Grace,” for example, I would be lying if I sang “How precious did that grace appear the hour I first believed.” I did not have a Damascus Road experience. What should I do?**

One of the best things about being part of a congregation is that we support each other in a variety of ways. If our attention drifts during the congregational prayer, for example, it is good to know that other members of the congregation are praying on our behalf. They can lift these prayers to God even if we are sleepy or if we find ourselves thinking about the busy week ahead.

We are called to live in community. We do not gather only to worship together, although that is certainly important. We gather to become the people of God. So, when we pray or when we sing, we’re not just connecting ourselves to God as individuals; we are coming to him together.

Many hymns purposely use “we” language instead of “I” language for that reason. Even though the words to “Amazing Grace” are first-person singular, when we sing it together in church we are much more than just a set of individuals. We are a gathering of brothers and sisters in Christ who share one another’s joys and burdens.

So when you encounter a line that doesn’t match your personal experiences, you can sing it with a clear conscience, knowing that you are singing on behalf of others in the body of Christ. You can also be glad that at other times, perhaps when a song

especially moves you and it is hard to sing without tears, others are singing on your behalf.

Laura Keeley is a regional catalyzer in faith formation with Thrive, the ministry agency of the Christian Reformed Church. Robert Keeley is a professor emeritus of education at Calvin University. The Keeleys recently retired after 31 years as directors of children’s ministries at 14th St. CRC in Holland, Mich.

**Missional Living**

**Can we really see God at work?**

It’s a common question these days, especially in missional circles, and I suspect that you, like many others, want to see God at work—even long to—but the possibility often seems quite elusive. Can we really see God at work?

I believe we can, because I believe the Spirit is present and active in every moment everywhere, inviting us to see—but not necessarily where and how we expect. We often assume and expect that evidence of God at work is seen in the *more*: more people in the pews, more people involved in our outreach projects and programs, more conversions.

But God, it seems, chooses to be seen in God’s own ways, which are not necessarily confined to or contained by our expectations, assumptions, metrics, and perhaps delusions.

God contrarily is often at work outside our boundaries, borders, and bastions.

For example, God was at work in bad Babylon (Jer. 29) and nasty Nineveh (Jonah), in foreigners like Ruth, Cornelius, and an Ethiopian eunuch, a widow in Sidon, a leper of Syria, and even in a three-times-beaten donkey for Balaam’s sake (Num. 22:21-32)!

So the question might really be whether we are willing to see God at work in people and places beyond our bounded sets. What if we’re not seeing

because we are not looking in the right places?

Jesus—God at work—was seen on the road, in the marketplaces and farmyards, at tax collectors’ tables, beside Samaritan wells, by shepherds’ fields and Bethsaida’s pools, in hungry people on hillsides, in fishless fishing boats late at night, and “on the other side.”

To see God at work might thus require that we get out more—and that we slow down in the places and among the people God has placed us so we can notice what the Spirit is up to right next door.

Here’s an excerpt from my poem “S-H-U-S-H”:

Slow to see or seeing slowly  
Same words, big difference  
Am I slow to see  
God at work ‘round me?  
Or am I slowing, for growing—  
Eyes that begin noticing  
Burning bushes, hearts burning  
In the Presence, Love knowing.

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



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

# Gather Events Continue

## NEWS

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**“We are part of something bigger than our local church,” said Rob Toonstra, Classis Columbia.**

The fifth of 10 planned Gather events designed to hear and share how God is working to bring renewal in the Christian Reformed Church will meet this month in Niagara, Ont., welcoming participants from classes Niagara, Quinte, Heartland, Muskegon, and Kalamazoo.

Almost half of the CRC’s 49 classes have participated since April’s inaugural session in Minneapolis. The last of the events, Gather Des Moines, is scheduled for April 28-30, 2025.

The CRC’s Council of Delegates approved the Gather initiative in February. It’s led by Elaine May, congregational renewal leader with Thrive, and is one of the first efforts toward Synod 2023’s assignment to the general secretary to “work with the Council of Delegates, each agency, and churches and classes to develop a comprehensive unified strategy and plan to arrest and reverse the trend of decline and bring about a positive trend of membership growth to our denomination” (*Acts of Synod 2023*, p. 976).

At the May meeting of the Council of Delegates, four members shared some impressions from Gather Minneapolis.

Joyce Jackson, Classis Hackensack, said a highlight was connecting the group’s reflections to the scriptural account of Jesus meeting two disciples on the Emmaus road following his resurrection. Jackson said the idea she took back home is “God is still on the throne, he’s not finished with us, and he’s going to do a new thing in our churches.”

Rob Toonstra, Classis Columbia, shared how inviting a newer member of his church to the event helped the woman to recognize “we are part of something bigger than our local church.” He said the diversity of the five “pretty different” classes coming together was “really

exciting to witness.” Matt Ackerman, Classis Lake Erie, didn’t attend the event himself but relayed the testimony of a parishioner who had been refreshed by the approach, which he said helped participants move “from thinking through a corporate framework of decision making based on data into a discernment process based on the leading of God through Scripture in our context.”

May said feedback from the first event helped to shape future iterations of Gather. One change was to shift session dates so they wouldn’t include a Sunday. About 22% of the first gathering’s participants were pastors.

Herb Schreur, Classis Northcentral Iowa, said that was a good development, but he wouldn’t want any fewer lay participants than had been at the first gathering, noting that a greater overall percentage of “smart, experienced lay people” is more representative of the full membership of the church than just its clergy. “I like that you’re getting away from Sundays,” he said. “I hope that you don’t let in any more pastors.”

Five different classes are invited to each event with a hoped-for 15 representatives from each regional group. (Because there are only 49 classes, the last event includes only four: Central Plains, Arizona, Zeeland, and Hanmi.) Attendance at Gather Minneapolis was 61, and 125 attended either Gather Vancouver or Gather Calgary in September. Sixty-one participants were anticipated for Gather Boston in October. About 20 staff and facilitators are present at each session.

“This is one experience to discover how God is renewing the church,” May told the Council of Delegates this spring. The results and findings from all 10 events can “inform future initiatives in church renewal,” she said.

—Alissa Vernon,  
News Editor



## Illinois CRC Extends Prison Ministry Out of State

The prison ministry team at Elmhurst (Ill.) Christian Reformed Church reaches inmates with the love of Christ at a nearby Cook County juvenile detention center and as far away as Louisiana and Mississippi. In August, the team visited the Mississippi State Penitentiary in Parchman, Miss., reconnecting with former inmates of Elayn Hunt Correctional Center in St. Gabriel, La., where the Elmhurst team has been ministering for five years.

From their many trips to Louisiana prisons, the Elmhurst CRC prison ministry team met incarcerated men who had graduated from a seminary program. Upon release, several were asked to work for Mississippi's Parchman prison as chaplains.

"Since we had already had a relationship with these men, we wanted to support and encourage them in their new ministries on the outside and are now in the infancy stages of developing a long-term supportive relationship with Parchman as we have done with Hunt and the Cook County temporary juvenile detention center," said Amy VanderMolen, one of the members of Elmhurst CRC's prison ministry team. "Like (for) the others, we are committed to keeping in touch monthly and praying for them regularly, having a mission trip there at least once a year, financially supporting the work of the chaplains, and providing material needs as needed."

Elmhurst CRC's connection to Hunt, the all-male maximum security prison in Louisiana, was itself an extension of the church's original and more local prison ministry.

VanderMolen said the team had been ministering in another prison for years but felt God leading them elsewhere. "The trips were always good but involved a lot of red tape, uncertainty, and questionable long-term impact," she said. After the opportunity to continue ministry in



Photo by Submitted by Elmhurst CRC

**Elmhurst CRC's prison ministry team on one of its trips to Louisiana's Elayn Hunt Correctional Center.**

that prison was cut off, VanderMolen recalled that one of her inmate friends had told her he was being transferred to Hunt. VanderMolen called Hunt's head chaplain to ask if they would like some visitors. "Come on over!" was the reply, VanderMolen remembered. "God shut a door because he was flinging open a window," she said. That was five years ago, and people from Elmhurst CRC have been taking annual trips to St. Gabriel, La., ever since.

Their focus has been a veterans' dorm created by VanderMolen's friend. VETS—Veterans Engaging Transition for Success—uses the military's code of ethics to shift the mindset within the prison. Inmates have to keep a clean room, do chores, contribute to community service projects, and take courses in trauma healing, communication skills, aggression management, and six other recovery-focused topics. VanderMolen said about 30 men have gone through the veterans program at Hunt and reentered society. None has returned to prison.

At Hunt, Elmhurst CRC's prison ministry team shares the gospel, prays, and plays games with the veteran inmates. "You look at every person as an image of God," VanderMolen said. "We never ask, 'What did you do?'"

Apart from the annual visits to Hunt and the new addition of the Mississippi prison, the Elmhurst CRC team still visits the Cook County temporary juvenile detention center every Tuesday.

VanderMolen doesn't consider prison work as visiting "a dark and scary place. ... It's like going to a family reunion. It's like seeing your family again."

—Callie Feyen

# Pastors, Churches Leave CRCNA Following Synod's Ruling on Traditional Sexual Ethic

At the close of the Christian Reformed Church's Synod 2024, its decisions to include same-sex sexual relationships in a confessional definition of unchastity, to require discipline of churches who disagree, and to restrict the use of confessional difficulty gravamen (a formal expression of difficulty with a doctrine of the church by an officebearer) put some of the denomination on what synod hoped would be "a path of repentance and restoration" (*Acts of Synod 2024*, p. 886). But in fall regional assemblies, several congregations instead filed resolutions of disaffiliation, and some pastors sought release of ordination, expressing their inability to "repent of what we believe to be a Holy Spirit-led discernment to welcome LGBTQ+ Christians into full participation in the life of the church," as Loop CRC in Chicago, Ill., wrote in its resolution.

As of early October, *The Banner* was aware of eight ministers requesting release from their calls, seven congregations in a disaffiliation process, and one Reformed Church in America congregation affiliating with the CRCNA because of synod's decisions about human sexuality.

In his August letter to classes, CRCNA general secretary Zachary King acknowledged the possibility of both growth and loss. "Today, many of our congregations are flourishing, and we see evidence of God sowing seeds all around us," he wrote. "At the same time, as a denomination we find ourselves face to face with a challenging and painful moment as some of our congregations consider disaffiliating. Even in this time of potential separation, we know that our God plants seeds and makes the desert bloom into joyful witness to his faithfulness."

A letter to Canadian classes from Al Postma, executive director-Canada, echoed King's thoughts. "The CRC is in a tough spot," he wrote. "There is a sense of brokenness within our community." Postma said it's good to resist the



Photo from Google Maps

**Sherman Street CRC was one of the first congregations to seek disaffiliation from the CRCNA because of synodical decisions on human sexuality. It filed its resolution with Classis Grand Rapids East in May.**

temptation to cheer everyone up and to instead "sit in the sadness." He noted, "As a denomination, no matter what happens next, it will not be the same as it was before."

## Resolutions of Disaffiliation

Notices of intent to disaffiliate coming from Hessel Park CRC in Champaign, Ill., Loop CRC in Chicago, and Calvin, Grace, and Church of the Servant CRCs in Grand Rapids, Mich., were recorded at September classis meetings of Chicago South, Northern Illinois, and Grand Rapids East. Sherman Street CRC in Grand Rapids had filed its resolution in May. A resolution of disaffiliation from Mountain View CRC in Lynden, Wash., was on the October agenda for Classis North Cascades, as was the classis' response urging that congregation to remain affiliated. Mountain View said its resolution stems from "underlying sicknesses that we see in the denomination," including "that the hermeneutic (biblical interpretive method) that allowed for women in office has helped pave the way to other

wrongful interpretations, namely the roughly 30% of Synod that promote full inclusion of practicing LGBT people" and "a compromise(d) position on sexuality" that communicates "that homosexual desire is not a sin."

Hessel Park, Loop, Calvin, Grace, Church of the Servant, and Sherman Street CRCs have begun their processes of disaffiliation for very different reasons. Loop CRC's resolution reads, "The decisions made by Synod(s) 2022, 2023, and 2024 in regards to human sexuality do not align with Loop's commitment for full inclusion of LGBTQ+ people in the life of the church. ... Synod 2024 has left us with no other option than to pursue disaffiliation."

