

BANNER

MARCH 2025

THE BANNER.ORG



Overcoming
False
Witness

A Bible for Those Who Can't Read



The Solar Talking Bible

- Easy to use
- Powerful speaker
- Solar powered



talkingbibles.org

Give the Gift of God's Word

"I can learn the Word of God from the Talking Bible," says Bharathamma, a woman in India who longed to know scripture but couldn't read. Now, with a Talking Bible, she listens daily with her family. Together, they've experienced life-changing transformation, returning to church and growing in faith.

Millions of non-readers in India, like Bharathamma, are eager to hear God's Word. For just \$50, you can help provide a Talking Bible to someone in need. Your gift will bring hope, faith, and renewal to families and communities.

Did you know that you can **pay less in taxes while sharing God's Word** with many who still need to hear about the Savior? Through our partnership with Barnabas Foundation you can **build a lasting legacy while giving hope.**



We can help you: Lower your taxes • Include Talking Bibles in your will
• Donate stock, real estate, crops, etc.

To find out more or to request a free brochure, **call Talking Bibles at: 760-745-8105 or email us at: info@talkingbibles.org**

Talking Bibles International • www.talkingbibles.org

419 East Grand Avenue, Escondido, CA 92025 • Telephone: 855-55-BIBLE (855-552-4253) or 760-745-8105 • Paul D. Hoekstra, President





WE EXIST TO SERVE THE CHURCH

Which is why we launched The Forum
Articles, podcasts, videos, and events all grounded in nearly
150 years of Reformed faith and theological scholarship at
Calvin Theological Seminary.

Follow the link below to discover what The Forum has for you:

 **THE FORUM**

go.calvinseminary.edu/theforum



BANNER

BY THE NUMBERS

What can we learn from the 201 Christian Reformed churches that reported growth through evangelism in 2023? Resonate Global Mission interviewed the churches with the most evangelistic growth and found several recurring words.

Talking Growth

Relationships

A form of “relation” appeared 74 times in the data.

Young

62 times

Pray or Prayer

49 times

Alpha

(the evangelistic Christian introduction course) 31 times

Long

(i.e., evangelism is a long process) 30 times

Children

27 times

From “Church Growth Through Evangelism,” by Amy Schenkel, Summer 2024, bit.ly/EvangelismGrowth2024.



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: Pew Report on Religious Persecution
- » Music Review: *Look Up*, by Ringo Starr
- » Streaming Review: *Inside the Mind of a Dog*
- » Book Review: *Healing What's Within*, by Chuck DeGroat

FEATURES



10

Celebrating the Nicene Creed

Tim Howerzyl // It's the creed's 1,700th anniversary.



32

Overcoming False Witness With True Witness

Joel Kok // The way is truth.



36

Faith Matters: The Danger of Political Idolatry

Brandon Haan // We've started to worship politics.

Cover: One way we can follow our Lord is by overcoming evil with goodness.

NEWS

- 14 CRC Ministry Support Center Opens**
- 16 Not Guilty Verdict for Former Pastor Charged with 1975 Murder**
- 18 Council of Delegates Updates Nomination Process, Appoints Task Force to Tackle Governance Costs**

COLUMNS

- 7 Editorial: Empathy**
Shiao Chong // We need it to love our neighbors as ourselves.
- 8 Reply All**
- 9 Vantage Point: Sermon Discussion: A Better Way**
Al Mulder // One way to get the most out of a sermon.
- 12 Big Questions**
Why does God sometimes seem so far away?
- 23 Discover: Waves**
Albert Kok // Waves are neat because they are all over creation.
- 35 The Other Six: Friendship Lessons & Tic-Tac-Toe**
Laurel Dykema // Here's how I approach making new friends at church.
- 38 Mixed Media: A Man on the Inside Reflects the Worth of God's Aging Image Bearers**
Lorilee Craker // Ted Danson's new comedy portrays the ups and downs of aging.
- 40 In My Shoes: 50 is Fabulous**
Felix Fernandez // I'm not old yet—right?
- 41 Word Play**
- 47 Still: Receiving the Blessing**
Rod Hugen // It's the richest of moments.

OUR SHARED MINISTRY

Editor Kristen deRoo VanderBerg,
Director of CRCNA Communications and Marketing



The World Belongs to God

Cassie Marcionetti // Why Reformed theology is making a difference in Kenyan classrooms.

28 The View From Here: Support and Accountability

Al Postma // Wounds from a friend can be trusted.

BANNER

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

- Editor** Shiao Chong
- Associate Editor** Sarah Heth Sundt
- News Editor** Alissa Vernon
- Mixed Media Editor** Lorilee Craker
- Art Director** Dean R. Heetderks
- Designer** Pete Euwema

Contact Us 300 E Beltline Ave NE, Grand Rapids MI 49506-1208 info@TheBanner.org
Address Changes and Subscriptions 800-777-7270 or visit TheBanner.org
Classified Advertising 616-224-0725 classifieds@TheBanner.org
Display Advertising 616-224-5882 ads@TheBanner.org
Editorial 616-224-0824 editorial@TheBanner.org
News news@TheBanner.org

To Advertise: Place your classified ads, including obituaries, online at thebanner.org/classifieds, or email ads@TheBanner.org, or fax it 616-224-0725. Published monthly (except August). Periodicals postage paid at Grand Rapids, Mich. Postmaster, send address changes to: *The Banner*, 300 E Beltline Ave NE, Grand Rapids MI 49506-1208. Canadian publications mail agreement #40063614. Return undeliverable Canadian addresses to: *The Banner*, 3475 Mainway, PO Box 5070, STN LCD 1, Burlington, ON, L7R 3Y8. Copyright 2022, Christian Reformed Church in North America. Printed in U.S.A. *The Banner* (ISSN0005-5557). Vol. 160, No. 2, 2025.

Member of the Associated Church Press and Evangelical Press Association.



Christian Reformed Church

Loan Fund

Lending as a Ministry

Low Interest Loans Available to Churches and Affiliated Organizations For:

- New Construction
- Renovation
- Purchase
- Refinance

Learn more at loanfund.crcna.org/loans and read about successful projects at loanfund.crcna.org/successful-projects

Christian Reformed Church Loan Fund, Inc.
300 E Beltline Ave NE
Grand Rapids, MI 49506

- www.crcna.org/loanfund
- 616-224-0829
- loanfund@crcna.org

Empathy

Empathy is the ability to understand and share another's emotions, thoughts, and experiences.



Shiao Chong is editor-in-chief of *The Banner*. He attends Fellowship Christian Reformed Church in Toronto, Ont.

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

이 기사의 한글번역은 TheBanner.org/korean 에서 보실 수 있습니다.

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

“JESUS WEPT” (John 11:35). But why? He knew he was going to raise Lazarus from the dead moments later. He knew Lazarus would come back to his beloved family and friends. So why would Jesus be so troubled that he openly wept? Because he saw everyone else weeping (John 11:33). He had so much empathy with everyone there that he wept too.

Empathy is the ability to understand and share another's emotions, thoughts, and experiences. It differs from sympathy, which is feeling pity or concern for someone's suffering. Sympathy psychologically distances us from the hurting person. Empathy, however, fosters connection with the one hurting. We share in the pain; we “mourn with those who mourn” (Rom. 12:15). Psychologists suggest that empathy is crucial in helping people who are struggling. Can we truly love our neighbors as ourselves if we do not have some level of empathy?

In debates about recent actions on undocumented immigrants and refugees in the U.S., some people seem to lack empathy for their plight. Most undocumented immigrants are not violent criminals; their reasons for being undocumented are varied, complex, and often desperate. And refugees are normally vetted before entry.

I am thankful that the Christian Reformed Church's Office of General Secretary issued a prayer and call to action on immigration that recalled previous synodical statements. Our denomination's official position calls us to give “mindful attention to the plight of both documented and undocumented workers and people without status, reaching out in love to those who seek help for themselves and for their children in terms of financial assistance, food, clothing, and shelter.” It also calls for “advocacy for comprehensive immigration reform that seeks the well-being and flourishing


of people without legal status and provides increased opportunities for immigrants to gain legal status” and “advocacy for just and dignified treatment of persons arrested and incarcerated because of their lack of status, and for humane treatment of such persons facing long-term imprisonment.”

I am thankful for many Christian organizations calling for compassion.

I am an immigrant to Canada, and, along with most Canadians, I was deeply disturbed by President Donald Trump's rhetoric of annexation and threats of exorbitant tariffs. This was headline news in Canada for weeks. Canadians took this seriously as an economic attack. Canada felt to its long-time friend and ally had become an aggressor and could no longer be trusted.

For the sake of our tenuous binationality, this is a time for American CRC members to empathize with Canadian members. Thankfully, many Americans do show support and understanding for Canadians. But this is not the time to make jokes about Canada becoming the 51st U.S. state, as one pastor did in the Pastors of the Christian Reformed Church group on Facebook. Such insensitivity can further emotionally distance Canadians in the CRC.

In return, Canadians should show empathy for Americans' fear and anguish over the fentanyl crisis. Regardless of how much or little fentanyl has moved across the Canadian/U.S. border, Canadians can empathize with the pain of many Americans who have lost loved ones to the drug crisis. And we should never equate the actions of a country's political leaders, whether in the U.S. or Canada, with its regular citizens.

Let us continue to follow Jesus' example and have empathy for those who are hurting. 



REPLY ALL

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

Beavers

Many websites say beavers use their tails to pack down mud, as does this article ("Aquatic Engineers," December 2024). Quite a few say this is a misconception. I have never seen a beaver do this, and I've seen quite a few at work. I see them using their front paws to do the packing.

» Curt Gesch // Quick, B.C.

Joy

I stumbled on Daniel Denk's May 2023 article on joy ("Jesus Came to Bring Joy") and so appreciated your publishing it. It's been a rougher year of pastoring than some, and it helped to clear the fog and get me ready for this season. It was personally encouraging as well.

» Pete Baker // Bakersfield, Calif.

Being Right

I feel moved to comment on Brandon Haan's welcome article, "When Being Right Is Wrong" (December 2024). Given the ongoing conversations on the hot topics of the day, I am afraid that all too many of us may read Haan and nod our heads in approval. "Yes," we might think to ourselves, "he certainly is right about those other guys. Glad that my side is so much better than that." The almost outright vitriol I see in so many articles around homosexuality is expressed on both sides, and I pray that all might be able to live with more orthopraxy. Yes, orthodoxy matters. It matters a whole lot, but not at the expense of failing to live out our faith in love, even to those with whom we disagree.

» Helen Laack // Rochester, Minn.

Synod 2024

The article "Pastors, Churches Leave CRCNA Following Synod's Ruling on Traditional Sexual Ethic" (November 2024) makes me very sad. So many Christian Reformed Church members are hurting right now, and I will pray for the denomination as you deal with the grief. ... Doesn't the denomination believe that the Holy Spirit speaks through the collective voice of synod? Then how do some claim that it is a "Spirit-led discernment" telling them to contradict synod? God is the same yesterday, today, and forever, right? So how can the Spirit tell synod one thing and then tell individual churches something different? That does not make sense to me.

» James Doyle // Miami, Fla.

What an irony in the Christian Reformed Church! Synod makes a decision about who is welcome and who is not welcome in the CRC ("Synod 2022 Upholds Traditional Stance on Same-sex Relationships," July/August 2022; "Synod 2024 Declared Disciplinary Measures for Those 'In Protest,'" July/August 2024). And then we see "All Are Welcome," #269 in the *Lift Up Your Hearts* hymnal. To quote in part the first line: "Let us build a house where love can dwell and all can safely live." And the last line, in part: "Let us build a house where all are named, their songs and visions heard and loved and treasured." When will we learn to stop confining God's grace in a box? When will we learn that God's love, grace, mercy, and redemption extend far beyond the narrowness of our minds, ... that God opens up his arms to all people? When will we learn to actually mean the words of the hymns we sing? Are all welcome? Do not sing it if you do not mean it.

» Gordon Terpstra // Bellingham, Wash.

Sermon Discussion: A Better Way

ALL OF US HAVE DISCUSSED sermons—at Grandma’s house, in church meetings, or in conversation with family or friends. Our discussions might be positive or negative. A few years ago, when I started attending Brookside Christian Reformed Church in Grand Rapids, Mich., with my new bride, I joined a sermon discussion group that I experienced as a better way.

Longtime Brookside member Glen Van Andel facilitates the group. When asked how the group came about, he explained: “Oftentimes when we leave the worship service, we don’t talk to many people about it, and if we do, it frequently becomes a critique of the sermon or the pastor. Several of us wanted to focus on what the Spirit was saying to us and how to apply that to our lives, so we formed an adult education class that meets the hour following the service.”

The group usually has between 12 and 20 participants and follows this simple format:


1. Pleasant chit-chat as the group gathers, then an opening prayer.
2. Group discussion guided by these three questions:
 - » What did you hear the Spirit say to you in today’s message or worship service?
 - » In light of today’s discussion, so what?
 - » Looking to the week ahead, now what?
3. Sharing of joys and concerns and intercessory prayer.

Soon after the meeting, the facilitator provides a written summary.

The three questions are foundational. Rather than asking participants what they thought of the sermon, they are asked what they sensed the Spirit was

saying to them personally. An exciting richness unfolds as participants tell stories and share insights of hearing God in differing circumstances and in such need-meeting and inspiring ways. The “so what” and “now what” questions are equally important. They help people move beyond talk to committing to real change in one’s daily walk with Jesus.

Good facilitation is crucial, and Brookside has been favored with a competent and committed facilitator. Good facilitation also can happen with multiple facilitators—provided they are mature Christians who have the respect of the pastor and the group and genuinely facilitate by helping the group share with and learn from one another. Good facilitation requires focus, regularly reminding the group of its purpose and process. It requires flexibility, at times allowing for discussion of tangential or unexpected issues. And always it requires gentleness.

Finally, a timely written follow-up sent via email is valuable as well. Van Andel thinks of it as a reflection on or overview of participants’ insights along with their joys and concerns. This summary provides a record for the participants and blesses the pastor with appreciative feedback. 



Alfred Mulder is an emeritus Christian Reformed minister who served three congregations and denominational missions. He lives in Grand Rapids, Mich., with his wife, Joanna Meyer, and is a father, grandfather, and great-grandfather.

As I Was Saying

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

- » Lamenting the Decline in Literacy? The Church Can Help
- » Don’t Send Your Kids to Mars
- » How Do Pastors Lead Amid Cultural Division?
- » What Comes After Christmas



Celebrating the Nicene Creed

By Tim Howerzyl

Of all the special anniversaries and observances you are planning to commemorate this year, I'm guessing that not many of us have this one marked on our calendars: "Celebrate 1,700th anniversary of the Nicene Creed." But I invite you to spend a few moments doing just that.

An Ancient and Unifying Standard

It was all the way back in A.D. 325 that the Nicene Creed got its start at a council of church leaders in Nicaea, a city that was part of what we now know as Turkey.

Seventeen hundred years is a long time—seventy generations. And for all that time, century upon century, the Nicene Creed has been believed and memorized and confessed by Christians as a standard of their faith.

The Nicene Creed also has been and continues to be a key symbol of the unity of the church of Jesus Christ. While there might be some important things that divide us, the Nicene Creed bears witness to the shared

faith of Christians around the world. It is claimed as a doctrinal standard by Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and most Protestant churches, thus representing the vast majority of Christians. It is spoken regularly in worship in many of those churches, making these words among the most recited throughout history and in the world today.

Reciting creeds in worship is not as common in Christian Reformed congregations today as it has been in the past, but the Nicene Creed is one of the three creeds (including also the Apostles' Creed and the Athanasian Creed) that, when combined with our three confessions (the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Canons of Dort), summarize our beliefs as a church. While we understand the Bible to be the only infallible and authoritative text for our faith, these creeds and confessions guide and form our understanding of what the Scripture teaches.

What Is a Creed?

The word "creed" is just a shortened form of the Latin word *credo*, which

means "I believe." So a creed is a statement of belief. It summarizes in a brief, memorable form the basic teachings of the faith.

If you are familiar with the Apostles' Creed, you recognize much of the Nicene Creed. That's because the Nicene Creed is an expansion of that earlier creed, which in turn had its origin in the baptismal confession of new believers. Before they were baptized, they would be asked if they believed in God, in Jesus Christ, God's Son, and in the Holy Spirit. Each time, they would respond, "I believe." And then they would be baptized in the name of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This trinitarian confession was later formulated into the Apostles' Creed.

But even as they believed, confessed, and were baptized into this triune name, those early believers wrestled with an important question: What is the relationship between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit? Are they all God? And if so, are they three gods? This is the question the Nicene Creed was written to address.

One God

If there was one thing God's people in the Old Testament learned in the long history of God's gracious dealings with them, it was that there is one God, and that God alone is to be worshiped and served. This central belief is recalled morning and evening as a mini-creed to this day by Jews reciting the Shema: "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength" (Deut. 6:4).

The church of Jesus grew out of the soil of the Old Testament, and Jesus and the rest of the New Testament affirmed this Old Testament teaching as authoritative for himself and his followers. Jesus claimed the one God, the God of Abraham, as his own Father—and our Father as well—and prayed that we would be in him as he is in the Father (John 17:20-23).

Who Is Jesus?

But Jesus, the faithful and obedient son of Israel, is revealed in the New Testament to be much more than an ordinary human. He was the very Son of God, sent down from the Father.

He said things like, "Before Abraham was born, I am!"—claiming both his own pre-existence and the divine name in one astonishing assertion (John 8:58).

Jesus also revealed, particularly in the gospel of John, the close relationship he has with the Father, saying things such as "I and the Father are one" and "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father" and "I am in the Father and the Father is in me" (John 10:30; 14:9, 11).

In response to these revelations, the first disciples called Jesus "Lord," a title that was also the one used for God in the Greek translation of the Old Testament. And in at least seven places

**The Nicene Creed
has been and
continues to be a
key symbol of the
unity of the
church of
Jesus Christ.**

in the New Testament, Jesus is directly called "God" (John 1:1; 20:28; Rom. 9:5; Titus 2:13; Heb. 1:8; and 2 Pet. 1:1).

Jesus' followers also worshiped him, something Jewish believers reserved for God alone (see Matt. 2:11; 14:33; 28:9; Luke 24:52; John 9:38). In the vision of the heavenly throne room in Revelation 4-5, both God the Father and Jesus the Lamb are worshiped together by the whole creation.

One and Three


But how do these two truths fit together—that there is only one God, but also that both Jesus and the Father are divine? One answer given by a pastor named Arius early in the fourth century ignited the controversy that led to the Nicene Creed. He argued that since there is only one God, Jesus is not God, but rather a creature of God. He thought Jesus was a sort of super-angel: glorious like God, but not eternal with God nor fully divine. This teaching disturbed the church, and in A.D. 325 Constantine, the first Christian emperor, called the Council of Nicaea to address this question. A bishop named Athanasius (our third creed is named after him) championed what became the position of the council, arguing that Jesus was God from eternity and had the same nature as the Father. As the Nicene Creed says, Jesus is "God from God, light from

light, true God from true God, begotten, not made; of the same essence as the Father."

It would take another 60 years of theological wrangling after the Council of Nicaea for the church to come to a consensus that this understanding truly reflects the Bible's teaching. Politics complicated things (as they are known to do) as various emperors supported either the teachings of the Arians or of the Nicenes in turn.

And what about the Holy Spirit? After much debate, a second council at Constantinople established the church's teaching about the Spirit and added them to the creed in 381. The council judged that the Holy Spirit is also a distinct person of the Trinity: eternal, fully divine, and properly called "Lord" and "Giver of Life," who "'with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified."

For 1,700 years the Nicene Creed has defined our trinitarian faith—that God is one, but eternally exists in three persons as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. There is mystery here, but for Christians it is not simply a mystery of ignorance, but a mystery of glory and of adoration. The creed reminds us that it is this one God who, as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, has created us, redeemed us, and is sanctifying us to live with and worship God forever in the splendor of God's triune majesty.

Happy anniversary, Nicene Creed! 



Tim Howerzyl is a member of Bauer Christian Reformed Church in Hudsonville, Mich., and teaches theology and ministry at Kuyper College.

BIG QUESTIONS

Vocation

I have multiple jobs. I don't think I can afford to drop any of them, but I feel like I'm being pulled in different directions.

What can I do?

Having several jobs is becoming the new "normal" for many people, but this doesn't make it any easier. It can feel as if you're always working and still not doing enough. People around you might not understand what you're going through, especially if they only notice what you're not doing.

It can be hard to find the extra energy needed to pause and imagine if and how things can be different. Yet if you don't, you'll continue to run from one thing to another without reflecting on whether and how you're truly using the gifts that God has given you. You also risk neglecting or even alienating the people God has called you to care for. You will likely need help from others to evaluate how all you're doing fits with your vocation. You'll need help and creativity to rearrange your schedule so you have time to rest and connect with others. Such sabbath times might need to switch week to week depending on your schedule, but if you don't plan for them, you're likely to default to working until you're exhausted. Making others aware of the challenges you're facing will help you keep those times of rest and allow them to understand that you're not as available as you'd like to be.

As part of imagining how things might be different, it would be wise to pray and talk with others about possible ways you could save money and be able to work less. You might explore different housing or transportation options, or reach out to others about



Illustration for *The Banner* by Gisela Bohórquez

preparing meals together. You might want to ask for help with applying for a different position or asking for a raise.

This hard season is an opportunity to grow in wisdom about how to follow God with your whole life and not just your job. Even if you get a full-time job that pays all the bills, you will still be pulled in many directions. Family, friends, church, and community are all part of your vocation. Your efforts now to pause and ask how God is calling you to use your gifts and to learn healthy ways to prevent work from taking over your life will continue to help you in the future.

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

Science/Environmental

The Bible says God designed life, so why do some Christians think life evolved?

We all praise God for designing and creating the amazing plants and animals we see around us. But Christians disagree on *how* God created. Did God create through a miracle 6,000 years ago or through the gradual processes of evolutionary biology? Even when God uses a slow process, we can praise God for it. Think of crops yielding a good harvest: we understand agriculture scientifically, *and* we praise God for the harvest.

Some people equate biological evolution with atheism, but we shouldn't.

God designed DNA, including all the ways it can duplicate and change. Evolutionary mechanisms let species adapt to new or changing environments. Most Christian geologists and biologists agree that the evidence (fossils, genetics, etc.) points to millions of years of evolution, and these mechanisms have increased the diversity of life. This doesn't shake their belief in God's design; instead, they praise God for making such an amazing system.

Does the randomness in evolution point away from God? No. Even if something is unpredictable from a human standpoint, it can still have purpose. A referee starts a football game with a coin toss because a random process is the fairest way to start the game. Video game designers add random elements because they want players to have variety. Christians can think of God designing an evolutionary process that includes randomness to create flowers with an abundant variety of colors, shapes, sizes, and scents.

Christians disagree about evolution and how to interpret Genesis 1. But we can all push back when someone assumes that biological evolution supports atheism. God created the world, and God gave us the gifts to study it scientifically. If we start with that assurance, we can study God's creation with joy. What we learn will deepen our gratitude to God.

For six short videos from the Haarsmas on creation, evolution, and design, see origins.faithaliveresources.org.

For the Christian Reformed Church's statement on evolution, see crcna.org/welcome/beliefs/position-statements/creation-and-science.

Deborah and Loren Haarsma are scientists who together wrote the book *Origins: Christian Perspectives on Creation, Evolution, and Intelligent Design* (Faith Alive, 2011). Deborah is an astronomer and the former president of BioLogos (biologos.org). Loren is a professor of physics and astronomy at Calvin University and the author of *When Did Sin Begin? Human Evolution and the Doctrine of Original Sin* (Baker, 2021).

Bible, Church

If God has promised to always be with us (Matt. 28:20), why does God sometimes seem so far away?

It is important, as you note, for God's promises to be the grounding of our faith. This means our faith does not rest in our capacity to predict what God is doing or our ability to perceive God's presence. If Jesus has promised to be with us to the end of the age, we can be sure of his word. For even if every other person were found to be a liar, he would still be found true (Rom. 3:4).

There are times when we, like Jonah, are the ones who are hiding, who are running away from God. But there are also times when God's people trust and obey yet still feel empty and forgotten. Many saints have testified to feeling God's absence. On the cross, Jesus himself takes up one such prayer: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Ps. 22:1; Matt. 27:46; Mark 15:34). The experience of feeling forsaken is one that Jesus shared with us, and this means that when we feel forsaken, he remains with us in the midst of it. He is with us by his Spirit, the one who prays for

us when we cannot find the words (Rom. 8:26).

Indeed, because we are united with Christ, he takes what is ours and gives us what is his. He joins us in the dark so that we might join him in the light. Just as the cross is not the end of the story, so too our experience of emptiness is not the end of the story.

In the meantime, Jesus shows us how to commit ourselves into the Father's hands (Luke 23:46; 1 Pet. 4:19). As C.S. Lewis once put it, the kingdom of darkness is never more threatened than when a person fails to see any light around them, yet still obeys.

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

Digital Life

Do you have any tips for staying connected with family through a health crisis?

There's nothing like a crisis to expose the weaknesses in any system—and that includes family communication systems.

With all the technological options available to us, you'd think we would have this down pat, yet often it's not so easy. Families are made up of different people, each with their own preferences and varying degrees of comfort with one technology or another.

When my widowed mother had valve replacement surgery, most of her children and grandchildren were local, but others were out of state—and all wanted regular updates.

Our early attempts didn't go so well: not enough information for some, and too much for others. Some liked funny side comments and emojis; others couldn't stand the extra noise. It wasn't

going so well. For mom's peace of mind and healthy recovery, we needed to get our act together and at least appear unified.

When I asked our friend Jaci, a nurse, for advice, she recalled her own family's experience with a parent who had cancer: "The two of us with the most health care experience were the 'point persons' for contact with the health care system. We attended the appointments, listened to rounds at the hospital, and made the phone calls to the appropriate health care members. We then sent a group text or email after a contact to the group." A sister who lived close to the parents and made regular visits fleshed out the picture with her own day-to-day observations via group text. "We used these two communication streams and official-yet-unofficial roles to keep each other updated and make sure our parents' needs were met."

I'd suggest an early conversation with family members to find out their preferred method of communication. Settle on one, and then use it consistently. Decide early on who will take the communication lead, who will be included in the first level of communication, and who will get downstream updates.

Providing care takes enough time and energy. Do what you can to ease the hassle of communicating with each other.

Dean Heetderks is co-director of Ministry Support Services of the CRC and art director of *The Banner*. Have you experienced a family communication success or failure lately? Tell him about it at dean.heetderks@gmail.com.



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

CRC Ministry Support Center Opens, Hosts Church Planter Meeting

NEWS

For more news and longer stories about the churches and ministries of the Christian Reformed Church, visit TheBanner.org. Or get the free app by searching for “CRCNA Banner” in your app store.