The council of Grace Community CRC, a congregation in Classis Chicago South, did not file a resolution of disaffiliation but wrote to its classis: "We are of one mind that we cannot agree with the decisions of synod regarding the human sexuality report and/or elevating this to confessional status. We do not believe these decisions are biblical; neither do

they follow the Church Order of the CRCNA. And now we feel that we as a council must make a painful decision which will affect our status in classis and likely our potential as a future member of CRCNA.”

Resolving to disaffiliate does not necessarily mean an eventual completed disaffiliation. It’s only the first step in a seven-step process laid out in the supplement to Church Order Article 38-f that includes two congregational meetings to confirm a withdrawal from the denomination.

## Departing Pastors

Recently released pastors include two released through Church Order Article 14-b to ministry roles outside the CRC—Jeff Kroondyk, who has taken up campus ministry with the Reformed Church in America at the University of Albany, and Heidi DeJonge, who also seeks ordination in the RCA—and two released through Article 14-c to non-ministerial vocations: Suzanne McDonald, a theology professor at Western Theological Seminary, and Aaron Winkle, superintendent of Grand Rapids (Mich.) Christian Schools.

In a letter to the council of Oakdale Park CRC, which had issued Winkle’s call to the superintendent position, Winkle wrote: “Grand Rapids Christian is a large, complex, and diverse Christ-centered learning community. Consequently, I recognize that part of my role is to build trust with people from across the community and to serve as a bridge builder for those within our community who may come from different backgrounds or hold different views on controversial topics. ... I have come to believe that maintaining my ordination with the Christian Reformed Church will no longer best position me to serve in this role that I have felt called to.” Classis Grand Rapids East approved Winkle’s request.



**Matt Ackerman, shown here at the May 2024 meeting of the Council of Delegates, is one of two members to step down from the Council since June’s synod meeting.**

Kroondyk’s request for release was processed by Classis Northern Michigan. “In light of the recent decisions of Synod,” he said, “I no longer feel I can in good conscience submit to the authority of the CRC and the confessions as they have interpreted them.”

Four additional requests for release were pending in classes Holland, Kalamazoo, and Alberta North.

## Affiliation Sought

Pleasant Valley Reformed Church (RCA) has affiliated with the CRC through Classis Northcentral Iowa. Pastor Rick Vollema, who serves the congregation of about 50 members, said he led the consistory through a process of discernment over the past two years seeking an appropriate denomination in which to belong, and “the CRC won out because it has a history and an established book of Church Order” as well as familiarity. Other RCA churches leaving that denomination in the past several years formed

both the Kingdom Network and the Alliance of Reformed Churches in 2021.

## Council of Delegates Resignations

Synod 2024’s measures to ensure leaders in the CRC remain faithful to the denomination’s confessional teachings are also affecting the makeup of the Council of Delegates, the denomination’s ecclesiastical governance board that acts on behalf of synod between meetings of synod. Delegates from Classis Grand Rapids South and Classis Lake Erie each resigned this summer, and a non-Council of Delegates appointee to a Council committee indicated her inability to serve. Another delegate, Thea Leunk, Classis Grand Rapids East, told *The Banner* she intends to resign once her classis has an opportunity to appoint another delegate.

Jessica Maddox, Classis Grand Rapids South, whose term was meant to end in 2025, said she resigned from the Council of Delegates “to comply with the decisions of Synod 2024.”

Matt Ackerman, Classis Lake Erie, whose term was also meant to conclude in 2025, posted his resignation publicly on the blog of *Reformed Journal*. Addressing the Council’s chair, vice-chair, and “the rest of my fellow Council of Delegates members,” Ackerman wrote about his calling to be a university chaplain and how he finds himself “estranged from the denomination that shaped and formed (him).” Ackerman said he plans to continue with what he believes is the “wisest course going forward,” which is to transfer his ordination out of the CRC, though he had not yet chosen a denominational destination.

—Alissa Vernon,  
News Editor



## 'It's Hard to Say I Need Help': Connecting to Community in an Arizona Church

Photos by Dante Vuoke



**Jordi outside of his apartment in the house owned by Mission Church.**

When Andy Littleton was 17, he met Jordi\* at a restaurant the two of them worked in. The job didn't last all that long for either of them, but about 20 years later, Jordi and Andy reunited, this time when Jordi walked one Easter Sunday into Mission Church, where Andy was pastoring. "We recognized each other immediately," Littleton said.

Over a meal, Littleton learned that Jordi, who has special needs, had recently lost his mom and was unhoused. Mission Church, a congregation of the Christian Reformed Church in North America in Tucson, Ariz., helped him find a few places to live, but none of them lasted long until last October, when the church purchased a house almost next door to Mission. Previously the house had functioned as a school, a grocery store, and a Catholic parish. Today it is home to Littleton's office, a conference room, a podcast studio, a woodshop, and an apartment for Jordi. "This space is a godsend," Littleton said. "We wanted a place where we could make the rules in such a way that worked for his particular needs."

Jordi loves to decorate and has made the place his own. There's a quail on his front door and candles and flowerpots on his



**Jordi grows basil, cilantro, and chili peppers in his garden.**

back patio. He's also cultivated a garden where he grows basil, cilantro, kumquats, and chili peppers. A few times a week he sells what he grows, but he also cooks with it, giving anything from ramen to macaroni and cheese a Mexican twist.

Besides cooking and gardening, Jordi works as a dishwasher for a pizza place. "I see how everything is made, from the dough to the cheesecake," Jordi said. He also likes to rebuild bikes. The one he was working on when he spoke with *The Banner* included a trailer and new front forks. Jordi uses his bike to go to nearby stores for groceries and other necessities.

### The Start of Something Bigger?

Mission Church members believe providing an apartment for Jordi is one of the church's callings. They see the church as a place for community transformation, such as when they created a colorful mural when the church first moved into the neighborhood. After that act of community building, Littleton was invited to tour Community First! Village in Austin, Tex., with other nonprofit and city leaders.

There's potential "for a more substantial partnership with (Tucson's housing)



**Jordi harvests kumquats.**

agency," Littleton said, but "all of this would take a long time and may never pan out." In the meantime, they've started with what is in front of them. "That trip (to the Community First! Village) was inspiring but also opened my eyes to the small things God likes us to begin with, and the fact that our quest to help a special needs friend at our church find housing was indeed our invitation into this work."

Many congregants at Mission have helped Jordi live as independently as possible. Jordi especially appreciates Mission congregant Andrew Youderian for helping him with his savings. "He helped me make the right choices," Jordi said, adding, "It's hard to say I need help."

"That's all of us," Littleton agreed.

—Callie Feyen

*\*Jordi agreed to speak with The Banner and have his picture taken for this story, but because he lives with some vulnerabilities we are using only his first name.*

## From Our Facebook Page

Follow The Banner on Facebook for photos and updates shared with us by congregations across the denomination.

### First Christian Reformed Church in Rocky Mountain House, Alta., celebrated four baptisms in the North Saskatchewan River July 21.

At the close of the Sunday morning worship service, Pastor Ken Douma, members of the worship team, the two families receiving baptism, and many of the church family drove seven minutes from the church to a roadside beach to witness or receive the sacrament.



### Congregants watch from shore and the shallow waters as Pastor Ken Douma baptizes two children of the congregation.

“When everyone was there, we sang a song with a couple of guitars, did the children’s baptism via a generous sprinkling, and then did the two immersion adult baptisms,” Douma said. “When we were done, we sang again and just enjoyed being at the river. It was a beautiful day and a huge blessing to those involved and the church as a whole!”

### IN MEMORIAM



### Rev. Vernon F. Geurkink

1936-2024

Vern Geurkink was an academic who sought to be a person of integrity. He is remembered as being humble, sincere, and friendly. He was an advocate for the disenfranchised and had a lifelong commitment to justice and mercy. Vern, 88, died Aug. 2.

A graduate of Calvin College (now University) and Seminary with post-graduate studies in Jerusalem and Amsterdam, Vern was ordained in 1964. He served Ellsworth (Mich.) Christian Reformed Church; Madison Square CRC in Grand Rapids, Mich.; Eastern Avenue CRC in Grand Rapids, Mich.; and Grace CRC in Burke, Va.

In Burke, Vern completed a long-term care chaplaincy residency and then moved to Wyckoff, N.J., where he served for nine years as chaplain to the Christian Health Center. Upon retirement in 2001, Vern and his wife, Pat, moved to Naperville, Ill., where they remained in service at Wheaton CRC and where Vern supplied many years of interim ministry to Christian Reformed churches in the area.

Predeceased by Pat in 2018, Vern is survived by two sons and their spouses, six grandchildren, and one great-grandchild.

—Janet A. Greidanus

### IN MEMORIAM



### Rev. Anthony (Tony) Begay

1938-2024

Pastor and chaplain Lt. Colonel (Ret.) Anthony Begay was known for his kind and generous spirit, his quick laughter, and his deep faith. He was proud of his Navajo heritage, which influenced many aspects of his life and work. Anthony, 86, died Sept. 5.

A graduate of Rehoboth (N.M.) Christian School, Anthony served in the U.S. Army from 1962 to 1968. With degrees from Arizona State University and Calvin Theological Seminary, Anthony was ordained in 1974 and pastored Church Rock (N.M.) Christian Reformed Church. After four years he returned to the military, serving first as a U.S. Army chaplain at Fort Hood (now Fort Cavazos), Texas, and then as chaplain in the Army National Guard, retiring in 2000. During his years in the National Guard, Anthony was also the pastor at Southwest Campus Christian Fellowship in Albuquerque, N.M.

Anthony shared his culture and heritage by teaching the Navajo language at Southwestern Indian Polytechnic Institute and the University of New Mexico. His hobbies included studying the Bible, golfing, and enjoying meals with family and friends.

Predeceased by his first wife, Marilyn, Anthony is survived by his wife, Mary; three daughters and their spouses; and five grandchildren.

—Janet A. Greidanus

# Church Property Conference Offers Congregations Help to Keep Their Buildings

Congregations facing hard choices about what to do with underutilized, high-maintenance sacred structures heard from real estate experts at a September conference organized by Princeton Theological Seminary on the future of church buildings.

As many as 100,000 church-owned buildings are expected to be sold or repurposed by 2030, according to an analysis in the 2024 book *Gone for Good? Negotiating the Coming Wave of Church Property Transition*.

“Everything keeps getting more expensive, but we have fewer people in the congregation to pay for it,” said Jainine Gambaro, a member of Franklin Reformed Church in Nutley, N.J. “We keep going by the grace of God, but it’s an issue.”

Gambaro was one of some 100 church leaders and congregants who gathered online and in person Sept. 20 and 21 to hear from real estate experts about how to reimagine a new future for church buildings. The Future of Church Property conference focused on turning community needs into grants, forming partnerships with developers, and developing new business-driven income streams.

Congregations were urged to consider social enterprise, a term for using business principles to address social problems while generating revenue. Attendees heard about congregations that had escaped dire financial straits and galvanized new ministry momentum by leasing space to the public for community and commercial use.

Sunset Ridge Church of Christ in San Antonio, Tex., leases a former “junk room” to NYX Wellness, which painted walls and began offering yoga classes. It now brings in \$650 per month for the church. Sunset Ridge’s commercial-quality kitchen is now used by entrepreneurs for \$400 per user per month to prepare food for retail sale. A co-working space brings together remote workers on a membership model.

Each user pays \$75 per month for unlimited access.

Getting the congregation on board for these innovations involved many “coffee chats” with the congregation in which pastoral leaders listened to fears and answered questions, according to Jess Lowry, executive director and pastoral leader of the Sunset Ridge Collective, which coordinates the church’s social enterprises.

“That time we invested ended up really helping people get ownership and understand,” Lowry said. “Even if they weren’t moved to participate in some part of the particular mission, they at least felt safe and comfortable that they weren’t just losing their church.”

The assembled church leaders were directed to resources such as the Good Futures Accelerator course from Rooted Good for other ideas on how to advance their missions while raising revenue.

Churches with land or buildings that can be developed into housing have huge opportunities in the current housing crisis, according to Nina Janopaul, president of Virginia Episcopal Real Estate Partners. She pointed to Arlington Presbyterian Church, across the Potomac River from Washington, which built 173 affordable housing units working with a nonprofit developer who pieced together \$71 million in direct funding and tax breaks for the project from multiple sources.