Follow *The Banner* on social media:

» [Facebook.com/crcbanner](https://www.facebook.com/crcbanner)
» On X: [@crcbanner](https://twitter.com/crcbanner)

Got a news tip?

Know of a noteworthy event or accomplishment in the life of a CRC member? Have details about an interesting ministry in a CRC congregation? Send your news tip to news@TheBanner.org.

Staff from several Christian Reformed ministries and denominational support offices moved into the new Ministry Support Center at 300 East Beltline SE in Grand Rapids, Mich., between Jan. 2 and 6, and church planters from Resonate Global Mission’s Great Lakes Region met at the new location Jan. 8.

Resonate, ReFrame Ministries, and Thrive all have staff in the building, as do the Office of General Secretary, the U.S. Loan Fund, and the U.S. ministry offices, which include centralized agency support services such as information technology and human resources.

The CRC purchased the building from Cornerstone University in May 2024. The previous denominational headquarters—a 70-year-old building at 1700 28th St. SE—were listed for sale in September 2023. Because of changes in ministry and more regional and remote staff, the 130,000 square feet of office and warehouse space was much more than was needed to suit the denomination’s needs. Renovations were completed in the new building in late 2024.

The vision for a new ministry support center, sketched out by a team tasked

with the revamp, called for a design that “wouldn’t be showy or extravagant,” in keeping with the character of the denomination. “The bones of the new building were good, but the renovation required classrooms to be replaced with private offices and open workspaces,” said Dean Heetderks, co-director of Ministry Support Services for the CRCNA. Heetderks served on the team involved with the sale of the old building and the purchase and renovation of the new. “Overall, the goal of the new workspace was to allow for more cross-ministry interaction and collaboration in a lighter, brighter, more modern environment.”

The church planters’ gathering Jan. 8 was part of the group’s five-times-a-year meeting schedule. Ruth Hiemstra, senior administrative assistant for Resonate’s Great Lakes region, said about 20 people attended, including church planters, a few spouses, and some members of the Great Lakes ministry team. For the past few years these meetings have been at Monroe Community Church in Grand Rapids.

Shirley De Vries, chief administrative officer for the CRCNA, was excited to see this group host a meeting so soon after move-in week. “I couldn’t resist taking a picture,” she said. “This has been a significant project, and seeing it used by these church planters feels like a milestone worth noting,” though the site generally will not host many meetings.

“We intentionally do not have large conference rooms because they don’t get used frequently,” De Vries said. Instead, the staff lunch room has a closing door and can be used for meeting space, as can a reception area at the entrance.

De Vries said ministries needing larger meeting spaces have been using rooms at Calvin Theological Seminary and Calvin University, a three-minute drive from the 300 East Beltline location.

—Alissa Vernon,
News Editor



Photo by Shirley De Vries, CRCNA

Video Series Asks Viewers to Think Differently About Missions

Photo by Missions Upside Down



Shooting an interview with pastor David Jena in the Eastern Ghat Mountains, India, for the second episode of the video series *Missions Upside Down*.

A video series recently released by Dordt University highlights changes in the global composition of Christians and how to think differently about funding and doing missions today.

Co-produced by Aaron Baart and Mark Volkers and hosted by Baart, *Missions Upside Down* revisits stories of missionaries of the past and looks at the current trend of historically gospel-receiving countries becoming places that send missionaries.

The filmmakers, both former missionaries, are colleagues at Dordt University in Sioux Center, Iowa, where Baart is chief of staff and dean of chapel and Volkers is an instructor of digital media production. This project was a gift to Dordt, Baart said, funded by a grant from John and Betty Addink.

One goal described in the project's FAQ is "that people give serious thought to how money in missions is used and what place there should be for supporting indigenous leaders and not merely sending [W]estern missionaries to foreign shores."

The series introduces indigenous leaders in India, Liberia, and Mexico and visits a Christian Reformed congregation in Vancouver, B.C., where many cultures are woven together in Tapestry, a three-campus church plant where Albert Chu serves as pastor. Planted as a mission of Christian Reformed Home Missions (now part of Resonate Global Mission), Tapestry's story is told in the fifth episode of the six-part series.

—Alissa Vernon

Noteworthy



Photo by Trinity Christian College

The women's soccer team of Trinity Christian College in Palos Heights, Ill., won the National Christian College Athletic Association Division I national championship Dec. 6, their third NCCAA championship.

Jamie McIntosh, appointed as World Renew's executive director-Canada in 2023, served his last day with the agency Jan. 24. The Canadian board announced that same day that **chief marketing and philanthropy officer Mike White will serve as acting**



Jamie McIntosh



Mike White

Canadian executive director. In a letter to ministry partners, Jeff Adams, president of the Canadian board commended McIntosh's dedication and passion for global mission. "He will always be a part of World Renew's story, and we pray for God's blessing on him," Adams wrote. White will serve as the organization's co-director with U.S. executive director Carol Bremer-Bennett while the board conducts a recruitment process.



Peter Mahaffy, professor of chemistry at The King's University in Edmonton, Alta., is the 2025 recipient of the American Chemical Society's George C. Pimentel Award in Chemical Education. The award will be presented this month at the society's annual meeting in San Diego.



Convening outside North America for the first time March 13-15 in Jakarta, Indonesia, the **annual Kuyper Conference will honor evangelist Stephen Tong with the 2025 Kuyper Prize.** Named for theologian Abraham Kuyper, the prize was established in 1998 and is awarded to recipients demonstrating excellence in Reformed theology in public life. Tong founded Stephen Tong Evangelistic Ministries International and is a minister in Jakarta who has preached across Asia, Europe, Africa, Australia, and the Americas. His work mirrors Kuyper's legacy, including contributions to the church and the arts.

Not Guilty Verdict for Former Pastor Charged with 1975 Murder

David Zandstra, a retired minister in the Christian Reformed Church who was ordained in 1965, was acquitted in a jury trial of all charges he faced stemming from his arrest in July 2023. Prosecutors alleged he confessed in a 2023 interview to murdering Gretchen Harrington, an 8-year-old girl who went missing from Broomall, Penn., in 1975 and whose body was found two months later in Ridley Creek State Park.

At the time of her disappearance, Harrington was expected to be attending vacation Bible school at Trinity Church Chapel CRC (later Trinity CRC), the church where Zandstra served. Zandstra's lawyers, whom *The Banner* was not able to reach for comment, did give statements to other media. "We are happy to have Mr. Zandstra returned to his family," attorney Chris Boggs told *The New York Times*. Thanking the jury for their work, he added, "Our hearts along with all of Delaware County still break for the Harrington family who deserve an end to the nightmare of losing a family member." *The Delaware County Daily Times* also quoted Boggs: "David Zandstra maintained his innocence for 48 years, and as (fellow defense attorney) Mr. (Mark) Much said in his closing, he maintained his innocence for most of his (police) interview, and he maintains his innocence to this day."

Before trial Zandstra was denied bail, which deputy district attorney Geoffrey Paine said is standard for people facing a first-degree murder charge in Pennsylvania. Zandstra's son-in-law, Jeff Berends of Marietta, Ga., said Zandstra, now 84, spent 550 days in jail. He said the family was relieved to have Zandstra released to them Jan. 17, but that he was in "pretty poor condition" as the jail he'd been kept in "was not equipped to care for octogenarians." Berends said the family—three daughters and their husbands and Zandstra's wife, Margy,



Photo by the Zandstra family

David Zandstra on his 83rd birthday, just a few months before his 2023 arrest.

83—traveled to Pennsylvania for the trial, which ran for four days.

While Zandstra was awaiting trial, the council of Fairfield (Calif.) CRC, the last congregation Zandstra had served and which still held his ministerial credentials, suspended his ability to perform official acts of ministry, in accordance with Church Order Articles 82-84. Classis Central California concurred with this decision and documented it in the minutes of its Oct. 3, 2023, meeting, noting the action was being taken "until they (the council) receive more clarity from a court judgment." According to Church Order Art. 84 and supplements, a suspension can be lifted by the same assembly that imposed it, with the concurrence of synodical deputies.

Reached for comment Jan. 20, 2025, the pastor of Fairfield CRC, Nicholas Blystra, confirmed that Zandstra's status as a minister emeritus had been suspended, not removed. "I am unable to comment more as we have just begun to process the news of his verdict," Blystra said.

Trinity CRC, which was still in ministry at the time of Zandstra's arrest in 2023, closed within three months of the news. Notes in the minutes of Classis Hackensack describe what led to the closure: "The church had already been discussing its viability due to diminished active members, and, in view of the (alleged) confession of sex abuse, kidnapping and murder committed 48 years ago by a former pastor of the congregation they see no prospect of continued ministry in the local community."

Asked about this impact, prosecutor Paine said reasons why a church might close could be many, and with the responsibility they have to the community "it's not something that would have any bearing on us prosecuting a case." Paine said his office "respects the jury's decision" in this trial and that they consider the Harrington murder case "a closed investigation."

—Alissa Vernon

Trustees Move Ministers' Pension Plan to Outside Management

CEB Services, a pension and health benefits administrator based in Grandville, Mich., assumed management Jan. 1 of the U.S. and Canadian Ministers Pension Plan of the Christian Reformed Church in North America. The firm was hired by the trustees of the two funds to take over the plans' daily operations.

"Under the management of CEB Services, plan members will continue to experience exceptional care and expertise, provided by the Pension Administration Office Team," a Dec. 19 news release from CEB Services said. CRCNA chief administrative officer Shirley De Vries confirmed that three former denominational staff members, equivalent to 2 1/2 full-time positions, have transferred to CEB. The synod-appointed pension fund trustees still have ultimate responsibility for the plans.

"The proposal came as the result of hearing the concerns that the trustees had about needing someone with defined benefit experience and my concerns about succession planning related to the day-to-day operations," De Vries said. "CEB Services has the staff capacity to cross-train, ensuring smoother transitions in cases of illness, retirements, and general staff turnover."

John Bolt, former chief financial officer for the CRCNA who retired in 2022, is the managing director of CEB Services. The corporation formed in 2024 as a continuation of the work of Christian Education Employee Benefits Team, part of Christian Schools International, which has been administering Canadian and U.S. pension plans since 1943. Bolt joined the Christian Education Employee Benefits Team Jan. 1, 2023. He served for two years as a CRCNA pension trustee, stepping down when the trustees decided to hire CEB Services. As managing director, he will have "an active role as a consultant to the trustees," Bolt said.

De Vries said the change in administration does not affect how plan members communicate with the management team—email addresses and phone numbers are the same. The plans themselves also remain the same. In the Jan. 9 "For Pastors" email distributed by the denomination, news of the change said "the shift should be virtually unnoticeable to plan members."

—Alissa Vernon

Shared Service Was 'Pentecost Moment' for Four California Congregations

Four congregations sharing a building joined for a carol service in three languages Dec. 22 at San Jose (Calif.) Christian Reformed Church. "I would say it is a Pentecost moment," said Mike Mat, an elder at Iglesia Cristiana Comunidad Latinoamericana, noting the service crossed many barriers. "We have all three of those crosses: generational, cultural, and language."

The children's choir from Mat's church sang at the service. River Tree Fellowship, a Korean-American church that worships in English, performed a skit. Gil Suh, pastor of San Jose CRC, gave the sermon, and Yu-Ling Yan from the Mandarin-speaking Friendship Agape Church read Scripture.

Members from all four churches formed a worship band to sing songs in Mandarin, Spanish, and English. "It just reminds me of how I think it's going to be in heaven," said Arlene DeVries, 91, San Jose CRC's second-oldest member. "People of all countries, all nationalities, all coming together to pray and praise."

Friendship Agape Church has a 20-year relationship with San Jose CRC, worshipping in its sanctuary and meeting monthly for shared communion. Iglesia Cristiana Comunidad Latinoamericana, a Spanish-speaking church of young families, began to use San Jose CRC facilities in late 2023, and the English-speaking River Tree Fellowship of young Koreans started meeting there in the fall of 2024.

While all these churches pay rent, the relationship goes deeper than that. "We are truly partners," Suh said. "It is fairly new and fresh, but I think everybody feels (that) this is God doing something here—within each congregation, of course, but together too."

"We're not just tenants when we pay rent," Mat said. "We like to feel like we're stakeholders in God's kingdom."

—Maia VanderMeer



The children's choir from Iglesia Cristiana Comunidad Latinoamericana sang at a multilingual service Dec. 22.

Photo by San Jose CRC

Council of Delegates Updates Nomination Process, Appoints Task Force to Tackle Governance Costs

At its Feb. 5-7 meeting convened by video conference, the Council of Delegates of the Christian Reformed Church received reports on medically assisted suicide and the theological implications of “virtual church,” reviewed the denomination’s financial health and established a cost-cutting task force, discussed the Council’s nomination and statement of belief exceptions policies, and more.

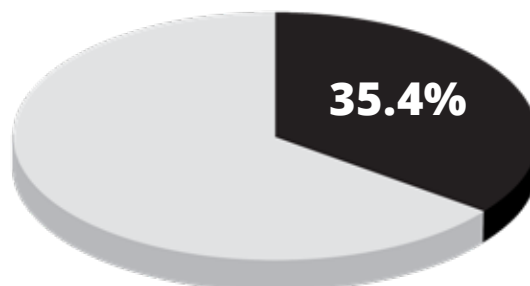
The Council is composed of delegates from each of the 49 regional assemblies of the CRC and a few at-large members. It serves as the interim committee for synod, the broadest assembly of the CRC.