The project not only allowed the congregation to keep a presence at its location, Janopaul said, but also spawned new energy for the congregation as it has mobilized to serve its new community.

Many nonprofit developers will cover costs before a project gets started as well, said Janopaul. They might cover predevelopment costs, which can run up to \$50,000 for appraisals, zoning analysis, and feasibility modeling, in exchange for

a commitment to use that developer if the project goes forward.

In many cases, the church will be asked to lease the land to the affordable-housing partner for a minimum of 50 years, Janopaul said, which sounds risky. But, she added, “at least with a nonprofit, you know that in 50 years you’re not dealing with an individual who will sell it. ... Nonprofits, you hope, are going to be around longer.”

Even when partners cover most of the costs, most housing projects take years to complete, and the deals themselves or neighborhood relations can become highly contentious. Congregations that lack the wherewithal and need cash fast might do better to subdivide and sell off parcels, Janopaul said.

Churches were urged to consider uses that will engage people in their community. “Young people are really motivated by climate action and thoughtful community engagement,” said Lindsay Baker, CEO of the International Living Future Institute, an advocacy group for making buildings healthier, greener, and more affordable.

Baker suggested improving the health profile of churches while shrinking their impact on the environment by using nontoxic flooring materials, increasing ventilation, replacing oil or gas with electric heat pumps, and installing solar panels for power and shade.

—*Religion News Service*

*This story by G. Jeffrey MacDonald, published Sept. 24, 2024, is reprinted with permission from Religion News Service. It has been edited for length and Banner style.*



# Community

The Christian Reformed Church is a community of believers who have decided that we are stronger and can do more when we work together. The 4 agencies, 2 educational institutions, and 3 uniquely Canadian ministries of the Christian Reformed Church are key catalysts in this community, providing support to congregations of any size at any time regardless of their financial means. Whether a church needs help finding a pastor, brainstorming ways to be more accessible to those with disabilities, kickstarting a heart for evangelism and mission, or offering ways to respond to global poverty and disaster, we are here, in community, for you. Learn more.

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Christian Reformed Church



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# Harvests of Blessings Lead to Food Security

By Kayleigh Van Wyk, World Renew

**F**ood security means knowing where meals are coming from today and into the future. For families around the world who experience hunger, food security is a challenge. World Renew works to end hunger globally by offering opportunities to farmers and families to grow healthy food. Through training in climate-adaptive farming techniques, farmer field schools, and gardening support, World Renew helps families grow crops to nourish themselves and generate income. People around the world now use their skills to achieve food security in their households and communities.

#### Adopting new farming techniques in Nicaragua

Ramón Yalít Aragón lives in the Jabillo community in Nicaragua with his wife and four children. Ever since he was old enough to know his own name, Aragón has worked as a farmer to help support his family.

Aragón had always farmed using the same techniques as his parents and their parents before them: make small holes in the soil, insert the seeds, and let them be. His crops rarely grew, or they produced only small fruit, and they were vulnerable to diseases and pests.

“Every time I put a seed in the ground, I know that the soil and the Lord will give me back something,” he said.

“However, with traditional farming our yields are low; when there is a drought, things get bad.”

Then Aragón became involved with a World Renew farmer field school in his community. He started experimenting with different methods of planting and produced a harvest of huge tomatoes that year. Aragón now uses manure from the animals he raises as well as “plant trash” (mulch) to help fill seed holes and grow better crops.

“I used to think manure was an annoyance,” he said. “It was extra work to deal with, and I would let it go to waste. Now I know that I have a fertilizer factory! I use the manure as organic fertilizer in my fields.”

The techniques he learned help him conserve the soil and provide for his family, even with Nicaragua’s variable climate. Aragón now encourages his friends to experiment with different farming methods.



Thanks in part to World Renew programs, farmers around the world are growing healthier crops like these vegetables from a garden in Nicaragua.

#### Increasing food security with new tools in Zambia

In Zambia’s Eastern Province, farmers are feeling the effects of changing weather patterns in short, unpredictable rains. Eunice Moyo knew she needed to change her farming practices to sustainably meet the food needs of her family of five children. A couple of years ago, Moyo tried a practice called “ripping” she learned from an agricultural project offered by World Renew’s partner, the Reformed Church in Zambia.

Ripping is a kind of deep tilling using a special tool with very long tines to break up soil deep beneath the surface. If done correctly, it doesn’t disturb the top layer of soil but still breaks up hard soil beneath. This helps rain infiltrate quickly and is an effective way to apply manure to increase crop fertility.

The women’s group in Fama Niang’s community in Senegal tends a successful garden that supports the community.





In Zambia, Eunice Moyo crouches in her field of maize, which she grew successfully with a ripper.

"I first heard about ripping in 2021 through an agriculture extension officer, and I decided to try a small section to see how my maize crop would perform," Moyo explained. "The results were not that bad, but I was not willing to continue because I had challenges with weeds."

The following year, Moyo got the information she needed to use ripping successfully. She received lessons in conservation agriculture that gave her a better understanding of ripping and applying manure. As part of the program, World Renew distributed a ripping tool to each participant. "I was the first to use it and ripped my field in November. This allowed me to plant with the first rains," Moyo said.

"I have learned that early planting is good," she explained. "My maize did very well in spite of a dry spell. As a family, we are happy with the results of adopting conservation agriculture, and we plan to rip all our farmland now that we see the benefits. For me and my family, I can say that we are food secure until the next harvest."

#### Supporting a community through gardening in Senegal

For a long time, Fama Niang did not know the power of working together with other women in her village in Senegal. But after connecting with Services Luthériens pour le Développement au Sénégal (Lutheran Services for Development in Senegal, or SLDS), World Renew's local partner in her community, she and other women learned to grow food for their families' consumption and for generating income.

Through SLDS, Niang and 25 other women joined a women's savings group that gave them the training and resources they needed to build a community vegetable garden. Niang and the women were excited to start growing vegetables such as hibiscus, okra, and eggplant. The women were even more excited when they began to sell their garden produce in their village and in nearby villages for a good profit.

Thanks to their garden, these women are able not only to make money to take care of their families, but also to provide for the needs of their community. Through a solidarity fund, they helped provide for the medical needs of a single mother and for pregnant women struggling to get by. The funds also paid for installing electricity in their village.

Niang is the vice president of the group. She is thrilled about everything the group is achieving. When she looks at a flourishing vegetable garden, she now understands that it is not only a source of sustenance for today, but a source of hope for the future.

"The people in the village are happy with us. They said that they have never seen such solidarity," Niang said. "Our garden has helped the village considerably, and we are really proud of it. We thank the donors and pray to God to grant us the means to develop additional sources of income."

Thanks to financial support and prayers for World Renew's work, people like Aragón, Moyo, and Niang are achieving food security for their families and communities. Please pray for continued provision and resources as World Renew works to end hunger around the world. **B**

# Preparing for Retirement from Ministry

**THRIVE**, the CRCNA's congregational support ministry, recently compiled a guide to help those in pastoral ministry think about and prepare for retirement. What follows is an adapted excerpt from "Retirement from Pastoral Ministry: Guidance for a Healthy Transition," which can be found at [crcna.org/PastoralRetirementRoadmap](http://crcna.org/PastoralRetirementRoadmap).

If you are in the later years of your ministry career, you have probably started looking ahead to retirement. Maybe you anticipate that season of life as a time of freedom to volunteer, travel, spend time with family, or develop new hobbies. As you begin to think about retiring from active ministry, you would be wise to take time regularly to sit back and reflect on your ministry career, your identity, and your hopes for the future. Among the things you might think about are these:

- » How did your ministry identity shape the way you saw yourself and the way you presented yourself to others? How authentically did that identity represent the real you?
- » What values characterized your ministry? How have those values changed over the years?
- » What components of ministry gave you life, and what drained you of energy?
- » What habits and patterns have you developed during your ministry?
- » Who showed you something of God while you were in ministry? How do you hold these people in your mind and heart today? What might you do to thank the top 10 people on that list?
- » What professional development did you engage in, and how did it impact your ministry?



Dave Den Haan equips ministry leaders in seasons of transition through his work at Thrive, the congregational support agency of the Christian Reformed Church.

- » If you are or were married, what role did your spouse play in your ministry?
- » When and how did God "show up" memorably? What did that do to your soul? What do these memories do now?


If you are married, seek the input of your spouse (and perhaps your children, if you have any) as you prepare for your upcoming retirement. You might also wish to have conversations with trusted colleagues or form a discernment team of some kind. Don't forget the input of spiritual directors or professional mentors.

Write down what you discover. Discuss your discoveries with others. Don't let negative observations get you down. Reviewing one's life and career

might lead to promising results. Some of your conclusions might still enrich the remaining years of your ministry, and they might help you set a direction for your retirement years.

It is important that your current church council or board becomes a partner with you in shaping the remaining years of your pastorate. To some degree, this season of your ministry resembles a term call. How can this defined period of time become maximized to the benefit of both you and your church?

Together you might outline the needs of the church at this time in its history. How can your gifts, skills, and interests be put to the best possible use? You may agree to assume some new ministry obligations and discontinue others. Your council may then want to recruit qualified volunteers to round out the overall ministry program.

You and your council might be wise to appoint a small planning team, consisting of perhaps three or four persons. Together you can set goals for your remaining years and produce a blueprint to propose to your council and congregation. At some point consider sharing and discussing this with the congregation in a town hall meeting or some other venue that provides people with the opportunity to hear and to speak into your plans propose to your council and congregation. 

— Dave Den Haan,  
Thrive

## The View From Here

## Seeds, Weeds, and Kingdom Vision

**I'M BOTH CAPTIVATED** and confused by Jesus' parable of the mustard seed. "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field" (Matt. 13:31). Really, Jesus? Are you telling us that the sovereign rule of eternal God—spanning from before the creation of time to the endless future eons when all the saints and angels will worship at the cosmic throne of Christ—is like ... a mustard seed?

Well, yes, says Jesus in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. The kingdom of heaven is indeed like that nearly microscopic seed, *brassica nigra*, also known as the black mustard plant. Jesus adds more: "Though it is the smallest of all seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds come and perch in its branches" (Matt. 13:32).

Black mustard is notable in that it can grow from a tiny grain to a six-foot-tall plant in one growing season. Black mustard is also a weed, an invasive species whose green foliage and tiny yellow flowers can quickly crowd out native species to take over both garden and roadside. Not such a positive image, Jesus.

Better images could be recommended. Perhaps the majestic and famed cedar of Lebanon from Ezekiel 17:22-24? Still adorning the modern flag of Lebanon, the *cedrus libani* grows up to 130 feet (40 meters) tall and 8 feet (2.5 meters) wide. "The kingdom of heaven is like the cedar of Lebanon, which starts as a seed and grows into a massive forest tree" would make much more sense—birds do come and perch in a cedar's inviting branches.

In the kingdom  
of heaven, small  
seeds do grow into  
mighty things.

Yet the gospels do not equivocate. Jesus said the kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed. The more I think about it, the more thankful I am that Jesus doesn't heed my advice. On this side of Christ's return, we don't often experience God's kingdom in its bigness. Instead, we resonate with Jesus' declaration, "If you have faith as small as a mustard seed ... (n)othing will be impossible for you" (Matt. 17:20; Luke 17:6).

In the kingdom of heaven, small seeds do grow into mighty things. We have a tendency to associate God's work with the big, shiny, and beautiful. More often than not, though, the Holy Spirit works through small acts of grace and faithfulness to yield a kingdom harvest.

It's the weekly trip to pray with residents of the nursing home behind the church that God uses to comfort the lonely and hurting. It's the early morning cup of coffee with a friend going through a divorce that reconnects him to Jesus. It's taking a few minutes each week to get to know our neighbors that gives us occasion to share our faith. It's taking an acquaintance to her doctor's appointment that demonstrates God's love to someone who has known none.

The same is true of our churches. A compelling vision, excellent facilities, and solid programs have roles to play in the life of the church. But the "mustard seeds" grow it. Small words of kindness, unobtrusive acts of compassion, heartfelt prayers, shared tears and laments—these are the things God uses to put down deep roots and grow strong stems in the church.