The membership qualifications, which do not require being an officebearer (elder, deacon, or pastor), include being “a member in good standing” of a CRC congregation, not being employed as a CRCNA staff member, and agreeing to the Council’s membership policies signified by signing the COD Statement of Agreement with the Beliefs of the CRCNA.

The February meeting reviewed the process for nominating members and the process for dealing with exceptions to the Statement of Agreement. Synod 2024 asked the Council of Delegates and other CRC institutions “to review and revise, as needed, their gravamina policies—e.g., exceptions—related to the decisions of Synod 2024 and report on their actions to Synod 2025” (*Acts of Synod 2024*, p. 880). Synod 2024 said any expression of confessional difficulty from an officebearer could not be left unresolved, would preclude that person from being delegated to broader assemblies, and “is not meant to be, nor should be, used as an exception to the confessions.”

The Council of Delegates adopted a revised nomination policy stipulating that before a classis selects a delegate, “nominees will be asked to indicate their willingness to sign the COD Statement of Agreement, Code of Conduct, and Conflict of Interest forms in line with the

Approved fiscal 2024-25



Fiscal 2025-26



The Council of Delegates approved the same ministry share distribution method that was set for the current fiscal year (2024-25), covering the cost of governance before distributing remaining funds to ministries. The portion of the pie that might take is not yet clear.

directives of synod that such agreement is without reservation and cannot include settled convictions that do not agree with the creeds and confessions of the CRCNA.”

While it adopted the updated nomination policy, the Council did not come to an agreement on a minimal change to the current exception process, which allows for submissions of exceptions from a member and allows the Council of Delegates’ executive committee to decide whether to accept the submitted exception. The Council voted “to remand the Exceptions Policy back to the Executive Committee for further proposed amendments that would align the policy with the work of Synod 2024.” The amendments, which “should include renaming the policy such that it does not explicitly or implicitly stand at odds with Synod 2024’s determination that leaders in the CRC may not have personal exceptions to or settled convictions against the

doctrines contained in the creeds and confessions of the CRCNA,” should come back to the Council in May.

‘No’ to Easy-to-Read Bible, ‘No’ to Medically Assisted Suicide, ‘Not Impossible’ to Virtual Church

The Council of Delegates received three reports that will be included in the Agenda for Synod 2025: one from the Bible Translation Committee, one from the task force on medically assisted suicide, and one from a team assigned by the Office of General Secretary.

The Bible Translation Committee analyzed the Easy-to-Read Version based on a Council assignment responding to a request from a CRC congregation. In accordance with the extensive criteria the committee has for evaluating translations of Scripture for use in worship, the Bible Translation Committee “does

not recommend the use of the ERV for general worship and is only able to commend it with reservations for discretionary use in public reading of Scripture for new believers or children's worship, devotional reading, or in litanies, prayers, or storytelling."

The 24-page report of a task force assigned by Synod 2023 "to make a definitive and comprehensive report on the practice of assisted suicide in all its forms" includes sections on addressing suffering, medical care in the dying process, disability, and pastoral care. It concludes with nine recommendations including to "remind CRC members, churches, and classes (as per Synod 2000) ... that the appropriate Christian response to suffering, disability, and/or dying people—and their families—is pastoral, including compassionate palliative care instead of acting to cause death."

Synod 2023 had also tasked the Office of General Secretary with creating a report exploring the theological implications of the concept of a "virtual church." The 10-page report submitted to the Council of Delegates explores the potential challenges a virtual church may have in exhibiting the three marks of a true church as outlined in the Belgic Confession, one of the CRCNA's three forms of unity. The report concludes, "It is not impossible for a virtual church to embody the three marks. ... However, it is critical that virtual churches be very intentional in explaining how they will administer sacraments in good order and how they will engage church discipline, given the challenges we have noted."

Ministry Funded After Governance Costs

Noting a reduction in ministry share giving—down about \$1 million from the same time last year—the Council of Delegates approved the same ministry share distribution method that was set for the current fiscal year (2024-25). That method disburses ministry shares first

"to the Office of General Secretary and synod with the remaining going to ministries, based on an established percentage plan." Last year the Council of Delegates approved designating 35.4% of the pooled money for those governance costs. A contingency for if there would be 10% less giving to ministry shares could see that piece of the pie go up to 39.4% because of the fixed costs of those functions.

Chief administrative officer Shirley De Vries said the percentages are still in flux for fiscal year 2025-26. "We hope our appeal to churches to get their pledges in—the deadline was January 31, but less than 50% have reported—will give us better numbers to use in planning," she said. "Because we have so few pledges, we don't have reasonable estimates yet, so we can't determine percentages. ... The Office of General Secretary and the governance functions are looking at ways to contain costs and increase revenues but face several constraints based on synodal directives."

The Council also decided to stop distributing print copies of the acts and agendas of synod to every church, a move that will save approximately \$45,000. The documents will be available digitally on the CRC website, and print copies will still be distributed to those attending synod and to churches who request them. The Council also appointed a task force to consider more ways to "reduce governance costs, fund synod, and use time wisely." An interim report is expected in May.

Other items noted by the Council of Delegates:

- » The resignations of Thea Leunk, Classis Grand Rapids East; Amy Nydam, Alberta North; and Anthony Selvagio, Atlantic Northeast
- » The interim appointments of one delegate and two judicial code appointees who have also been recommended to Synod 2025 for full appointments

- » A report from general secretary Zach King highlighting findings from the fall Diaspora and Ethnic Ministry Review
- » The Dec. 31 retirement of World Renew director of Disaster Response Services Bob Laarman, succeeded by former program team manager Chris Gibson
- » The expected January 2026 retirement of chief administrative officer Shirley De Vries
- » Reports from the director of ecclesiastical governance and the ministry directors of ReFrame Ministries, Resonate Global Mission, and Thrive, noting particularly the additions of Benjamin Van Arragon as pastoral well-being consultant and Rick Zomer as faith formation consultant with Thrive
- » An approved policy change for *The Banner* allowing more access to advertising revenue from external institutions as long as the potential advertiser doesn't conflict with any other guidelines
- » Meetings of the U.S. and Canada ministry boards with reports from U.S. director of ministry operations Dan DeKam and executive director-Canada Al Postma
- » A response from the Canada Ministry Board about the group working toward an independent Canadian CRC saying the board "engages in minimal dialogue with the steering team of Toward CRC Canada in 2025. Our time and efforts are primarily focused on supporting the work of Canadian ministries and agencies in the CRC."

—Alissa Vernon

Report: 1 in 7 Global Christians Faces 'High-level' Persecution

Driven by Islamic extremism, authoritarian regimes, and war, high-level persecution and discrimination affected 380 million Christians around the world in 2024, according to the annual World Watch List report by the evangelical nonprofit Open Doors released Jan. 15.

The list ranks the 50 countries where Christians experienced the most persecution and discrimination. The 2025 report details concerns about escalating violence in sub-Saharan countries, authoritarian regimes targeting Christians, conflicts forcing Christians to flee their homes, and churches forced underground. North Korea topped the list for the 23rd year, followed by Somalia, Yemen, Libya, Sudan, Eritrea, Nigeria, Pakistan, Iran, and Afghanistan.

The report also counted 209,771 Christians displaced because of their faith and 54,780 Christians physically or mentally abused, 10,000 of whom lived in Pakistan. In total, 1 in 7 Christians faced "high-level" persecution.

"While the numbers and rankings only partially tell the story, they do help draw the world's attention to the 380 million believers who are suffering for their faith. This presents an opportunity for us to communicate the rest of the story," said the CEO of Open Doors US, Ryan Brown, in a news release announcing the report's publication.

Since it debuted in 1993, the Open Doors World Watch List has relied on data provided by on-the-ground local researchers and has assigned a persecution score to countries based on the evidence collected. Countries in the "extreme" category scored between 81 and 100 points. Scores between 61 and 80 points are associated with a "very high" level of persecution, and scores between 41 and 60 with a "high" level.

The report defines persecution as "any hostile action towards a person or community motivated by their



Video screenshot, [opendoors.org](https://www.opendoors.org)

identification with the person of Jesus Christ." It takes into consideration insults, abuse, and workplace discrimination. It also distinguishes cases of physical violence, bombings, shootings, and sexual violence—instances it categorizes as "smashes"—from policies and laws forcing Christians into isolation and underground practices—what the report calls "squeezes."

Several countries have pushed more Christians to worship underground, the report found, including Afghanistan, ranked 10th, and China, ranked 15th. World Watch List researchers found that more Christians in China feared online and real-life surveillance than in previous years. The report also mentions cases of churches facing ideological pressures and new laws enrolling pastors into indoctrination sessions.

In Eritrea, which employs phone and internet surveillance on citizens, Christians were arrested en masse in house-to-house raids. Only certain expressions of Christianity are allowed, excluding evangelicals and Christians from a Muslim background.

Algeria, which is ranked 19th, has forced its Protestant churches to close or operate secretly. This caused its score to decrease by 2 points, as it lowered the number of persecuted churches to observe. The report also notes that the

number of Christians awaiting trials and sentencing for faith-related allegations in Algeria is at an all-time high.

The persecution score of Kyrgyzstan increased by 7 points, pushing its rank on the list to 47th, the most dramatic increase of all countries. The government there has taken an authoritarian turn and used laws against public criticism to target Christian minorities, explained the report.

In Kazakhstan, which is ranked 38th and gained 3 points on its persecution score, churches have been attacked by police and security services, and Christian women have been forced to marry Muslim men.

As in past years, the report reiterates that Islamic terrorism remains the main threat to Christian communities worldwide. In sub-Saharan countries, jihadist militants have benefited from unstable governments to seize control of specific areas. All 15 countries of the sub-Saharan region were in the top 50 list, and 13 had "extremely high" persecution scores.

—Religion News Service

This story, published on [religionnews.com](https://www.religionnews.com) Jan. 15, 2025, is republished with permission, having been edited for length and Banner style.

IN MEMORIAM



Rev. Henry Eshuis

1934-2024

Living a life of faith and ministering to others was Henry Eshuis' mission. Toward those he encountered—whether congregation members, neighbors, family, or friends—he was compassionate, loving, thoughtful, and caring. "I held him in high regard," said a pastor colleague at Henry's memorial service, because of his qualities of wisdom and consistent grace. Henry, 90, died Dec. 2, 2024.

Born in the Netherlands, Henry immigrated with his family to Ontario, Canada, in 1953.

A graduate of Calvin College (now University) and Seminary, he was ordained in 1962 and served six congregations in Ontario: Athens Christian Reformed Church; Compass Community Church, Strathroy; First CRC, Barrie; Maranatha CRC, Woodstock; Water Street Church, Guelph; and Bethany CRC, Fenwick. He retired in 1997.

Beyond living a life of service to others, Henry enjoyed landscape painting and working with wood, particularly in contributing to building his own homes or those of others as part of disaster relief. He loved to share a good laugh and liked to travel, something he especially enjoyed with his wife in their later years.

Predeceased in 2022 by Margaret, his wife of 64 years, Henry is survived by four children and their spouses and 10 grandchildren.

—Janet A. Greidanus

IN MEMORIAM



Rev. William (Bill) Dykstra

1939-2024

Kind, thoughtful, loving, reflective, intelligent, and passionate, Bill Dykstra placed a special emphasis on mercy and restorative justice. Bill, 85, died Dec. 12, 2024.

Born in the Netherlands, Bill immigrated at age 12 with his family to Bloomfield, Ont., eventually graduating from Calvin College (now University) and Seminary. After ordination in 1969, Bill served Maple Ridge (B.C.) Christian Reformed Church and then became the first Christian Reformed campus pastor at Queen's University in Kingston, Ont. Eight years later, he went on to pastor two Ontario congregations: First CRC in Chatham-Kent and Bethel Community CRC in Newmarket.

In 1998 Bill became a prison chaplain at Beaver Creek Correctional Institution, a minimum- and medium-security federal prison in Gravenhurst, Ont. He retired in 2003 but continued to volunteer there, staying in touch with many former prisoners after their release.

Bill loved to golf and fish and spent many summers enjoying the beauty and quiet of Bobs Lake, Ont., in his little fishing boat. He built furniture and could fix almost anything, from toys to appliances and vehicles.

Bill is survived by Virginia, his wife of 59 years; three children and their spouses; and eight grandchildren.

—Janet A. Greidanus

IN MEMORIAM



Rev. Thomas Ray Dykstra

1955-2025

As a pastor and chaplain, Tom Dykstra consistently demonstrated faithfulness, dedication, and compassion. Recognized as an encourager, Tom reflected the traits of his favorite Bible character, Barnabas, a disciple of Jesus known for mentoring, support, and encouragement. Tom lived for eight years with Lewy body dementia and died Jan. 3 at age 69.

A graduate of Dordt College (now University) and Calvin Theological Seminary, Tom was ordained in 1981. He served Iowa Falls (Iowa) Christian Reformed Church; West Sayville (N.Y.) CRC; Calvary CRC, Pella, Iowa; Lake Worth (Fla.) CRC (now Sunlight Community Church); and Visalia (Calif.) CRC. He also served as a chaplain for 20 years in the U.S. Navy Reserve, retiring as a lieutenant commander in 2005.

Upon his diagnosis of dementia in 2017, Tom retired after 36 years in ministry. In 2018 he moved with his wife, Julie, to live near family in Clermont, Fla. Despite the challenges of his diagnosis, Tom faced the future with remarkable grace and a firm trust in God.

An avid reader, history buff, and sports fan, Tom enjoyed traveling and made friends wherever he went.

Tom is survived by Julie, his wife of 46 years; four children and their spouses; and 11 grandchildren.