That brings us back to the perching birds of the mustard seed parable. Jesus would have confused his original audience with his assertion that birds could "perch" on a mustard plant. Sure, a tiny bird could land on a mustard plant, at least momentarily. But at the end of day, the black mustard plant is little more than a tall weed.

By evoking an image of perched birds, Jesus is reminding us that the kingdom of heaven is more than a floppy weed. It has the strength of Ezekiel's great cedar. Small kingdom acts of grace and faithfulness attract others to take shelter in Jesus' strong branches. Small seeds grow into mighty things. **B**



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](http://TheBanner.org).

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## Sustainable Change in Cambodia

**ONLY 3% OF CAMBODIA'S** population identifies as Christian. Resonate Global Mission missionaries Ly Chhay and Navy Chann-Chhay are working with local pastors, churches, and ministries to grow that percentage to at least 10% by 2033—2,000 years from the year in which many Bible scholars put Christ's resurrection.

For Chhay and Chann-Chhay, that work goes hand in hand with seeing individuals, families, and entire communities lifted out of poverty and thriving.

"God's Word changes lives," they said.

Chhay and Chann-Chhay lead Timothy Leadership Training, which provides holistic biblical training for pastors and Christian leaders who haven't had an opportunity to attend seminary. Because Cambodia's population is almost entirely Buddhist, there aren't a lot of Bible schools or seminaries, and attending one can be expensive, especially for people who already struggle to make ends meet.

Resonate missionaries use TLT in Cambodia and throughout the world because it gives pastors and leaders tools to overcome challenges and meet needs, leading to sustainable change in communities. At the end of every TLT training module, participants develop a plan for implementing change in their own lives, their families, their churches, or their communities.

Since participating in TLT with Chhay and Chann-Chhay, Pastor Sophon has witnessed growth in his small, rural village.

"The village faces many conflicts with families and lack of income-generating activities," Chann-Chhay said.

"Many people have no land to cultivate fruits, short crops, and vegetables. Cambodia has limited security on land



Pastor Sophon and his wife, Chan Thach, have seen God at work in their village since Sophon participated in Timothy Leadership Training led by Resonate Global Mission missionaries Ly Chhay and Navy Chann-Chhay.

ownership, which makes it difficult for landowners to protect their lands. The farmers can lose their land because they have no influence or connection. And they have limited access to the market."

Sophon and his wife, Chan Thach, work hard. In addition to leading the village's small but growing church, they run a farm that grows what Chhay and Chann-Chhay say are some of the best oranges they've ever tasted. But the orange farm wasn't producing enough to meet the family's needs.

During TLT, Sophon learned what the Bible has to say about stewardship and using resources already available to him. Feeling encouraged and inspired, he worked with Chhay and Chann-Chhay to develop an action plan for diversifying his crops. In partnership with one of his neighbors, Sophon and Chan Thach planted 400 banana trees and started a vegetable garden. Over time, the family has been able to harvest more food to eat, sell, and share with their neighbors.

The transformation has been a vibrant testimony to Sophon's village. Through Chhay and Chann-Chhay's

work with Sophon and the family's hard work, the village has seen that the gospel makes a difference in their lives. More people have become curious about Christianity, and they know they can go to Sophon with questions and prayer requests. Sophon has been leading Bible studies with small groups, and with more money coming into the village, the community is now constructing a building where the church can gather to worship and study God's Word together.

"Pastor Sophon shows people that God provides with what we have," Chann-Chhay said. "He is a trusted person who loves God."

Chhay and Chann-Chhay are equipping more leaders like Sophon to spread the gospel. They hope to see more churches, thriving communities, and people following Jesus.

"On behalf of the church in Cambodia and Resonate, we appreciate your prayers and support," they said. "Please pray for the church to be a healthy witness."

— Cassie Marcionetti,  
Resonate Global Mission

## Churches Serving Churches

**OVER NINE DAYS** in July, a group of 14 volunteers from Almond Valley Christian Reformed Church in Ripon, Calif., caravanned 900 miles to the Navajo reservation in New Mexico to help a fellow CRC in need. The group blessed Crownpoint CRC by fixing windows, renovating a bathroom, and restoring water to the parsonage. Volunteers also installed a new sound system in the church building and hosted a vacation Bible school for children in the community. The group from Almond Valley was blessed in return through the unity they found and the trust they developed in God's unique plans.

The connection between the two churches started after a denominational Council of Delegates meeting in Grand Rapids, Mich. Mark VanDyke, pastor of Almond Valley, was riding back to the airport with Tabitha Manuelito, a delegate from Classis Red Mesa. She mentioned that there was a CRC in New Mexico in need of a sound system after a recent burglary. VanDyke's California congregation later reached out to Crownpoint CRC and learned there were other ways they could help.

After some time of discernment and fundraising, Almond Valley sent a scouting party to Crownpoint to determine the logistics of the service project. "Things came together so providentially and beautifully," VanDyke said. "So many people (at Almond Valley) stepped up giving money so that we could go and make a lot of the repairs." Almond Valley



A volunteer group from Almond Valley CRC (Calif.) onsite with representatives of Crownpoint CRC (N.M.).

also took donations of new clothes and school supplies to Crownpoint for that church to distribute to its community.

"We were excited for the project because it would connect us with another Christian Reformed church," VanDyke said. "Classis Red Mesa holds a special place in the hearts of Christian Reformed people, and it was great to travel there to learn more about what the Lord has done in the Christian Reformed churches in northern Arizona and New Mexico for the past 100 years."

Randy Eskes of Ripon, Calif., went on the initial scouting trip and was one of the project leaders. He has been a building contractor for 43 years, so he is used to planning jobs and controlling how and when work gets done. He said God taught him a few things on this project, especially when the group arrived in New Mexico and some plans needed to be scrapped.

"God certainly used my years of experience in managing jobs, but I needed to learn to let go and to trust God more," Eskes said. "An even more valuable lesson I learned on this trip is that the physical work we did is only a means

to an end. Building relationships is the most important thing that we can do. I concentrate on doing a job. God is concerned with building relationships with him and each other."

Doris Anema was part of the VBS team headed by 87-year-old Irene Bishop. "We planned the stories, the songs, the games, the crafts as best we could, but the one thing we couldn't plan was how many would be coming," Anema said. Between six and 12 kids attended on each of the four days, with the scheduled starting times becoming as flexible as the turnout.

From digging a trench for plumbing, cleaning windows, and renovating a bathroom to painting a mural, wiring a sound system, and leading VBS sessions, Almond Valley found its service unified the volunteers as a team. They returned to California hoping for more service-mindedness in their church. This trip was not just for building memories to reminisce upon in the future, VanDyke said, but to be prompted and pushed to do more for God's kingdom by serving others.

— Kevin Hoeksema,  
Thrive

## Centering Justice in Food Security

**JODI KOEMAN RECENTLY** had an opportunity to visit The Table, an organization in Denver, Colo., that is part of the food justice and community growing project Koeman oversees in her work as Church With Community mobilizer for World Renew.

The food justice and community growing project is a grant program that enables organizations and congregations involved in a food project, ministry, or initiative to commit to increasing their awareness of food justice and developing connections with community members.

“This helps lead to more asset-based, community-driven, and justice-rooted engagement,” Koeman explained.

The Table is a unique urban farm and faith community working in neighborhoods across South Denver. Since 2012, The Table has sought to improve food access in communities by growing organic food on scattered urban farm plots and distributing the food to local partners. The organization received a small food justice and community growing grant to purchase a refrigerator, and now the team can store fresh produce for longer before distribution.

Next year, The Table hopes to expand one of its 5,000-square-foot food plots into an adjacent vacant lot. The team also hopes to reopen Table Public House, a community café and gathering space.

“Together, we are envisioning the future of their mission, developing leadership, practicing asset-based community development principles, and centering justice in food security,” Koeman said.

The Table is one of four organizations that are part of the food justice and community growing grant program. Silver Springs Christian Reformed Church in Silver Spring,

Md., is developing a youth advisory council for its growing food pantry, and the Church of Refugia in Visalia, Calif., wants to revitalize a community garden and support the local Thursday-night farmer’s market. In Michigan, the New Era Farmer’s Market—started by and located on the property of New Era



This 5,000-square-foot plot maintained by The Table is located next to the Denver Police Department’s District 4 station.

CRC—implemented a canning lending library at the public libraries in its county.

“Food is essential to life. Food is nourishment and nutrition, yet it is also about comfort, culture, and connection,” Koeman concluded. “Food teaches us about growing relationships and deepening community, yet food also has been used to divide and deny access, and food insecurity and injustice persist throughout our communities. I’m grateful for the congregations I get to work alongside as they implement unique responses to food insecurity and advocate for food justice in their communities.”

—*Kayleigh Van Wyke,*  
*World Renew*



The Table received a grant for this refrigerator to store produce.

Last spring Jodi Koeman facilitated a Food and Faith webinar series on the experience of leaders in the food systems field. To watch, go to [worldrenew.net/events](http://worldrenew.net/events) and fill out the form requesting access to the Food and Faith series. More webinars will come later this year.

To learn more about ways to get involved in these types of food justice and community growing projects, email Koeman at [jkoeman@worldrenew.net](mailto:jkoeman@worldrenew.net).



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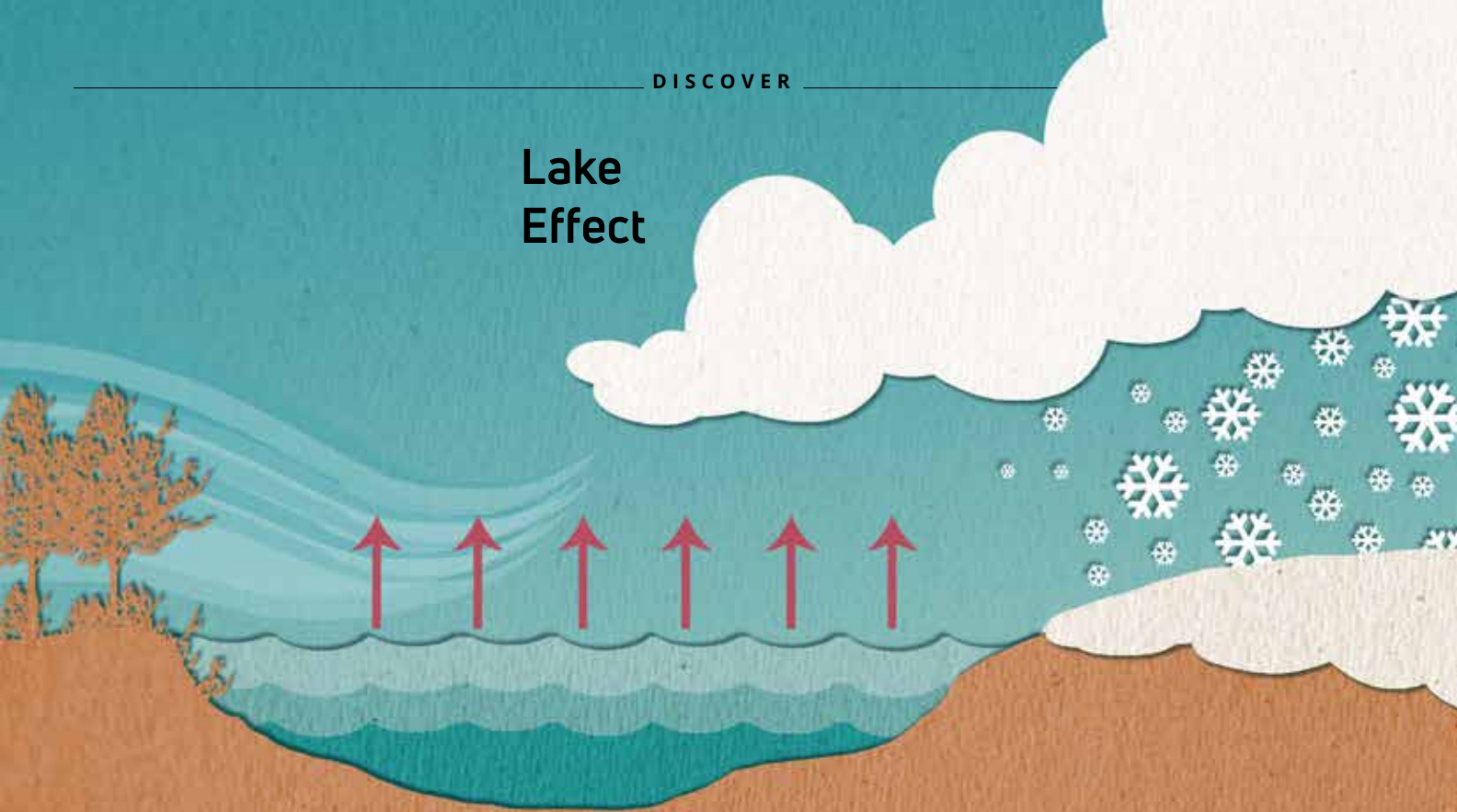
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# Lake Effect



**THOSE OF US LIVING** near the Great Lakes often hear the term “lake effect” or “lake-effect snow.” The lakes have a huge effect on the weather. They can temper storms or make them worse.

To understand how the lakes affect weather, it’s important to know that heat means vibration. The faster something vibrates, the hotter it is; the slower it vibrates, the cooler it is.

The faster air vibrates, the warmer it gets and the more water molecules it can hold. So on a warm summer day, if the atmosphere has water it can pick up, it will, and the air feels more humid.



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

Water is also very good at storing heat. It takes a lot of heat to warm water, and it takes a long time for water to lose that heat and cool down. Land has a much lower heat capacity, so it can change temperature much faster.

Now imagine it’s December, and much of the U.S. Midwest and Canadian prairie provinces are under a cold snap. The land loses heat quickly, and it gets cold. But the Great Lakes have not changed temperature very much and remain warmer.

When a very cold, more slowly vibrating air mass crosses the Great Lakes from west to east, the warmth from those bodies of water goes into the air, raising the air temperature and causing the air to vibrate faster. And as it warms up and vibrates faster, the air is better able to pick up water out of the lakes.

Once that moisture-heavy mass of air crosses onto land again on the other side of the lake, the land is cooler, and as a result the air mass cools, and the vibrations slow. It can no longer carry that extra moisture, so it drops it. Depending on the temperature, it can become rain or snow, or it can simply form clouds.

When I think of the Great Lakes and their effect on the weather, I’m reminded of what our lives should look like as Christians. God created us to positively influence the world around us, and every day God gives us ways to do that.

Be a positive influencer! 📌



# The Lost Gifts of the Vanished

By Jenna C. Hoff

**T**he evening sky was rapidly darkening as my family frantically huddled outside our broken-down van on the rocky shoulder of a busy mountain highway. As smoke streamed from our engine, large semi-trucks continually blasted down the road beside us, going 120 km per hour (about 75 mph).

We'd been happily driving home from a family vacation when our wheelchair-adapted van suddenly began to give off major signs of trouble. The only option was to pull over on a difficult stretch of highway in a province not our own.

For two frightening hours, I devoted everything in my power to keeping our kids safe. Meanwhile, my husband, Eric, battled the spotty phone coverage of the Canadian wilderness to call for assistance. Finally a tow truck arrived to take our van to the nearest small city.

When the next morning a mechanic reported catastrophic damage and said a repair might take weeks, we decided to go home. Eric could return for the van once it was fixed. But how would we get home? If you use a power wheelchair, as I do, many common travel options are closed.

To fly, for example, one must be able to sit on a plane seat and check your

wheelchair in with the luggage at the bottom of the plane. I can sit for only a short period without my wheelchair's custom support, so flying wasn't an option.

Similarly, calling a loved one to pick us up or renting a regular vehicle was also out. I need to travel in my power chair, which can be transported only in a specially adapted vehicle with a ramp. My power chair cannot go in a regular vehicle because it weighs hundreds of pounds, doesn't fold to fit in a trunk, and needs locks to secure it to the vehicle floor.

Stranded almost 1,000 kilometers (621 miles) from home in a highway hotel, we surveyed our limited options. Panic began to set in.

Then inspiration hit. If anyone knows what it's like to swim upstream against significant disability-related challenges and find innovative, workable solutions, it's fellow people with disabilities.

These were the folks most likely to know someone willing to rent or sell us a used adapted van or come up with another novel idea for how we could get home.

So I reached out to friends in and out of the disability community and posted on social media to community and

disability groups. Ideas, messages of support, and prayers quickly began to roll in from strangers and friends alike.

In mere hours, a solution was found. Friends of my parents in the disability community back home offered to lend us their wheelchair van. My father drove it out, and soon we were on our way. The crisis was over.

## Valuable Skills

As this situation showcases, many people with disabilities develop creativity, resiliency, and problem-solving skills to survive and thrive in an obstacle-filled world where we are often treated as lesser members. Because we know what it is like to be devalued, many people with disabilities develop a keen sense of empathy for others who face challenges of all kinds. That's why I knew instinctively that people in the disability community were our best bet for finding a viable solution for traveling home.

These invaluable skills are transferable to all aspects of life, including church life. Creative problem solving, resiliency, and empathy are incredibly valuable gifts when serving and loving a church community.

Additionally, many people with disabilities know well the beauty of



interdependence and have acquired the gift of accepting help from others in a way people without disabilities might have had less opportunity to experience.

“People with disabilities often understand what a gift of interdependence is. They are less likely to believe the myth that they can—and should—go it alone,” said Lindsay Wieland Capel, disability consultant with Thrive, an agency of the Christian Reformed Church in North America, in an email. “There’s so much the church has to learn from people with disabilities.”

“The church has easily fallen into the temptation to commodify our bodies and minds, placing value based on what someone can do or accomplish,” Wieland Capel added. “But that’s not how God sees us at all. We are valuable because of who we are and whose we are.”

But, perhaps because of this interdependence, people with disabilities may be seen as having fewer gifts, capabilities, or value to contribute. In churches—as in society as a whole—it can be easy to shut doors to leadership or to provide equal opportunities for service and belonging.

For example, every spring since we began attending our church in 2006, my husband has received a phone call from the church saying he had been nominated to the church council. He’s asked to please prayerfully consider saying yes because it is difficult to find enough people in the congregation willing to serve in this manner.

For 17 springs, I watched Eric receive these calls while I found other ways to serve the congregation and the denomination. Though our church continued its struggle to find elders and deacons, no call ever came for me. It wasn’t a matter of gender—a very solid percentage of our church council is women.

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community.

This year, after 18 years at our church, I told the church council what I’d noticed. In the spring, I received a phone call of my own.

#### **What We Lose**

Wieland Capel explained that sometimes people with disabilities simply opt out of participating in something rather than advocate for what they need or have to offer to the church.

“People don’t want to stand out or have to ask for special treatment,” she said. “That’s why universal design is so essential. I know of an older gentleman who stopped leading the congregational prayer at his church because he could no longer climb the stairs to the podium. That congregation was missing out on his gift of prayer because of a step!”

The losses to a congregation can be immense when a person stops fully participating or even outright vanishes from the pews. These losses are incurred whether the person has a lifelong disability, a chronic condition,

or is facing more recent impairments due to advanced age, a new illness, or a short-term disabling condition.

Elderly members often bring a wealth of knowledge and wisdom to the table. When senior members stop being able to attend church or fully participate in church life, every member of the church, down to the tiniest infants, loses out on this wisdom and life experience. A church without its elders present and sharing their gifts is like a partly grown forest that has lost its most beautiful, aged trees.

People facing new illnesses, injuries, or short-term disabilities might still be processing and grieving the sudden changes in their lives and bodies. When these people vanish, our congregations not only lose out on the gift of their presence but also on the opportunity to lovingly walk beside them in their time of challenge and need.

#### **Bolstering Fellow Members**

Even though I had already lived with a disability for a number of years after a car accident in my early adulthood, I will never forget the shock, struggle, and sorrow I experienced in 2016 when I suddenly lost the ability to walk due to another injury.

A team of people in my church brought my family a meal every week for a year, and the extraordinary difference that made in our lives was unquantifiable. The food was helpful on a practical level, but even more, the love shown in those homemade meals was a morale-boosting encouragement like none other. For months, I wasn’t well enough to attend church, and these weekly meals were a loving lifeline of connection to our church family.

Psalms 34:18 reminds us that “the LORD is close to the brokenhearted.” To love each other deeply as a community, we

need to model this and be close to each other in times of both joy and sorrow.

It can be a temptation to show each other only the good aspects of our lives. Social media is rife with pictures of people's amazing lives while their secret struggles and hurts remain hidden away. But when we hide our struggles, pain, and sorrows, we rob each other of authentic relationships of genuine love.

This is not something we should model in our churches. When people facing illness vanish from church life, we lose the opportunity to authentically love each other in both hard and good times.

Over the ages and into the present day, the church has lost out on an extraordinary number of wonderful relationships and gifts when people with disabilities have vanished from the community or not been fully included. When that loss occurs due to something preventable, such as inaccessibility, devaluing, a lack of universal design, judgment, or a dearth of needed accommodations, it is a travesty.

### **Unique Stories**

Of course, it's prudent to be cautious. It's easy to get carried away romanticizing the gifts of people with disabilities, but like everyone else, people with disabilities are individuals.

It is stereotyping to say that every person with a long-term disability is a resilient solution finder, that every person with a new illness is grieving, that every older adult is wise, or that people with disabilities as a whole bring specific and similar gifts to church life. When a person with a disability is no longer present or fully participating, the loss is tragic—but also unique to that person.

Many people picture people with disabilities as joyous folks who bring a

sense of warmth and inclusion to the life of the church. Sometimes that is true. But I'm a prime example of this not always being the case. My husband and kids will happily fill you on how joyous I am not when I'm tired, head-achy, or coffee-less.

The truth is that each person, disabled or not, brings unique and varied gifts, talents, strengths, weaknesses, hurts, and joys to the church. The loss of even one person is an extraordinary loss unlike any other.

Similarly, the varied opportunities for people with disabilities to share their gifts with the church are endless, but also unique to each person.

"Sometimes people ask, 'What roles have you seen people with disabilities in at a church?'" Wieland Capel said. "All of them! The ways people with disabilities serve are as varied as the ways anyone else in the church might serve."

In other words, there is no one role that fits all people with disabilities, just as there is no one role that fits all people without disabilities. And there is no one-size-fits-all loss when people with disabilities—and their gifts—vanish.

"Some people will serve quietly with a ministry of prayer that no one even knows about. Others will serve by using their gifts of teaching. Others will clean up the pews after worship or volunteer in the nursery. Someone else might offer a ministry of presence by being beside people through difficult times," Wieland Capel said.

### **The Lost Sheep**


Luke 15 recounts Jesus' parable of a person with a 100 sheep who lost one. Instead of being happy that he still had 99 sheep left and calling it a day, he dropped everything and went searching for his missing sheep. On finding

that sheep, he joyfully put it on his shoulders, went home, and invited others to join him in rejoicing.

While the parable is about God seeking out lost sinners, it also showcases the unique value to God of each person God individually and uniquely created. When a person—with or without a disability—vanishes or is not fully included in the life of the congregation, the loss is not only significant, but one of a kind.

Just as in Jesus' parable of the one lost sheep, we too must drop everything when a person with a disability vanishes from our pews due to inaccessibility in the church, a lack of universal design, noninclusive practices and attitudes, or other reasons.

We can "drop everything" by repenting of our lack of inclusivity or accessibility and for any barriers that we as a church or as individuals have put up. The next step is to embrace that "vanished" person with a full welcome, genuinely listening to them about how the barriers can be removed or vanquished and how we can champion their full return.

To keep that person and their unique gifting is to retain a treasure of greatest value, just as it is for any other member with or without a disability. We avoid the loss and vanishing of not only that individual's unique gifts but also their presence, friendship, love, and continued relationship as our dear brother or sister in Christ. This, ultimately, means everything and is worth all cost. 

1. When was the last time you were either served in some way or taught something by a person with disabilities? Can you recount the moment?

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## The Bible in a Tree

Sound strange? Yes,  
it is surprising and  
mysterious—but  
also divine!

**DUSK GLOOMED** the back of the plaza where I was walking early one morning. Against the horizon, the shapes of several trees loomed dark, their branches barren and brittle due to winter rest and possibly disease. Never a pretty sight, no matter the season, these trees seemed slated for an appointment with an arborist's pruning shears or even a chainsaw.

Suddenly a black shape leaning against a gnarly trunk snagged my curiosity. I came closer. A book rested on the tree's lowest limb. I reached for it and read the title: *The Story: The Bible as One Continuing Story of God and His People*.