—Janet A. Greidanus

IN MEMORIAM



Rev. Paul O. Sausser

1959-2025

Gentle, patient, humble, and thoughtful, Paul Sausser modeled Christ with his compassionate servant's heart. "If you've seen Paul, you have seen Jesus," eulogized a friend at Paul's memorial service. Paul, 65, died Jan. 8 after five years of living with cancer, a journey he used to point others to Jesus.

A graduate of Calvin College (now University) and Seminary, Paul also earned a doctorate in ministry from Bethel Theological Seminary in St. Paul, Minn. Ordained in 1988, he served Three Rivers (Mich.) Christian Reformed Church; Bethel CRC, Princeton, Minn.; Calvary CRC, Wyoming, Mich.; and Discovery CRC, Grand Rapids, Mich., where he pastored for 20 years. The scriptural theme of Christ as the good shepherd was foundational for Paul in his life and in ministry. He enjoyed being a shepherd to his congregations and communities.

In 2004 Paul was on the founding board of Family Network of Wyoming, Mich., formed to address issues of poverty and hunger. He also served on various committees of Classis Grand Rapids South.

Paul and his wife, Renae, enjoyed reading, cooking new dishes, biking, running, hiking in God's beautiful world, traveling, and discovering new places.

Paul will be lovingly remembered by Renae, his wife of 41 years.

—Janet A. Greidanus

IN MEMORIAM



Rev. Peter P. Kranenburg

1929-2025

Pastor Peter Kranenburg nurtured many interests in a life defined by the power and grace of Jesus Christ. Peter, 95, died Jan. 7 after 15 years of living with dementia.

Born in the Netherlands, Peter immigrated to Canada at 21 and then attended Calvin College (now University) and Seminary. After ordination in 1957, he served three Ontario congregations: Athens Christian Reformed Church; Springdale CRC, Bradford; and Ebenezer CRC, Jarvis. Moving west, he pastored First CRC in Red Deer, Alta., and Ladner (B.C.) CRC before returning to Ontario to pastor Strathroy East CRC; Second CRC, Toronto; and Grace CRC, Chatham. In 1988 he became chaplain at Toronto's Queen Elizabeth Hospital and Holland Christian Homes, Brampton. He retired in 1994.

Peter loved to share about the love and forgiveness of Jesus and continued to do so in retirement by corresponding with prisoners through Crossroads for Prisoners Canada.

Peter had a beautiful singing voice and was a photographer and an accomplished artist. He loved gardening and excelled at growing vegetables and flowers of many types, but he had a special love for orchids.

Peter is survived by Marrie, his wife of 67 years; five children and their spouses; 20 grandchildren; and 28 great-grandchildren.

—Janet A. Greidanus

IN MEMORIAM



Rev. Robert (Bob) D. Ritsema

1944-2024

"He gave his heart to loving Christ's people, to loving the church, and to reaching the lost," said the pastor presiding over Bob Ritsema's celebration of life service. "Bob wanted people to know about the grace and love of Jesus Christ." A powerful and transformational preacher, Bob had an imposing physical presence and a booming voice—someone you would not forget even if you met him only once. He died Oct. 29, 2024, at age 80.

A graduate of Calvin College (now University) and Seminary, Bob was ordained in 1969 and served McBain (Mich.) Christian Reformed Church; Second Church, Allendale, Mich.; Bradenton (Fla.) CRC; First CRC, South Holland, Ill.; South Grandville CRC, Grandville, Mich.; and Northern Heights CRC, Kalamazoo, Mich. He then served for six years at Anchor House Seafarers Center in Port Manatee, Fla., which ministers to port workers and international seafarers. He retired in 2009.

Bob enjoyed playing golf, softball, and basketball and helping family and friends with building or remodeling projects.

Bob is survived by Cheryl, his wife of 59 years; three children and their spouses; nine grandchildren; and two great-grandchildren.

—Janet A. Greidanus

Waves



I AM SURE that when God designed the usefulness of waves, he said “Neat!” or, as we read in the Bible, “It was good!” Waves are neat because they are all over creation.

In creation there are four main types of waves: the waves people experience in water, the sound waves people hear, the seismic waves people feel in the ground when there is an earthquake, and the waves in the electromagnetic spectrum that people see as light. In light, earthquakes, sound, and water, waves are very similar.


Think about how waves are created. They usually start because something moves. In fluorescent lights, electromagnetic waves are created when electrons and protons move quickly. Sound waves are produced when violin strings vibrate. With earthquakes, waves are created when two plates slide against each other. And water waves are produced when wind moves against the water. In each case,

waves are created by the energy of something moving.

All four kinds of waves look similar, too. Though waves can have different sizes, they all have repeating high and low points called crests and troughs. One way a wave is measured is by its wavelength—the distance between two crests. Seismic waves—the ones caused by earthquakes—usually have wavelengths between 40 and 250 km (64 and 155 miles). Water wavelengths can be anywhere from less than a centimeter up to 200 meters or more. Sound waves range from around 17 meters (deep bass sounds, like those whales make) to about 17 millimeters (annoying high-pitched sounds). Finally, electromagnetic waves range from about a millimeter (radio waves) down to 380-700 nanometers (billionths of a meter) for the colors in the light we see and even shorter for things like X-rays. However, no matter the wavelength, they all act the same when crashing against a solid object.

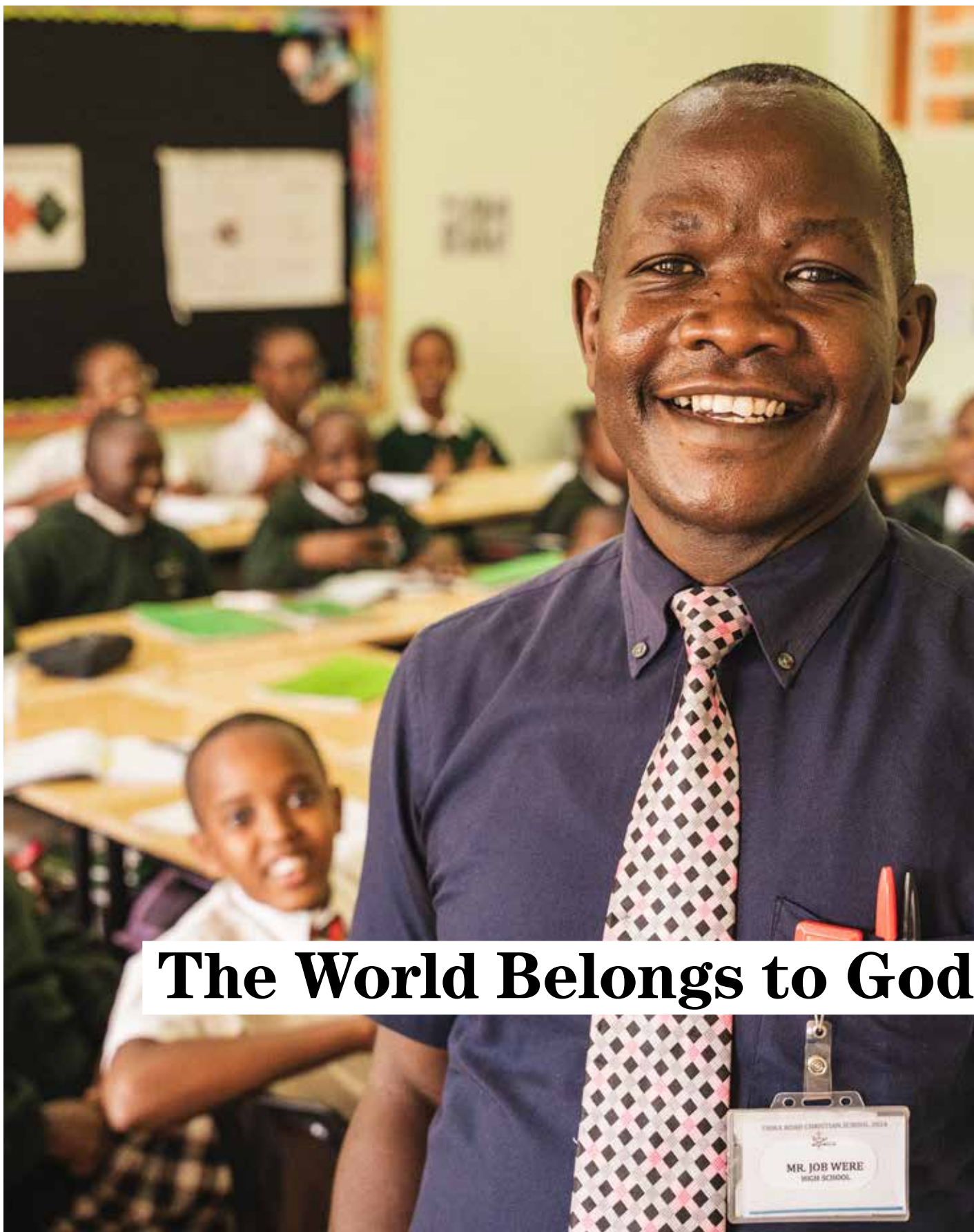
For example, imagine waves crashing against a rocky cliff: they bounce back. Seismic waves can bounce off a hard surface back to the interior of the earth. When sound waves bounce, they create an echo. Light waves bouncing off an object allow us to see that object.

Finally, because waves carry energy, all waves cause things to move. Seismic waves cause buildings to sway, sound waves make our eardrums to vibrate, water waves move sand, and light waves cause molecules to vibrate.

I don’t know when God created waves. He could have created them on the first day, when he created light, the third day when he created land and seas, or on the fifth or sixth day when he created animals that bray, honk, and whistle. However, I imagine God laughing when he first created waves because they are so amazing and useful in all corners of his creation! 



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



The World Belongs to God

Why Reformed Theology Is Making a Difference in Kenyan Classrooms

By Cassie Marcionetti, Resonate Global Mission

The world belongs to God, and the world is everything—including our professions and our callings,” said Mwikali Wambua, a missionary with Resonate Global Mission.

Resonate is the Christian Reformed Church’s mission agency. As Resonate missionaries, church planters, and campus ministers work to spread the gospel throughout the world, ministry leaders such as Wambua are discovering that Reformed theology resonates with people from diverse backgrounds and cultures.

The idea that every square inch belongs to God—that God is at work outside the walls of church buildings and in and through all individuals in all spaces to redeem and renew the world—is encouraging to believers.

And it’s completely transforming how people live out their faith.

Wambua, for instance, sees God at work in classrooms. She works with teachers and school administrators in Kenya and throughout East Africa. Despite the influence teachers have in the lives of students and communities, very few people in Kenya want to be teachers. As in many places throughout the world, school resources vary depending on the school and where it’s located. In much of Africa, teachers often are thrown into classrooms with limited training, are paid little for the hours and energy they put into their work, and are teaching in crowded classrooms with too few resources.

On top of all that, the teaching profession is looked down upon. For many, teaching is not a calling or vocation; it’s a tough job they never really wanted.

“Teaching is a difficult job,” said Wambua. “In my early years of teaching, I struggled to settle down as a teacher. I relate my experience to that of Jonah. Every time I would try to do something else, God blocked it until I said, ‘OK, Lord. I will be a teacher because you called me to do that, and you’ve given me the skills and giftings of a teacher.’ Once I started loving teaching, I saw many doors open.”

Wambua sees how teachers can make a big difference in their students’ lives. The ways in which educators teach and relate to their students can have lasting effects not only on children’s education and future career, but in their walk with Christ and how they live out their faith.

Through Educational Care training, Job Were learned that teachers play an important role in caring for and discipling God’s children.

“When children are taught well, with good planning, they don’t just learn for the sake of learning. They learn for application, and they learn for change,” Wambua said.

In response to some of the challenges educators in Africa face, Resonate missionaries developed Educational Care training. Based on biblical principles, the training equips educators with best teaching practices and a Christian perspective on teaching. It’s helping teachers such as Job Were see their jobs as a calling from God.



Like thousands of other educators who have participated in Educational Care training, Job Were doesn’t see teaching as just a job. He sees it as a calling to join God on mission in the classroom.

Were never thought he would be a teacher. He wanted to be a medical researcher and work for the Kenya Medical Research Institute. But after graduating from university, he had trouble finding a job and thought he would give teaching a try. Unlike many of his colleagues, Were didn’t hate it—he had volunteered at his local school during his summers at university—but it was still just a job. He thought something better might come along someday.

From Were’s first day teaching biology and chemistry to high school students, he said, he was a tough, no-nonsense teacher.

“Having been brought up by an autocratic father, all I knew was obeying orders no matter what,” he said. “I never thought I would give a child an opportunity to argue with me or defend himself or herself.”

But that started to change as Wambua led Were and other teachers through Educational Care training’s first module, which focuses on a biblical view of teaching.




While he initially thought of teaching as just a job, Job Were now thinks of it as a calling.

Because of Were's changed posture, his students haven't been as intimidated by him. He has developed a good rapport with them, and they have told him he is a good teacher.

"God transformed me, and my students started addressing me as a father figure," Were said. "They started approaching me with confidence and courage. We now chat, crack jokes, and have fun."

When Were first started teaching, he would scan job postings hoping for a new opportunity, but not anymore. Today, like thousands of other educators who have participated in Educational Care training, Were doesn't see teaching as just a job. He sees it as a calling to join God on mission in the classroom.

"I no longer think about or imagine being a medical researcher," he said. "I have concluded as a child of God that this was the Lord's leading. I deeply enjoy teaching." 