What? The Bible in a tree? How did it get there? I wondered. Did a shy evangelist set it there, hoping someone would discover the gospel? Perhaps the story of Jesus and his love had greened up the shy evangelist's barren life, but the thought of explaining the good news to someone else was too intimidating. Hence, the solution: place the Bible in a tree.

As I walked on, I puzzled over the hands and heart that had landed the Bible in such an unlikely place.

The next morning, I checked to see if the Bible was still there. As I came closer, I noticed that it was no longer perched on the limb. Had the shy evangelist's goal been attained? Had someone taken the Bible home and met Jesus on its pages?

No, there it was beneath the tree, possibly knocked down by the wind or a squirrel.

I put it back on the limb and kept on walking, pondering the connection between the Bible and trees.

The next time I stopped at the tree, the Bible was gone. I was curious about who took it. God knew even though I didn't.

But I know this: If the Bible gets knocked to the ground, rained on, crumpled, and destroyed; if it's left

to collect dust in cupboards or stored away with antiques; if it is maligned—even then the Story will live on. It's an alive and active, sharper-than-a-two-edged-sword Story that penetrates people's hearts and minds (Heb. 4:12).

With something so powerfully dynamic bringing springtime salvation and summertime sanctification to all who believe, one might begin to see a new relationship between the Bible and trees. Trees are repeatedly mentioned in the Bible, but Scripture in trees is also alluded to.

Sound strange? Yes, it is surprising and mysterious—but also divine! Psalm 1 gives us insight into this truth when it describes believers in Yahweh delight in the law of the Lord and meditate on it day and night: "That person is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither—whatever they do prospers" (Ps. 1:3).

Though all believers are like trees planted by streams of water—trees made alive through the power of Jesus and his Word—we're not all the same. When I look in my backyard at the seven trees my husband, Rinke, and I have planted since 2007, I celebrate each one's uniqueness, beauty, and usefulness. A Bloodgood Japanese maple, a Royal Red maple, an Eastern redbud, a Forest Pansy redbud, a ginkgo biloba, a Milky Way dogwood, and an Emperor Japanese maple each proclaims the glory of the Lord in the exact way God designed it to.

The same is true of each Jesus-follower. We're in different places on our faith journeys—mature trees, saplings, diseased, or healthy. But the truth of what Christian musician Ken Medema sings in the refrain to "The Tree Song" is true for all who believe: "I've got roots growing down to the water, I've got leaves growing up to the sunshine, and the fruit that I bear is a sign of the life in me." **B**



Sonya VanderVeen Feddema is a freelance writer and a member of Covenant Christian Reformed Church in St. Catharines, Ont.



## In the Hands of the Maker

It is no surprise that the Bible describes our Creator God as an artist and craftsman.



Wendy van Leeuwen is a member of Bethel Christian Reformed Church in Listowel, Ont., a secondary school teacher, and the author of several published stories and articles for children and adults.

**ONE OF THE GREATEST** gifts I inherited from the women in my family was a love of needlecrafts. My mother and grandmothers created beautiful works of art and functional everyday items using simple raw materials such as yarn, fabric, beads, and embroidery floss. When I was a young child on summer sleepovers, my grandmother taught me how to knit and crochet, and I still use those skills almost every day. The repetitive motion of needles or hook settles my mind at the end of a stressful day, and the dance of color and design satisfies my creativity. Crafting a garment, home decor item, or gift with my own two hands is immensely gratifying.

There are many other forms of creative expression for which I have no natural talent but plenty of admiration. Some people can take a simple brush and create an awe-inspiring painting or mold a lump of clay or stone into a dish or sculpture. Still others craft elegant furniture or mouth-watering pastries using basic materials.

The Old Testament includes many examples of people offering their artisanal skills to God. In Exodus 35, Moses calls on craftspeople to design and decorate the temple. A master craftsman, Bezalel, is given special mention as one who is filled with the Spirit of God, having wisdom, ability, and expertise in all kinds of crafts, including working with precious metals and gemstones and carving wood. He and Oholiab are commended for their ability to teach others their special skills as engravers, designers, embroiderers, and weavers.

It is no surprise that the Bible describes our Creator God as an artist and craftsman. Jeremiah and Isaiah each portray God as a potter. “Yet you, LORD, are our Father. We are the clay, you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand” (Isa. 64:8). In

the beginning, God created the first human out of the dirt with God’s own hands and breathed life into him (Gen. 2), and now, God takes us as we are, lumps of unformed clay, and transforms us through Jesus into vessels who are filled with the Spirit and fit for serving him. And we are not just lowly cracked pots or chipped plates. We “are God’s masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good things he planned for us long ago” (Eph 2:10, NLT).

But before we hang our masterpiece selves on the wall and consider ourselves finished and perfected, we need to go back to Isaiah for a dose of humility. He uses the same illustration of God as the potter to remind us of our place in relation to an all-powerful Creator. “You turn things upside down, as if the potter were thought to be like the clay! Shall what is formed say to the one who formed it, ‘You did not make me’? Can the pot say to the potter, ‘You know nothing’? ... Woe to those who quarrel with their Maker, those who are nothing but potsherds among the potsherds on the ground. Does the clay say to the potter, ‘What are you making?’ Does your work say, ‘The potter has no hands’? (Isa. 29:16, 45:9).

Ouch. Do I, like a foolish pot, treat God as if God is stupid and clumsy? I have to admit that there are times in my life when I want to cry out, “Stop, you’re doing it wrong! God, people I love are suffering. God, my children have turned their backs on you. God, my closest relationships are disappointing or broken, and my circumstances are so lonely and painful. God, I’m not the person I want to be physically, emotionally, or spiritually. I certainly don’t feel like a masterpiece. What are you doing in my life, and why is it taking you so long to do it?”



The world's messages don't help: "You do you." "Be true to your authentic self." This world worships identity and personal expression, and even in the church we sometimes hear things like "God made you special" or "Come as you are; Jesus loves you." But it would be a mistake to stop there. The truth is this: I don't belong to myself, as much as the world tries to convince me of that. I "belong—body and soul, in life and in death—to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ" (Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 1). This truth sets me free from my sins, certainly, but also from my preconceived ideas and from the ideologies the world thrusts upon me. Yes, God made me as I am, but God doesn't leave me there. Jesus didn't pay the price for me so that I can stay unchanged and unformed. I am far too precious to God for that. Like an artist with a lump of clay, a ball of yarn, or a palette of paint, God takes the raw materials of my body, my desires, my dreams, my

education, my personality, my circumstances—everything—and creates them anew in Christ Jesus, shaping them for God's purposes and glory, not my own.

This means I can't say "That's just who I am," or "This is what I want for my life." Everything must be surrendered to God. In the painful process of being reformed, I might lose things I thought were an essential part of my nature or that I really wanted to keep. God's plans for my life might not align with my own ideas or even with my deepest desires. "I plead with you," the apostle Paul writes, "to give your bodies to God because of all he has done for you. Let them be a living and holy sacrifice—the kind he will find acceptable. This is truly the way to worship him" (Rom. 12:1, NLT). This is such a challenging verse. Am I leading a life worthy of my calling, allowing God to form who I am and what my life will be, or am I

hanging on to the things that I think define me and my life? "The LORD says, 'I will guide you along the best pathway for your life. I will advise you and watch over you'" (Ps. 32:8, NLT). Do I trust God to do that? Do I trust God enough to give God all of me and every aspect of my life?

God's promise is that when we trust God to shape and form us, we will be masterpieces that stand the test of time, lasting even into eternity so that "God can point to us in all future ages as examples of the incredible wealth of his grace and kindness toward us" (Eph 2:7, NLT). We need to be patient with each other in this. None of us is worthy of God's grace on our own merit, and we are not all at the same place in this process of being formed. Humility is required, both in surrendering our own lives to God, and in waiting and praying for God to do the same in others. But we have the example of Jesus, who surrendered his divine privileges and subjected himself to the will of his Father. His obedience demonstrated unwavering trust in God. Jesus put his human form into the hands of God the potter and fulfilled God's purpose for his life by dying a humiliating death to pay the price of our redemption (Phil. 2:7-8). He demonstrated this grace to us while we were sinners—unformed raw materials. **B**

1. How often do you think of God as an artist or a potter? What are some insights you gain about God from that metaphor?
2. In what sorts of circumstances have you been tempted to complain to God? From examining them, what might you learn about yourself and about God?

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# Fall Into an Autumnal Book Pile



## His Face Like Mine: Finding God's Love in Our Wounds

*By Russell W. Joyce*

Reviewed by Sonya  
VanderVeen Feddema

Author Russell W. Joyce was born Nov. 17, 1988, with a rare craniofacial disorder called Goldenhar syndrome.

Though Joyce's parents knew that "God gave them this child with a different face for a reason," they continued to plead for God to make their son whole. Joyce asserts that all people long for God to make them whole. "As a pastor and, more importantly, a follower of Jesus," he explains, "I've learned that Jesus came to earth for one reason: our wholeness."

*His Face Like Mine* is an outstanding resource for pastors, lay leaders, and anyone who recognizes their woundedness and desires to take steps to discover the wholeness Jesus longs to bring to the world. The book concludes with questions for reflection. (IVP)



## The Spirit of Justice: True Stories of Faith, Race, and Resistance

*By Jemar Tisby*

Reviewed by Ann Byle

Jemar Tisby, author of the best-selling *The Color of Compromise*, continues his study of racism as he looks at the history of the United States from its earliest settlement by non-Native Americans to the present as it relates to the Black fight for justice and liberty.

Tisby asks, "What manner of people are those who courageously confront racism instead of being complicit with it? And what can we learn from their example, their suffering, their methods, and their hope?"

He answers by "focus(ing) primarily on the beliefs and actions of Black Christians." Tisby puts their actions into the context of American history, revealing how their faith in God was the basis for their actions on behalf of their brothers and sisters as well as themselves. (Zondervan Reflective)



## Her Part to Play: A Novel

*By Jenny Erlingsson*

Reviewed by Ann Byle

Adanne Stewart is back in her hometown of Hope Springs, Ala., after a stint in California. She'd dreamed of being a makeup artist to the stars, but now she is rebuilding her life and doing makeup on the set of a movie filming locally.

John Pope, the film's star, is recovering from a nasty public breakup with the woman he thought he'd marry. Now he's stuck in Hope Springs with nothing but a bad attitude and a broken heart.

Adanne and John slowly build a friendship as he begins to heal and, with Adanne's help, return to his spiritual roots.

Erlingsson has written a beautiful romance that unfolds smoothly and slowly as the protagonists face their struggles and as they begin to see a future together. (Revell)



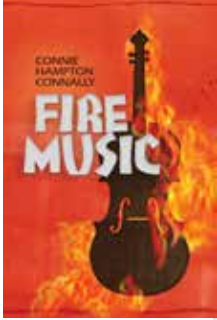
## 12 Truths & A Lie: Answers to Life's Biggest Questions

*By J.D. Greear*

Reviewed by Paul Delger

Before pastor J.D. Greear tackles the questions he is most often asked, he debunks the notion that Christians should not ask questions and exposes the lie that "if you have doubts and difficult questions, you're a bad Christian or maybe not a Christian at all." Greear responds to 12 questions with biblical guidance and a bit of humor. Questions include: How can I know for sure I'll go to heaven? Why isn't God answering my prayers? How can I know God's will for my life? I believe in God, so why do I still struggle with anxiety? Why does God care so much about my sex life? The book can be used as a reference guide or can be easily read in a few sittings. (K-LOVE Books)





## Fire Music

*By Connie Hampton Connally*

Reviewed by Cynthia Beach

*Fire Music* tells the story of Hungarian youths in 1944-45 who experience something no one wishes: German cruelties, then Russian. These teens encounter the trauma of war and even death while wanting to find their way and perhaps fall in love.

*Fire Music* also tells the story of newly divorced American Lisa Denman, who travels to Hungary in 2007 carrying yellowed sheet music. What can she learn of its untold story?

Connie Hampton Connally's faithful commitment to Christianity shows in her story. While she doesn't preach or push, redemption shows gold in believable character arcs. Suffering is noticed and never shamed; rather, it's handled as if holy.

Language and adult themes are used at times to depict the reality of war-torn Hungary.

*Fire Music* is an ennobling and soul-moving read—perfect book club reading. (Coffeetown Press)



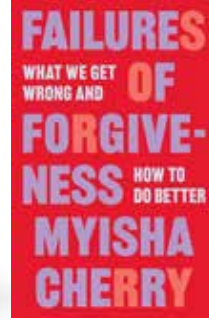
## Why Everything That Doesn't Matter Matters So Much: The Way of Love in a World of Hurt

*By Charlie Peacock and Andi Ashworth*

Reviewed by Robert J. Keeley

Charlie Peacock is best known as a musician/producer, but he also speaks into the public conversation about the role of the arts in the life of faith. Peacock and his wife, Andi Ashworth, founded the Art House in Nashville, Tenn., as a place where artists could come to explore how to connect their faith with their art. Their new book is part memoir and part treatise on the way the couple looks at hospitality, mentoring, being a Christian artist, self-care, and faith.

Their story is fascinating, and as we are invited into their lives, their two voices help us feel as welcome as their many guests have been. Their story is a testament to how God uses ordinary things in the lives of his people to further his kingdom. (Thomas Nelson)



## Failures of Forgiveness: What We Get Wrong and How to Do Better

*By Myisha Cherry*

Reviewed by Mary Li Ma

Across religions and societies, forgiveness is a profound and complex human experience that defies oversimplification and represents the highest moral ground. Contemporary philosopher Myisha Cherry carefully unveils the myths and misconceptions around forgiveness.

"Forgiveness is powerful. But it's not magical," she writes. A narrow view of forgiveness equates it with "the 'letting go' of negative feelings," such as anger and resentment. Sometimes, the moral command of forgiveness can even be used to pressure victims of crimes, leading to further harm. "Many of us turn to forgiveness as a possible antidote," Cherry says. "But forgiveness, like any powerful medicine, works only if applied properly."

This book is a great resource for thoughtful Christians willing to expand their philosophical understanding of forgiveness. (Princeton University Press)



## Until Our Time Comes

*By Nicole M. Miller*

Reviewed by Sonya VanderVeen Feddema

Author Nicole Miller explores the traumatic history of how Russian and German invaders wreaked havoc on a stud farm in 1939 Poland that specialized in breeding Arabian horses.

American horse trainer Adia Kensington has deep roots at the farm because of the role her Polish mother played during World War I in trying to save the renowned farm's horses from the occupiers. Now, Adia finally has the chance to work there, but her hopes are disrupted when Germany invades Poland.

Bret Conway says he is a journalist, but unbeknownst to Adia and others at the farm, he is a British intelligence officer.

*Until Our Time Comes* offers an enjoyable and thought-provoking reading experience that will appeal to history buffs and fans of romance novels alike. (Revell)



## Between Two Brothers

*By Crystal Allen*

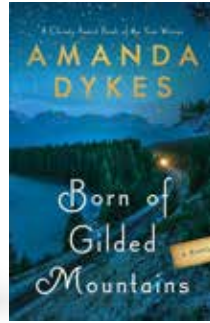
Sonya VanderVeen Feddema

Thirteen-year-old Isaiah “Ice” Abernathy reveres his 17-year-old brother, Seth, a renowned cross-country runner with a scholarship to a prestigious university. For Ice and Seth, it’s always been about the relationship between brothers, a friendship bond that each considers unbreakable.

But when an accident incapacitates Seth and sends Ice and his family into a tailspin emotionally, financially, and spiritually, their Christian faith is tried like never before.

*Between Two Brothers* explores themes such as bullying among adolescents and between corporations, the transformative power of friendship, the role of Christian faith and prayer when dealing with tragedy, and the need to “always leave space for grace.”

Though recommended for children ages 8-12, the book is better suited for ages 11 and older due to its emotionally charged topic. (Balzer + Bray)



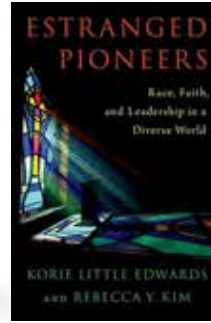
## Born of Gilded Mountains

*By Amanda Dykes*

Reviewed by Sonya VanderVeen Feddema

In 1948, when 30-year-old Mercy Windsor, a famous Hollywood actress, stands up against injustice, she learns that her career has been terminated. Wanting nothing more than to disappear and fade from the spotlight of the public’s harsh scrutiny, Mercy sets out for a small community in Colorado called Mercy Peak to find her girlhood pen pal.

*Born of Gilded Mountains* is replete with adventure after adventure, clues upon clues, majestic descriptions of nature, emotionally complex characters, biblical truth, and portrayals of the harshness of life in mining communities and in Hollywood culture. In this gratifying novel for adults, Dykes masterfully combines various formats—pen pal letters, newspaper reports, interviews, a motion picture script, and prose—to tell Mercy’s story. The book includes discussion questions. (Bethany House Publishers)



## Estranged Pioneers: Race, Faith, and Leadership in a Diverse World

*By Korie Little Edwards and Rebecca Y. Kim*

Reviewed by Reginald Smith

When I read *Estranged Pioneers*, it resonated with my lived experience as an ethnic minority pastor leading a majority-white multiethnic church. I found myself nodding at almost every page.

Edwards and Kim explore whether multiracial churches can overcome the racial divide that exists in most of the American Evangelical world. Despite facing real challenges, the pastors of those churches have a unique opportunity to be bridge builders as well as “pioneers.” Edwards and Kim conclude, “Regardless of their religious affiliation, pastors of multiracial churches were pioneers. They were going against the odds, doing something that few of their peers are doing.”

The book makes an excellent resource for church book clubs, church council conversations, churches with local contexts that might be racially changing, or personal enrichment and learning. (Oxford University Press)



## Darkness Calls the Tiger

*By Janyre Tromp*

Reviewed by Sonya VanderVeen Feddema

Set in Burma—present-day Myanmar—during World War II, this expansive, fascinating novel for adults begins with a dynamite first chapter that catapults readers into a narrative zinging with danger and unpredictability. It grapples with compelling questions about God’s presence in the face of suffering, evil, war, and death.

Kai Moran, an 18-year-old missionary kid, must work with Ryan McDonough, a new missionary, to help their village as Japan invades Southern Burma and a flood of refugees descends upon the town.

*Darkness Calls the Tiger* is a must-read book that exposes historical injustices, offers captivating characters and a riveting plot, addresses spiritual questions posed by people who long to understand where God is when darkness descends, and portrays Christian hope. (Kregel)

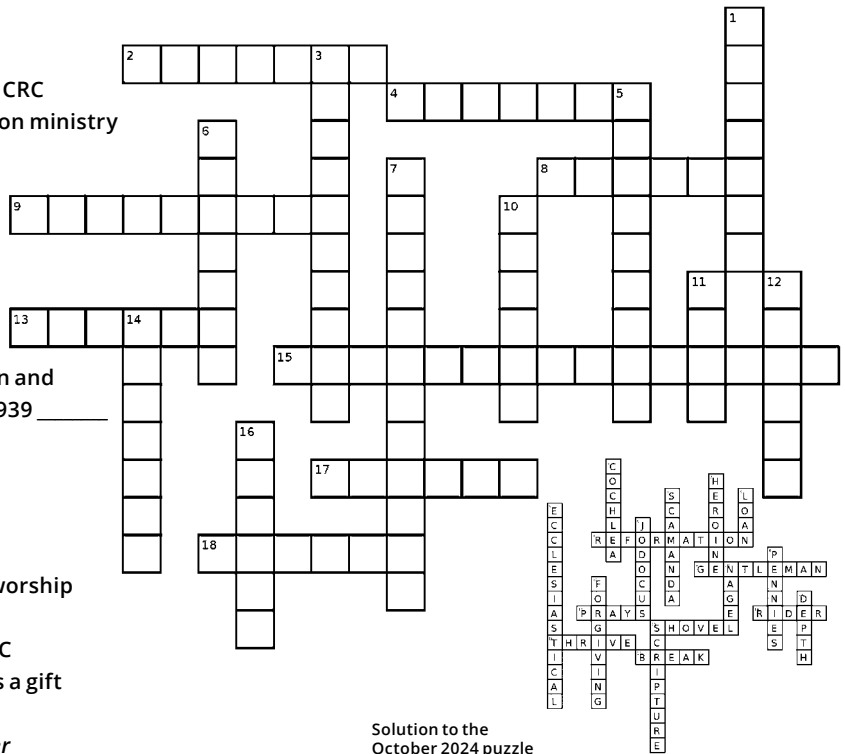
Find the answers to this crossword puzzle in this issue of *The Banner*! See the solutions next month.  
 (Please note we do not publish Word Play in the July/August issue.)

**Down**

- 1. The Great Lakes affect the \_\_\_\_\_
- 3. This church received volunteers from Almond Valley CRC
- 5. One of three states where Elmhurst CRC hosts a prison ministry
- 6. The kingdom of heaven is likened to this seed
- 7. A deacon, elder, or pastor in the CRC is an \_\_\_\_\_
- 10. Author of *The Prodigal God*
- 11. Where one author found a Bible
- 12. Mission Church is in \_\_\_\_\_, Ariz.
- 14. Some churches are repurposing land or buildings to develop affordable \_\_\_\_\_
- 16. Novel explores the traumatic history of how Russian and German invaders wreaked havoc on a stud farm in 1939 \_\_\_\_\_


**Across**

- 2. Charlie \_\_\_\_\_ and his wife have coauthored a book about creativity
- 4. A master craftsman in Exodus 35
- 8. It's neither merely a building nor weekly corporate worship
- 9. God is described as an artist and \_\_\_\_\_
- 13. An initiative to share instances of renewal in the CRC
- 15. People with disabilities are more likely to see this as a gift
- 17. A farmer in the Jabillo community in Nicaragua
- 18. \_\_\_\_\_ Tromp is the author of *Darkness Calls the Tiger*



Solution to the October 2024 puzzle

FAITH  
 ↳  
 PRACTICES




HOLY HABITS THAT HELP US  
 LOVE GOD AND OUR NEIGHBOR.  
 LISTEN TO THE SPIRIT,  
 AND BECOME MORE LIKE JESUS


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**DEADLINES:** Ads for the December issue are due November 1, 2024; Jan/Feb: December 13, 2024. Subject to availability. Details online at [thebanner.org/classifieds](http://thebanner.org/classifieds), or for display ads see [thebanner.org/ads](http://thebanner.org/ads). Advertising in *The Banner* does not imply editorial endorsement.

**PRICES:** Most ads are \$0.45<sup>US</sup> per character (min. 150 characters including punctuation and spaces). A discounted rate of \$0.38<sup>US</sup> per character and \$65 per photo applies to Anniversaries, Birthdays, Obituaries, Denominational and Classical Announcements, and Congregational Announcements.

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**Church Positions Available**

**CROWN POINT CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH** in Indiana is seeking a STUDENT MINISTRY LEADER to help fulfill our mission to Radiate God's Love, Raise Christ Followers, and Reach One More. The candidate will have a mature relationship with Christ, genuine love for and strong rapport with teens, demonstrate leadership, and experience is preferred. Visit [www.cpcrc.org](http://www.cpcrc.org) or contact office@[cpcrc.org](mailto:cpcrc.org) with cover letter and resume.

**DUNCAN CRC** on beautiful Vancouver Island, is seeking a full-time, dynamic pastor to be part of a ministry team, with a passion for youth and ministering to all ages in our congregation. Info available: [duncancrc.org](http://duncancrc.org) or contact the search team: [search@duncancrc.org](mailto:search@duncancrc.org)

**FIRST CRC IN BARRIE, ON.** is pursuing a full-time Co- Pastor for their multi-generational congregation. We strive to grow in love for God and neighbour. We are a loving congregation who are seeking a leader with preaching and pastoral care abilities to foster discipleship. The city of Barrie offers a variety of recreational and educational opportunities. Please contact us at [firstcrcpastorsearch@gmail.com](mailto:firstcrcpastorsearch@gmail.com).

**FULL TIME SENIOR PASTOR** Grant Reformed Church is seeking a visionary leader with a heart for God's people. He must have a deep love for Christ and faithfully proclaim the word of God from the pulpit.

Grant Reformed Church has been faithfully and diligently serving the rural community of Grant for more than 100 years. Recently having left the RCA and joined the ARC, we look forward to continuing to serve the community for many more years.