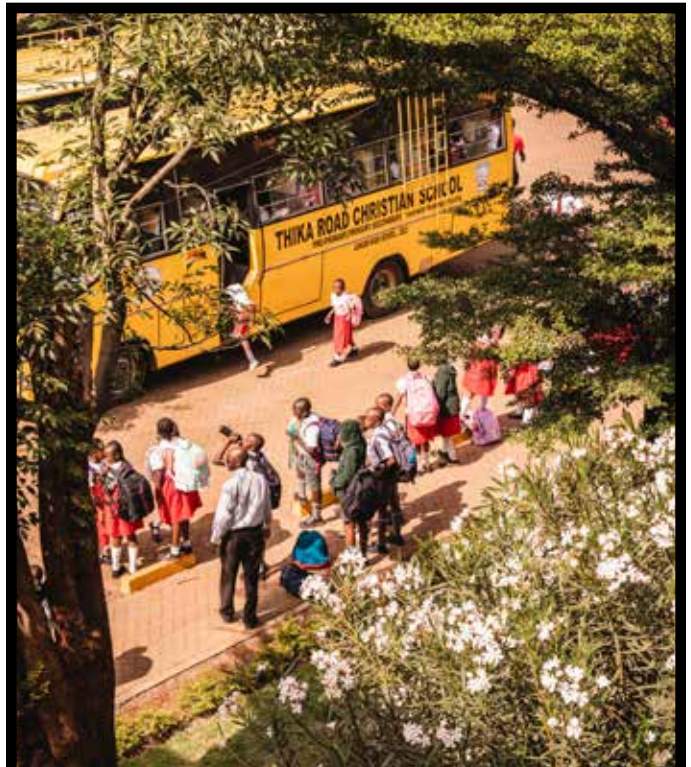
Teachers learn that "teaching is a noble job because it's a calling from God," Wambua said. "Even looking at Jesus as a teacher—it didn't make him lesser."

As Were read Scripture, he started to understand that teachers play an important role in caring for and discipling God's children. He was also touched by Wambua's humility as a facilitator.

"I asked God to make me as humble (as Wambua was) for his glory," he said. "She would correct us during our training with lots of love, and I felt the move of God in me to embrace such virtues while handling my students."

Throughout the various modules of Educational Care training, Were learned more about different teaching methods that address a variety of student learning styles. He started to incorporate interactive projects and group work rather than only lecturing from the front of the classroom. Some of Were's students told him they were learning more than ever before. Were also started to become curious about students, asking questions and listening rather than making assumptions.

"I recall one student in my class had challenges with writing class notes," Were said. "I kept pushing and forcing him to complete his notes in vain. One day, after we handled the module on learning intelligences, I called the boy and asked him to share why he hardly writes class notes. ... He said he is not the type that must write notes, that he understands well listening to the teacher. His response prompted me to apologize to him and his parents too. ... He emerged top of his class in his final examinations."



Job Were's students see him as a father figure. They approach him with confidence and feel comfortable chatting, cracking jokes, and having fun.

Global Voices, Shared Faith

How Calvin Seminary's Growing Diversity Enriches Learning and Community

CALVIN THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY is blessed with a diverse community of over 300 students from more than 30 countries. This diversity enriches our community by bringing together a wide range of cultural backgrounds, experiences, and passions. Three current students—David Seunghwan Roh, Debbie Jin, and Jun Soo Park—say this diversity has shaped their experiences at, and contributions to, CTS.

“The diverse cultural backgrounds of students and faculty have enriched my experience,” said Roh, a doctoral student in the history of Christianity. “Engaging with peers from other countries has broadened my perspective on how cultural influences shape our views and decision making, helping me to approach others with more empathy and understanding. As an international student from South Korea, I believe my presence contributes to the community by offering a unique voice and perspective, enhancing our shared conversations.

“I am particularly excited about CTS's growing diversity, which allows for exploration of how Reformed theology has developed in various cultural contexts,” Roh continued. “The historical movements of liberation and Black theology, as well as the theological expressions in countries like China, Indonesia, and Korea, illustrate the way local experiences shape theological thought. The opportunity to engage in dialogue about these differences has been one of the most rewarding aspects of my time here.”

Jin, a Master of Divinity student, said, “The diversity at CTS has reminded me of the global church beyond seminary. While adapting to different ways of thinking and communicating has been challenging, it has pushed me to grow in my ability to engage with a global context. My Chinese cultural background has shaped how I interact



Calvin Theological Seminary is blessed with a diverse community of over 300 students from more than 30 countries.

with others, especially through active listening and hospitality.

“What I appreciate most about CTS,” she added, “is its commitment to amplifying diverse voices both inside and outside of the classroom setting. I’m excited about the growing diversity at CTS because it enables students from various cultural contexts to engage with Reformed theology in critical, context-specific ways. This approach equips us to better serve our home countries and apply theological principles in ways that are culturally relevant and impactful.”

And Park, a doctoral candidate in New Testament, reflected, “I’ve been blessed by the diversity of students and faculty, which has broadened my understanding of world Christianity. Hearing firsthand accounts from Christians in countries like Turkey, Palestine, Cuba, and China has deepened my appreciation of and prayer for God’s work around the world. These experiences have also nurtured humility, seriousness, and reverence in my approach to Scripture as I recognize that every interpreter brings cultural presuppositions.

“My time at CTS has inspired my hope for the future as many of my peers aspire to return to their home countries or serve in mission fields using their theological training to contribute to God’s kingdom. The growing diversity excites me, as new students bring fresh testimonies and insights that enrich our learning community. I look forward to the conversations and collaborations that will deepen our faith and equip us for service, building a strong foundation for expanding God’s kingdom.”

Roh, Jin, Park, and hundreds of other students bring diverse backgrounds and experiences to make CTS a place of rich learning, growth, and community. Their unique voices and perspectives continue to shape and strengthen the seminary as a global community committed to expanding God’s kingdom. ^B

—Leah Jolly,
Calvin Theological Seminary

The View From Here

Support and Accountability

I REMEMBER BEING at a classis meeting where a minister was being deposed due to significant challenges in his personal life. This pastor was given an opportunity to speak and, with the arms of his colleagues around his shoulders, he stood at the mic and quoted this proverb: “Wounds from a friend can be trusted” (Prov. 27:6).

The meeting was a difficult experience for this pastor. It was tough for his colleagues and friends, too. They had to navigate how to walk alongside him, shoulder-to-shoulder, and help him see not only that his life is no longer congruent with ministry, but that they were taking action to remove him from his position.

There was pain all around. But this community was trustworthy. The pastor ached for an alternative, but accepted the accountability from those who loved him.

Not One Without the Other

Support and accountability should always come as a married pair. Accountability is best when it happens in a relationship and carries with it a commitment to walk with the person or group being held accountable. Otherwise, the wounds of accountability may not be trusted.

Likewise, a healthy community cannot merely have a supportive role. Good friends must offer each other words of challenge. A community that is deep and sturdy will push one another to

Good friends
must offer each
other words of
challenge.

grow and be accountable for their words and actions. The truth of the proverb is not only that wounds from a friend can be trusted, but also that true friends can be trusted to speak painful words of truth when needed.

Denominational Community

This column is part of a series on the purpose and value of a denomination. I believe that denominational communities can offer churches a robust possibility for healthy support and healthy accountability.

Like others, I have been part of ecumenical church networks within a city or town. They are often rich and rewarding experiences, particularly for pastors. Some have pointed out that they have such a great experience ecumenically that they wonder about the role of a denomination for them.

My questions would always be: Which of these churches can be expected to be there when a pastor behaves in ways not fitting for the office? Or to challenge a church that is mistreating its pastor? Or to help out when a fellow church is experiencing a pastoral vacancy? Or to make a long-term

commitment to walk together in joys and challenges?

To be part of a denomination is not just to be a collaborative partner; it is to make a commitment to mutual support and accountability, offering it to other churches and leaders and receiving it from others.

We Can Do Better

The Christian Reformed Church in North America has been struggling with this. Yes, there are bright spots, and some of our support and accountability structures are great on paper (especially classes). But overall, our denominational relationships are not as strong as they could be, and those relationships that are strong seem increasingly to exist in echo chambers or closed tribes. In many cases, we've gotten worse at actually knowing one another, at being there for one another. Many don't do the work that relationships require.

It also means our ability to offer accountability suffers. If we don't really know someone or a situation and haven't done the work to listen deeply, our attempts to relate our concerns or offer a critique or challenge can feel inauthentic and untrustworthy, or we may avoid bringing a challenge because we feel as if we haven't earned the relational credibility to offer accountability. And when accountability does come our way, we refuse to receive it. (Many appreciate accountability as long as it is for someone else.)

Where Two or Three Are Gathered

Many people don't realize that the text “where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them” (Matt. 18:20) is not about being together for worship. It is part of Jesus' teaching on accountability in the church. Jesus' teaching is remarkably relational, with the goal

Women Telling Their Own Biblical Stories

of restoration. The promise Jesus gives is that when we are in these challenging circumstances, the Spirit is with us. We need the Spirit's guidance and presence particularly in these moments. Wounds must be trustworthy; they must come from friends.

I would like to challenge the whole Christian Reformed Church to lean into support and accountability. Your denominational ministries are helping churches develop relationships, offer mutual support, and challenge one another effectively. But these efforts take the commitment of the whole community to raise one another up, to develop friendships within our churches and among our churches, to be willing to receive a challenge from another, and to grow not just personally, but communally on our path of sanctification. **B**



Rev. Al Postma is the executive director-Canada of the Christian Reformed Church in North America. He is a member of Hope CRC in Brantford, Ont.

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

이 기사의 한글번역은 TheBanner.org/korean 에서 보실 수 있습니다.

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



Members of a Zambian women's group celebrate the launch of two books that explore women's roles in the Bible.

"UNLESS WOMEN tell their stories, someone else will tell it their way." This is the motto of a new group of women theologians who are shedding light on gender inequality in the church.

In 2009, most of the 2 million members of the United Church of Zambia, World Renew's local partner, were women, but almost all of its pastors and other leaders were men. This gender imbalance is often used to perpetuate inequality in the church and even gender-based violence in Zambian society.

In response, the Community Development and Social Justice Department of the UCZ collaborated with the Circle for Concerned African Women Theologians (established in 1989) to discuss women's leadership. Despite the challenging environment of predominantly male church leadership, the theologians started a group for Zambian women to provide mentorship and encourage women to delve into Scripture and understand what it says about women. There are 25 members so far.

In July 2024, the group published two books: *When Valor Is Silenced* and *Reading Ruth as a Site of Struggle*. The books

contextualize stories of women in the Bible—including Ruth and the woman of valor described in Proverbs 31—that have often been misunderstood and used to perpetuate gender-based violence.

"I must say that I am very grateful for this mentorship program," said Mable Sichali, World Renew's partner staff. "I will continue being part of this progressive group for my continuous improvement until I am able to write my own book." Sichali's book is already in the works.

The materials created in this group are being used to lead devotions and raise awareness about gender-based violence in Zambian communities. The group anticipates that its literature will help awaken the church to gender inequality and create more leadership opportunities for women.

Please pray that World Renew and its partners will continue to find ways to help communities embrace all members as image bearers of God. Through the examination of the stories of women in Scripture with an astute, theologically rigorous lens, the truth that all people are deserving of love and respect comes to light.

— Elizabeth Mwanza,
World Renew

Home Away From Home

Creating Belonging for BIPOC and International Students at Calvin University

“HOME IS WHERE THE HEART IS, and my heart is on this campus,” Shanaya James said.

James is a Calvin University sophomore from Islamabad, Pakistan. Like many international students, she decided to study at Calvin without ever visiting the school.

Her reasons are ones commonly cited by other students too: excellent financial scholarships, strong academics, a Christ-centered community, and a beautiful campus. While that’s all been validated by James’ experience at Calvin, she’s also discovered something much deeper.

“There have been no nights I have been sleepless. When I go to bed, I know I belong here,” she said.

That’s music to the ears of Josh Samarco, director of Calvin’s Center for Intercultural Student Development. His team works with students from dozens of countries around the world who are adjusting to a new culture on campus.

“The orientation to Calvin has been the best experience of my life,” James said. “There was a special package designed for international students where we had group mixers and activities, and it broke the boundary of being uncomfortable. Being able to talk with people who are sharing the same story and same struggles as you de-escalates your emotions of anxiety and stress.”

From the start, the CISD team ensures that Calvin’s hundreds of international and domestic students, students of various races and ethnicities, and first-year students have the tools and resources needed to navigate a new space.



Photo by Christian Frazier

Shanaya James (center) appreciates the sense of community and belonging she has found at Calvin University.

“We want to set our students up well. When international students feel culture shock, we want to be able to point them to where they can go for help,” Samarco said. “That first week in the states, we are helping them with things like cultural identity, emotional support, mental health, helping them get bus passes, set up bank accounts, and showing them where to grocery shop. We are doing all this resourcing. It’s a beautiful display of what it means to be the body of Christ.”

Student after student agrees. It’s a key reason people have such high regard for Calvin’s Entrada Scholars Program, which gives high school juniors and seniors from racial or ethnic minority groups an opportunity to experience what college life is like for one month in the summer.

“Although I attended a diverse high school, my experience as a Christian often placed me in environments where I wasn’t surrounded by many people of color like myself,” said Hannah Jeong, a first-year student

from Novi, Mich. “This contributed to my struggle with confidence in my identity. Entrada has shown me how to love my roots and appreciate them.”

Whether they come from abroad or from just down the road, students are seeing the benefits of a multicultural, multiethnic campus community.

“Through conversations and experiences, I’ve gained a lot of different perspectives and viewpoints,” said Gabby Halliwill, a first-year student from Charlotte, Mich. “There’s a lot of value in incorporating and engaging with people outside of your background and culture.”

“As the body of Christ,” Samarco said, “one of our greatest witnesses can be our *with-ness*. When we are living life with people from different ethnic and racial backgrounds, we are living out our faith as God intended for us to be. At Calvin, we get the opportunity to do just that.”

— Matt Kucinski,
Calvin University

Finding Freedom and Faith

WHEN NOMKHOSI FIRST reached out to Pastor Deb through ReFrame Ministries' *Family Fire*, she was in despair. "I was in a hopeless place," Nomkhosi wrote.

Formerly called Back to God, ReFrame is the CRC's global media ministry.

Despite her Christian faith, Nomkhosi was weighed down by struggles she didn't fully understand: feeling isolated and burdened by relentless spiritual battles.

Nomkhosi, a young woman from South Africa, had been praying for a loving marriage partner for years. Yet she felt trapped. Her relationships crumbled without her knowing why, and she felt that unseen forces were obstructing her dreams of a family and her spiritual well-being.

Family Fire, one of ReFrame's English-language ministries, became her lifeline during these dark times.

"We're offering resources and personalized prayer support to hurting people around the globe," said Deb Koster, *Family Fire*'s producer.

Koster and her team commit to addressing struggles that often go unspoken—challenges in marriage, parenting, and spiritual growth—while reminding believers of God's unfailing love.

"God does not always give us all the things we desire," she reminded Nomkhosi, "and sometimes that might feel disappointing." She encouraged Nomkhosi to find peace in God's



Nomkhosi's smile reflects her journey from despair to hope, guided by faith and the resources of *Family Fire*.

purpose even if it didn't align perfectly with her hopes.

Koster's prayers and advice were rooted in Scripture and focused on the strength that comes from walking faithfully with God, regardless of one's marital status. Through Koster's words, Nomkhosi began to see her life not as a series of unfulfilled prayers, but as a journey of spiritual growth.

"If I thought I loved the Lord before, let's just say today I'm madly in love with

him," Nomkhosi said. This deepening relationship allowed her to confront and overcome her fears.

Family Fire is dedicated to helping people like Nomkhosi, whose faith was tested and ultimately strengthened. Through online articles (*FamilyFire.com*), prayer support, and pastoral guidance, *Family Fire* offers an inclusive space for those facing everything from family discord to personal spiritual battles.

As Nomkhosi's spiritual journey unfolded, she grew increasingly assured of her identity in Christ. Her prayers shifted from desperate requests to heartfelt surrender. In her words, she was "the happiest bride of Christ."

What's more, Nomkhosi's desire for marriage, once a source of pain, became secondary to her relationship with God. Instead, she felt grounded in her identity as a beloved child of God.

Today, Nomkhosi continues to grow as a woman of faith, inspired by the work of *Family Fire* and the support of the Christian Reformed Church. She is grateful for the valley she had to walk through, believing it led her to a truer understanding of God's love.

—Brian Clark,
ReFrame Ministries



Overcoming False Witness With True Witness

By Joel Kok

When a fellow Christian used his podcast to describe me and those who share my perspective regarding church life as so lukewarm that Jesus would vomit us out of his mouth, I felt tempted to respond with mutual insults and contempt. But then I heard Jesus calling me to rejoice!

In the conclusion to the Beatitudes, Jesus states, “Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you” (Matt. 5:11-12). Jesus proclaims that message as the Savior who overcame false witness by persevering in true witness—even to the point of being lifted up on the cross to reveal the glory of his saving love. In the gospel of John, Jesus says, “For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth” (John 18:37, ESV). And in our world of false witnessing—which includes our own false witnessing—Jesus shares that purpose with us. Thus one way we can follow our Lord in the way of overcoming evil with goodness is by seeking to obey the ninth commandment in Christlike ways.

When I heard the insult against me on the podcast, not only was I tempted in the direction of contempt, but I also fell into an anger that could have led me into false witnessing. We all live with similar temptations, and we “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23). Many of us respond to insults with insults, but to help us live out our Lord’s teachings regarding the ninth commandment,

we can turn to Jesus’ teaching about the sixth commandment—a teaching I relied on previously to navigate a difficult relationship.

During my student days, I worked part time for a church as a youth leader, and that work included ongoing conflict with a volunteer youth leader. For various reasons, this other youth leader and I did not get along, and one evening he shocked me with a phone call in which he expressed his anger through insult after insult. After some dismayed silence, I started to burn with anger and made plans to call that other leader back to tell him off. But, thank God, I was led to first check in with a therapist friend.

After I ranted and raved for several minutes and described my plan to call the other leader back, my friend opened my mind and heart to biblical truth by asking, “What do you hope will happen?” And as I pondered that question, I realized my subconscious hope was to hurt that other leader at least as much as he had hurt me. I was tempted to say “You fool!” as I burned in anger with fire from hell (Matt. 5:22). Thank God, our Lord revealed a healthier path for me to follow, and while the other leader and I did not become best friends, we did find ways to speak and work together honestly and in peace.

Here and Now

Social media has only intensified false witnessing and insults. Social psychologist Jonathan Haidt, though he does not identify as a God-believer, uses the biblical story of Babel (Gen. 11) to offer insights into the destruction that can happen through social media. He compares social media to the tower at Babel, which led to division of the human family. In Haidt’s article “Why

the Past 10 Years of American Life Have Been Uniquely Stupid” (*The Atlantic*, May 2022), he makes a strong case for seeing how social media can contribute to the shattering of communities. Haidt points out that as people seek engagement with their posts, they can fall into dishonesty, which leads to what Haidt calls a “continual chipping away of trust.” He concludes by urging readers to reform social media: “We must change ourselves and our communities.”

The community of the Christian Reformed Church in North America has its own needs for reform. Rev. Susan LaClear, Candidacy Committee director, recently shared on The Network a message she gave to synod. She spoke of how church members can “participate in factions, spread misinformation, and bear false witness against each other on social media,” which can lead emerging leaders to feel anxious and wonder whether they can or should serve the church. LaClear also shared a quotation from a Latino pastor who wondered why CRC people can feel led to publicly disparage each other. “In our culture,” the pastor said, “if you’re family; you’re family. We don’t talk bad about each other.”

A story from the Old Testament can speak to this struggle, too. In his book *The Nine Commandments*, David Noel Freedman explores King Ahab and Queen Jezebel deliberately bearing false witness against a farmer named Naboth in order to steal his vineyard (1 Kings 21). In this story, Jezebel arranges for false witnesses to accuse Naboth in a way that leads to his death. When the prophet Elijah confronts the powerful king with a true witness regarding that sin, Ahab says to Elijah, “So you have found me, my enemy!” (1 Kings 21:20). That response was

simply one further expression of the enmity and persecution that Ahab already had been practicing against Elijah, and it illustrates what Jesus notes is the persecution of prophets who testify truly to God (Matt. 23). It further reveals that false witness can bring numerous bad consequences: Ahab and Jezebel continue to lead Israel down a path of destruction.

So how do we overcome false witnessing, which continues to work destruction even in our day?

When a false witness led Jesus into the shadow of the cross, our Lord testified before Pontius Pilate that the Messiah's kingdom differs from other kingdoms. Jesus has not called his followers to engage in military revolt against the Roman Empire. As Jesus brings God's heavenly kingdom to earth, he does so not by trashing his enemies, but by testifying to the truth. Jesus emphasizes that witnessing to the truth was the purpose for which he was born into the world, and he adds, "Everyone on the side of truth listens to me" (John 18:37). We can listen to Jesus' voice about seeking his kingdom by offering a true witness.

When Jesus reveals himself as the only begotten Son of our Father, he reveals further a glory that is "full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). With that glorious combination, Jesus shows how much we need a Savior, and he proclaims that he has come not "to condemn the world, but to save the world through him" (John 3:17). Jesus then warns against hiding from his saving light of truth by practicing the darkness of deceit (John 3:18-20). He reveals further that the truth will set us free to abide with him because truth liberates us from the devil, who "is a liar and the father of lies" (John 8:44). And, astonishingly, on the night before his arrest on the way to the cross, Jesus not only proclaims himself to be "the

way and the truth and the life" (John 14:6), but promises to send "the Spirit of truth," who will lead us "into all the truth" (John 16:13).

Seeing Jesus in prayer illustrates this.

One gospel scene reveals how Jesus had been praying for Simon Peter. At the Last Supper, knowing how weak his followers are when they trust primarily in themselves, Jesus says, "Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift all of you like wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers" (Luke 22:31-32).


Simon Peter does seem to fail in faith when he later denies Jesus three times. That false testimony leads Peter to weep in shame, but it also leads Jesus to pray and to save with grace and truth. Instead of condemning Peter for false witness and a failure of faith, Jesus continues to pray for his disciple and restores him into an apostleship in which he is able to strengthen countless brothers and sisters by offering true witness.

Another passage in which Jesus prays is in John's portrait of the Last Supper. Jesus concludes his table talk by lifting his eyes to heaven and praying passionately. In his prayer for his people, which continues to this day (Rom. 8:34; Heb. 7:25), Jesus prays that his followers can be one so that people can come to believe in the one God, who is love. Our Savior's prayer culminates with his testifying, "I made known to them your name [character], and I will continue to make it known, that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them" (John 17:26, ESV).

The Heidelberg Catechism interprets the ninth commandment to instruct us on how to bear true witness. In Lord's Day 43, the catechism emphasizes not only that our Lord calls us

to "never give false testimony against anyone," but also to love the truth in a way that leads us to "do what I can to guard and advance my neighbor's good name" (Q&A 112). Can you imagine what church life would be like if we repent from trashing one another with false witness and seek to treasure one another with true witness? We can join Jesus in praying for such unity and love, and we can experience the joy of the gospel by following Jesus out of falsehood and into the truth that will fascinate us.

In an essay he wrote in response to people slandering the Christian faith by claiming religion to be a source of fanaticism that can lead to terrorism, German New Testament scholar Gerhard Lohfink testified that Jesus does not make disciples of all nations by leading his followers to fight against people we don't like. Instead, Jesus fascinates us into the saving truths of his kingdom so that we can follow him in the way of truth that leads to freedom and the positive peace we call shalom (Lohfink, *No Irrelevant Jesus*, pp. 75-85; John 8:32)

In seeking shalom, we can all edify one another by bearing true witness to Christ, who saves us with his glorious grace and truth. 



Joel Kok earned degrees from Calvin College (now University), Calvin Seminary, and Duke University. He is grateful to have served congregations in the United States and Canada. He now serves at Covenant Christian Reformed Church in Sioux Center, Iowa.

1. Have you ever been a victim of someone bearing false witness against you? How did you feel, and how did you respond?

[READ MORE ONLINE](#)

Friendship Lessons & Tic-Tac-Toe

Still today, I look for people who are sitting alone in the church pew.



Laurel Dykema has more than a decade of experience as a professional nonprofit writer. She lives in Grand Rapids, Mich., and attends Westend Christian Reformed Church.

“HEY, YOU WANNA PLAY tic-tac-toe?”

Startled, I glanced up from my seat on the dusty Arizona ground to see a freckle-faced boy standing before me. He shifted his weight onto one foot, using the other to poke at the reddish dirt, his blue eyes questioning me. I didn't know his name, but I recognized him as the kid with bright red hair who sat to my left in class all morning picking his nose.

It was recess—and my first day at a new school.

At the sound of the recess bell earlier, my third-grade classmates ran outside, shouting and laughing with their friends. I felt awkward and out of place. I slowly made my way to a quiet corner of the playground and sat in the dirt. As I stared unblinkingly at my new white tennis shoes, tears began to slide down my cheeks.

It was at this moment that the red-haired kid interrupted my thoughts with his request. “Uh ... OK,” I said, wrapping my arms around my knees and studying my shoes again as if they were very interesting. Andrew plunked down next to me, leaning over to flatten some loose dirt with his palm. In the dirt, he rather crookedly drew a grid with his finger. Then he placed an X in the corner and looked at me expectantly.

As I played that first game of tic-tac-toe with Andrew, I knew I'd found a friend. We played many more games of tic-tac-toe at recess that year.

That summer, when my family moved again, I again became the new kid at school. But I had learned some important friend-making skills from my friend Andrew that I began using right away. In fact, I found myself still using these lessons when I started attending my current church a few years ago! Here's how I approach making new friends at church:

1. I choose to believe that people actually do want to be my friend.

When Andrew approached me, he displayed confidence that I would want to be his friend. In contrast, my worst fear as a kid was imposing my friendship on someone who didn't really want to be my friend in the first place. To be honest, that fear still sometimes keeps me from approaching people after church on Sunday. I just do my best to ignore it.

2. I look for new faces and loners.

Andrew noticed I was new and sitting alone at recess. Still today, I look for people who are sitting alone in the church pew. I search for new faces. I try to make a note of the people who always leave immediately after the Sunday morning church services instead of lingering to chat with people. Over the years, I have found that these are the people that often are most in need of connection and friendship.

3. I invite people to do things with me.

For me, inviting people to do something with me requires the most bravery. Andrew invited me to play tic-tac-toe. I invite women I meet to join a Bible study at church. I invite people over to my house or out for coffee. Some people say yes; others say no. Just remember that not all people you meet will be a close friend at this point in both of your journeys—and that's OK!

How are you making new friends at your church? 

The Danger of Political Idolatry

Idolatry is anytime we take something that's not God and put it in God's place, worshiping it and finding our meaning, significance, value, and purpose in it rather than God.



Brandon Haan serves as the senior pastor at Ivanrest Church in Grandville, Mich. He lives in Grandville with his wife, Sarah, and their two sons, Levi and Titus.