Our ideal candidate will have some experience. He will be a gifted communicator with dynamic and engaging preaching skills. We are seeking someone who is motivated to reach unchurched or spiritually curious people in our community. He must have a Shepherd's heart and a love for people of all ages. He must be able to equip, develop and motivate people through God's word.

Located around 35 minutes northwest of Grand Rapids Michigan, our church and parsonage are nestled in Newaygo county amongst Grant public schools. Newaygo county offers a multitude of outdoor activities like hunting, fishing, hiking, biking and water sports of all kinds. Please contact us at [grcsearchteam@gmail.com](mailto:grcsearchteam@gmail.com)

**UNIQUE OPPORTUNITY FOR A FT SR. PASTOR** at Golden Gate CRC ([ggcrc.org](http://ggcrc.org)) in San Francisco to provide leadership, direction and vision for our 3 diverse congregations and 4 associate pastors. Qual: M.Div. accredited theological seminary. Min 5 yrs. church pastor exp. Proficient in English; fluent in Mandarin or Cantonese. Authorized to work in the US. Inquire at [srpastorsearch@gggcrc.org](mailto:srpastorsearch@gggcrc.org).

**WORSHIP COORDINATOR** Zion Church in Os-hawa is hiring a Worship Coordinator! For a job description or to apply, please visit [www.zioncnc.ca/careers](http://www.zioncnc.ca/careers).

**Congregational Announcements**

**MARANATHA CHURCH BEGINS** meeting Sunday, Dec 1, at 10:45 am in Church of the Master, 6659 E University Dr, Mesa, AZ 85205. For more info, call Harry Weidenaar 206-595-9852.

**Birthdays**

**BIRTHDAY 100 YEARS**

**ALWAYS TESTIFYING TO GOD'S GOODNESS, HELEN SCHOLTEN (NEE ROZEMA) WILL** celebrate her centennial Nov 4. Cards may be sent to her address of 75 years, 6745 Buchanan SW Grand Rapids MI 49548.



**GEORGIA (VANDER WEIT) JONKMAN** and family anticipate celebrating her 100th birthday on January 20. Cards can be mailed to: 1600 Westbrook Avenue, Apt. 9320, Richmond, VA 23227. Georgia gives thanks for her children and their families and all the ways she has known God's faithfulness and love.



**IRENE FEIKEMA** will celebrate 100 years of God's goodness on November 3rd. Greetings can be sent to her at 505 W Trosky Rd. Edgerton, MN 56128. Her children rise up and call her blessed: Brent and Wanetta Feikema, Mary and Doug (deceased) Vander Woude, Milo and Cheryl Feikema, Colin and Darla Feikema; 13 grandchildren and 21 great grandchildren. Praise and thanksgiving to God for His faithfulness! We love you mom!

**Anniversary**

**WEDDING ANNIVERSARY 50 YEARS**



**STRUIKSMA, BOB AND PAT (DEBOER)** My parents (Bob and Pat Struiksma (DeBoer) and John and Irene Struiksma (DeBoer)

are long standing members at First CRC in Bellflower. They just celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary on August 23. They had a double wedding when they got married at First CRC. 2 brothers (John and Bob Struiksma) married 2 sisters (Pat and Irene DeBoer).

**Obituaries**

**COLE, Stanley, 86, of Whittier, CA,** passed away on August 23, 2024. He is survived by his wife of 64 years, Barbara (Geels), daughters Debbie (Mike) Fitzgerald, Carmen (Bill) Bandstra, Melanie Grigg, 8 grandchildren, 4 great-grandchildren, a sister, Margaret (Rick) Schuyler, and a brother, Bill (Barb) Cole.



**GELDERLOOS, Marjorie** (nee DeJong) woke up in the presence of her Lord and Savior on September 24, 2024. She was born to the late Rev. John and Jennie DeJong in Ripon, CA one of nine children.

She spent her childhood in Manhattan, MT, Vancouver, BC, Iron Springs, AB, and Ripon, CA. She met and married Paul Gelderloos in Cicero, IL and became the loving mother of his two children, Paul Wayne and Clyde Alvin and to their own child John Lee. She was devoted to family, her faith, and her church, Ebenezer Christian Reformed Church. She loved to travel and drove across the country many summers for extended visits with family and friends. She is survived by her sons Clyde Gelderloos, and John and his wife Patricia Gelderloos; grandchildren Paul and Becky Gelderloos, Amy and James O'Toole, Ken and Tammy Gelderloos, Chad Gelderloos, Kristi and Brian Cox; several great-grandchildren; her sister-in-law Eleanor DeJong; many nieces and nephews and their children; special great niece Christy and her husband Robert Hooker; and many family friends. She was preceded in death by her husband Paul Gelderloos and her second hus-

band Herman Buurma; her siblings Peter (Thelma) DeJong, Harold (Marge) DeJong, Theodore DeJong, James (Elsie) DeJong, Andrew (Dorothy) DeJong, Morris (Nell) DeJong, Nelson (Aletha) DeJong, Mary (Henry) Eskes; son Paul Gelderloos and his wife Sharon; daughter-in-law Nancy Gelderloos; and grandson John Lee Gelderloos Jr.



**TAMMINGA, MURIEL (OVERBEEK)**, loving and devoted wife of Rev. Ed Tamminga, went to be with the Lord on September 4, 2024, having suffered with Lewy Body dementia. Together they served 5 congregations

in Michigan and Florida. She gave of herself in ministry for many years by knitting baby blankets, hats and mittens for Love, INC, as well as prayer shawls for churches they served. Surviving are her husband, their children Mark and Beth Tamminga, Ken and Shelley Tamminga, Joyce and Mike VanDinther, and Marianne; 14 grandchildren and one great-grandchild. Memorials may be made to the Rev. Edward and Mrs. Muriel Tamminga Scholarship at Calvin Theological Seminary.

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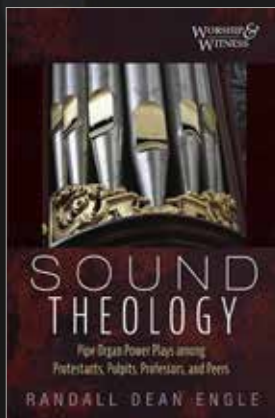


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# A Community in Harmony

I can imagine  
what it would  
be like to sing in  
40-part harmony.



Jasmine Duckworth has been serving with Karis Disability Services (formerly Christian Horizons) since 2004 and has been disabled since 2015. As part of her role as community development manager, she often speaks about disability, accessibility, ableism, and belonging. She is a mother, wife, and obsessive knitter.

**ALL MY LIFE** I have loved to sing: on my own, when leading worship, and in choirs. When I joined a youth choir as a teen, I was disappointed to hear I had been assigned to the alto section. With time, I learned to love this section. I did my best to blend my voice with those around me, and I loved the way our parts harmonized together. My favorite concert of the year was when we joined with several other local choirs and sang along with an even wider range of voices. The added complexity was thrilling.

This summer I attended the Institute on Theology and Disability, an annual week-long conference bringing together theologians, faith leaders, and anyone wanting to learn about the intersection of disability and theology from various religious traditions. It's always a fascinating week in which I learn as much from informal conversations as I do from the keynote speakers and workshop presenters.

This year, one of the most impactful moments was not part of the official conference at all.

After the conference day had ended, four of us decided to get tacos at a tiny restaurant within walking distance. Along the way, we picked up acquaintances and friends we met until we numbered more than a dozen. At one point, I looked back and saw a long line of people traveling behind me. Some were using crutches and canes, some (like me) were rolling walkers along, and others walked unassisted. Not everyone in the group had disabilities, but we certainly had more people with disabilities than you would usually see together.

We took our time, making sure no one was left behind. Through mutual care and assistance, everyone got their dinner and returned to a lounge in our dormitory to eat together.

This beautiful moment might have seemed chaotic to onlookers, but it reminded me of one of my favorite art

installations in the National Gallery of Canada here in Ottawa. *Forty-Part Motet* is an audio sculpture made of speakers on stands, each about five feet high, positioned in a circle around the room. When you stand in the middle of the room, you hear what sounds like a typical religious choral piece in Latin. But if you walk around the room with an ear toward the speakers, you'll notice that each speaker projects one voice. Forty speakers project 40 voices, each singing its own harmony line.

I can imagine what it would be like to sing in 40-part harmony. You would need to be confident in your own line because you couldn't simply follow your neighbor. You would feel nervous about messing up, but over time you'd learn how your notes fit in around those of others. You'd take cues from each other and find support and encouragement in the contrasting notes dancing together. You would learn how you fill in each other's gaps.

This is what I saw when we went for dinner together. People were comfortable asking for any help they needed. We responded and met each other's needs. It's tricky to carry takeout when your hands are needed on your crutches, but the walkers some of us used were great for transporting food. We held doors for one another, assisted with touchscreens that were not accessible for everyone's fine motor skills, found missing cutlery, cut up each other's food, and had a blast hanging out. The tacos were delicious, but it was the rich conversation and sense of community that made the night come alive.

At times I grieve that I can no longer sing the way I used to because my chronic illness impacts my breathing, but for this evening I felt part of a choir again. It was a blessing to blend my gifts and limitations with those around me to reveal the beauty of a diverse and vibrant community. **B**

## Getting Stood Up

I smiled back and moved over to give him room.



Rod Hugen is a retired co-founder of the Village Church in Tucson, Ariz., and disciples and mentors young pastors and leaders on behalf of Classis Arizona. He is author of *Parallels: a Lenten Devotional*.

**SHE STOOD ME UP.** I didn't get too worked up about it, because it meant I would have some free time to do things I thoroughly enjoy. It was almost an hour after our meeting time. She wasn't responding to texts, so I just sat in the park and enjoyed the day.

I watched a roadrunner with a gecko in its beak strut down the concrete path like it owned the place. A couple of squirrels chased each other. Shaggy palm trees in desperate need of a trim stood watch over the moss-covered pond. It was wonderfully peaceful.

An elderly man moved slowly down the path toward me, leaning hard on a wooden cane. He looked up as he approached, smiled, and said, "Good day, sir! Would you mind terribly if I joined you on your bench?"

"I'd be honored, and for the record, it's not really my bench." I smiled back and moved over to give him room.

It took him a bit to situate himself. Eventually he turned toward me and asked, "So, what brings you to this beautiful place today?"

"Well, I was supposed to meet someone, but they haven't shown, so I'm enjoying the morning and the fact that I get to just goof off for a while. How about you?"

He paused for a moment, and his voice turned a bit husky. "I suppose I'm evading responsibility as well. My wife has dementia, and I try to care for her, but sometimes I just need to get away. The neighbor lady comes and sits with her, and I get to escape."

We sat in silence for a moment.

"I make it sound like she's a burden, and I don't mean to convey that message," he continued. "She's the love of my life, and I'm privileged to care for her. We've been married 62 years, and God knows she has always cared for me. I can't imagine life without her. What is so hard is that she doesn't even know who

I am anymore. There is no recognition. I'm just another caregiver to her."

My voice got a little teary, too. "I'm sorry for your loss."

"Look at me. Here I am burdening you with my troubles and spoiling your morning joy."

"Please don't apologize. It's an honor to listen. I hope your time here allows you to find some rest."

More silence.

He changed the subject. "You said you got stood up. I hate when that happens. Doesn't it grate on you when people do that? It's so inconsiderate."

"Actually I'm kind of strange, I suppose, but I enjoy it. I get a bit of free time to do as I please. But, you're right, it is rather rude."

My phone took that opportunity to buzz. "Excuse me," I apologized. "This is the young woman who stood me up."

I answered. Lots of gushing apologies. "I totally spaced it. So, so sorry. I'll talk to you later and see when we can reschedule."

"No problem. You're forgiven. I'll chat with you later. Bye."

He had eavesdropped.

"My wife has stood me up, I think," he said. "It's not supposed to be like this. It's not fair. But you're right. There's really nothing you can do about it. So I might as well enjoy the day and forgive her. Thanks for the lesson."

"You're welcome."

He looked at me in earnest. "It's an audacious ask, but maybe we could meet here again next week—that is, if you're not too busy?"

"I'd love to! Same time and place?"

He nodded. We parted ways.

The next week I got stood up. **B**





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