WE LIVE IN an increasingly secular culture. What I mean by that is that we live in a culture that no longer believes in or assumes the existence of God. Instead, plagued by a combination of faith and doubt, we lurch back and forth between receptivity to God and a tortured agnosticism.

Historians and scholars differ on exactly when the transition to secularism started. Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor provides an exhaustive account of it in his massive book *A Secular Age*, while Australian pastor and cultural commentator Mark Sayers gives a more accessible overview in an episode of his now-defunct podcast *This Cultural Moment* ("What Is Secularism?", May 29, 2018).

What they say is that the world used to be an enchanted place. The divine was lurking around every corner, and people had a constant sense of the sacred. The world felt shot through with the power and presence of God.

Nowadays, though, it seems more complicated. It's not quite that we're disenchanted. It's just that we're *differently* enchanted. First, the monotheistic faiths of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam killed the pantheons of gods. Then, the Enlightenment's rationalism and naturalism started killing monotheism. And now, a few hundred years later, we find ourselves less intrigued by God in general. We prefer our spirituality à la carte these days, on our own terms, at our own leisure—just like everything else.

But Sayers says we can't live like that. Human beings can't live well without transcendence, without the sacred, without a deep sense of meaning, significance, value, and purpose. "Meaning-making machines," he calls us, and he says we're driven to find that sense of meaning, significance, and purpose somewhere. We have to.

Hollowing God out of our lives doesn't mean we don't worship. It just means we worship different things, because the "God-sized hole" still exists, needing to be filled.

Politics and Idolatry

One of those things we've started to worship is politics.

In the vacuum created by our attempted expulsion of God from our lives, many people have turned to their preferred political candidate, party, or platform as the source of the meaning, significance, value, and purpose they crave. "The rise of the political religions," Sayers calls it. Put simply, people are using politics to try to plug the hole left by our purging God from our lives.

This, I think, is part of why our current culture war has taken on such dizzying significance for so many North Americans.

Put simply, if "we" (whoever "we" are) lose the culture war, we aren't just losing our preferred vision/outcome/order/structure for society. We're actually losing our sense of meaning, significance, value, and purpose. We're losing our god. In other words, politics are no longer just politics. They've become for many a crusade of transcendent, spiritual, and sacred significance.

But that, plain and simple, is idolatry.

Idolatry is anytime we take something that's not God and put it in God's place, worshiping it and finding our meaning, significance, value, and purpose in it rather than God. And it doesn't have to be a "bad" thing. It can be a good thing too. As Tim Keller used to say, "Idolatry is making anything other than God (good or bad) into an ultimate thing."

That is what too many of us have done with politics. We've taken a good



thing (appropriate political interest and involvement), and we've made it an ultimate thing, putting it in God's place and trying to derive more meaning, significance, value, and purpose from it than it can truly offer.

Engage Appropriately

So what do we do instead?

Well, it's certainly not to disengage from the political process entirely. That's a cynical overreaction that leaves us passively indifferent to the things of this world—"too heavenly-minded to be of any earthly good," as the saying goes.

Politics are, in fact, good. The simple fact is that politics matter, so as Christians we should be involved in politics. It's part of who we are as human beings and therefore part of what we're called to do. But we should keep our engagement with the political process in its proper place and not let it spin out of control to the point where we end up enslaved to an idol.

Avoiding Idols

After all, that's what we're called to do in every other area of our lives. John Calvin famously called the human heart an "idol factory" and said, "Man's mind, full as it is of pride and boldness, dares to imagine a god according to its own capacity" (*Institutes* I.11.8). His point was that we can turn pretty

much anything into an idol: our job, our car, our house, our spouse, even our country and our politics.

The challenge is keeping those things (literally everything) in their proper place: under God. That includes our politics too. That's the job of the Christian: We need to constantly submit ourselves and our desires, everything that matters to us, to God. Only then will we keep those things from becoming idols, a religion that takes the place of God, and something we worship instead of him.

For me, at least, I've found a few things helpful for doing that with politics:

First, read Scripture. That might sound too simple. But I used to believe all sorts of things politically that I no longer do because of the Bible. Put simply, the more I read Scripture, the more I find my preferred political beliefs and positions challenged. And that's a good thing. It's Scripture working on my idols.

Second, get news and political commentary from a variety of perspectives. If you are a conservative, for example, you should tune in to or read from progressive news and political commentary. If you are a liberal, you should tune in or listen to conservatives. This is important for two reasons: First, pigeonholing ourselves into monolithic echo chambers where


everyone says things we already believe reduces us from full human beings to parrots. It makes us people who just mindlessly repeat our party's talking points, and that does no one any good (including us). Plus, it helps us understand "the other side." While that might not make us more sympathetic to their views, it does challenge the areas where we might be slipping into an unquestioned idolatry of our own views.

Third, try to get to know people from different political perspectives. Grab coffee with them. Ask about their thoughts. Listen. It's not always easy, but it is beneficial: Now it's not just "the conservatives" or "the liberals" who think that. It's your friend, Jane. It's your cousin, John. And while you still won't agree with everything they say, it'll help you love better, because now you know a real, live person who thinks the way "they" do.

Politics and Jesus

Politics are good. They're important. They're a crucial part of our society and culture, and there's no denying that.

But they are not the be-all and end-all. Christ is. And we Christ-followers need to remember that.

After all, no matter how much we love our country or our politics, they didn't save us. Jesus did. We therefore need to keep our politics (and everything else) in their proper place: under him. 

1. Before reading this article, how would you have typically defined idolatry?

2. The article focuses on the idolatry of politics. What other examples of idolatries are current in our culture?

READ MORE ONLINE

A Man on the Inside Reflects the Worth of God's Aging Image Bearers

SEPTUAGENARIANS are having a moment with the success of *Only Murders in the Building*, starring Martin Short and Steve Martin, and *Matlock*, starring Kathy Bates.

Add 76-year-old Ted Danson to the list of 70-somethings saving some of their best work for their latter years. In *A Man on the Inside*, Danson, a bundle of frenetic charm, physical comedy, and the ability to break your heart and heal it, stars as lonely and adrift widower Charles, who gets a new lease on life when he gets an unexpected gig that changes his life.


Missing his late wife terribly and pining for purpose, Charles jumps at the chance to be the “man on the inside,” a spy hired to infiltrate a retirement community after one of the residents has an expensive necklace go missing.

Pacific View Retirement Community is like your grandma's assisted living home on steroids. Loaded with amenities such as a beauty salon and a gorgeous view of San Francisco's Golden Gate Bridge, the fancy facility holds several residents aching for their former lives and mourning the losses of spouses and friends. We know going in that Charles' tender heart won't be able to withstand the tug to care for his fellow seniors; he relates to them all too well. Soon Charles finds the community he has been looking for, even though it is established on pretenses. How will his new friends react when they find out he has been spying on them?

Danson carries the show deftly. He's still got it—the magic that made him a star when he was Sam on *Cheers*. Reunited here with Michael Shur, the showrunner from his last hit series, *The Good Place*, Danson has a winsome way of making us laugh while

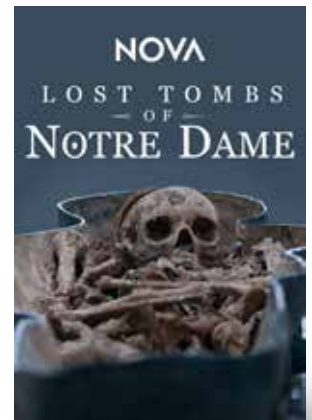
pondering themes of aging, autonomy, and end of life. The creators also worked on *Parks and Recreation* and *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*, but this show is not as laugh-out-loud funny. It's every bit as good, though.

Speaking of *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*, Stephanie Beatriz's tough, sarcastic character Rosa from that show is nowhere to be found in her character here. She shines as Didi, the facility manager who pours her all into caring for her residents. I also loved Jama Williamson's Beatrice, who plays the loving and mega-enthusiastic activities director who isn't going to let a little thing like a massive trust fund stop her from contributing worthy work into the world (she volunteers full time). Lilah Richcreek Estrada as Julie, Charles' droll millennial spy boss, is also fun to watch.

Anyone who has ever loved an aging parent or anyone else at the end of life will be won over by Charles and all the residents of Pacific View. God imbues his image bearers with worth until the end of time, and certainly until the end of their time on earth. *A Man on the Inside* highlights that truth with wit and grace. (Netflix) 



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



NOVA: Lost Tombs of Notre Dame

Reviewed by Sam Guitierrez

In 2019, the world watched in horror as the 800-year-old Notre-Dame Cathedral in Paris burned. The moment its iconic spire collapsed into the massive flames below is an image seared into our collective memory. Thankfully, firefighters could extinguish the fire and preserve much of the building, but everything inside was left caked with ash and toxic chemicals.

As restoration work began, a surprising discovery was made: two sarcophagi made of lead buried in the rubble. Workers also discovered another mystery beneath the cathedral floor—thousands of broken sculpture fragments related to the Protestant Reformation.

This episode of *NOVA* is the third in a series about this great cathedral, the fire, reconstruction efforts, and important discoveries. ([PBS.org](https://www.pbs.org))



You'll Always Have a Friend: What to Do When the Lonelies Come

By Emily Ley;
illustrated by
Romina Galotta

Reviewed by Sonya
VanderVeen Feddema

Emily Ley begins her compassionate, gentle book for young children on the challenges of finding and being a friend by explaining that everyone has felt lonely at some point in their lives. She encourages children to combat loneliness and make friends by being kind, loyal, and true to others, by being brave and saying hello to kids they've never met, by joining a sports team or other group, or taking care of a pet friend.

Illustrator Romina Galotta's sweet pastel pictures reveal kids' vulnerabilities as they combat loneliness and portray their joy upon finding a place to belong.

Christian parents and caregivers who share this book with children will have the opportunity to talk with them about whether they feel lonely and about the friends they may already have. Most importantly, they can point their children to Jesus. (Tommy Nelson)



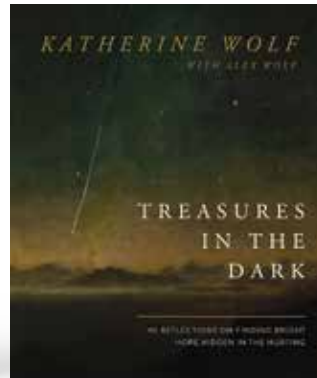
Pachinko (Season 2)

Reviewed by Daniel Jung

Pachinko chronicles the lives of a Korean family learning to survive through three consecutive generations of subjugation, discrimination, and social degradation. Adapted from Min Jin Lee's novel of the same name, *Pachinko* centers around matriarch Sunja, played by Kim Minha as the younger Sunja and Youn Yuh-jung as the elder.

Throughout this second season, Sunja and her family are continually reminded that they are Koreans living as second-class citizens in Japan. They've learned Japanese and only speak Korean in safe spaces.

Pachinko expands our awareness of our Korean American neighbors. The experience of being passed over for jobs and the feeling of simply being tolerated is a reality that takes a toll. Safe spaces are needed to take a breath and let down our guard. (Rated TV-MA for violence, some strong language, and non-graphic sensual content. Recommended for 15 and up. Apple TV+)



Treasuries in the Dark: 90 Reflections on Finding Bright Hope Hidden in the Hurting

By Katherine Wolf
(with Alex Wolf)

Reviewed by Amie Spruiensma

In April 2008, Katherine Wolf suffered a massive brain-stem stroke that left her with life-altering disabilities at 26. As a wife and new mom, Wolf spent months in a neurological rehabilitation hospital learning how to walk, talk, and swallow again. She tells how the darkest days of her suffering taught her things she never could have learned through a pain-free life.

The book is recommended for mature readers who want to grow in their understanding of how suffering and uncertainty affect daily life in both positive and negative ways. Wolf does not have the life she once imagined as a newlywed, but she is actively choosing to bless God and bless others through the good/hard life she has now. Her life showcases God's faithfulness amid disappointments, losses, and grief. (W Publishing)

The Lowdown

When Work Hurts: The Bible tells us that work will be difficult—filled with thorns and thistles—but no one prepares us for the pain we experience on the job. In this book, Meryl Herr explores the emotional, relational, and vocational pain that work causes and helps us rebound and build resilience so we can fully participate with God in God's mission. (March 11, IVP)

Based on a True Story: In *Doc*, Molly Parker is Dr. Amy Larsen, chief of internal medicine at a Minneapolis hospital. But she has a brain injury that caused amnesia, and she can't remember the past eight years of her life. One thing she does remember? That healing people is her calling. (Fox/Hulu)

Snow White, Redux: This live-action musical reimagining of the classic 1937 film stars Rachel Zegler (*West Side Story*) in the title role and Gal Gadot (*Wonder Woman*) as her stepmother, the Evil Queen. (Disney, in theaters March 21)

One Step Forward: Written by Marcie Flinchum Atkins, this YA historical fiction novel in verse features Matilda Young, the youngest suffragist to be arrested and imprisoned for lawful protests during the five years leading up to the passage of the 19th Amendment in 1920. (March 4, Versify)

50 Is Fabulous

We should approach every new season of life as a gift from God.

IT HAPPENED in an instant at a moment when I least expected it. We were in a department store, and I had just finished helping my oldest son choose an outfit for his first interview after his college graduation. Just before the clerk reached over to scan the barcodes, she looked up at me and asked a question that forever changed my life: she asked me in Spanish if I wanted to get the senior discount for these items. Wait! What?! At that moment, I couldn't remember how to speak English or Spanish. It was as if time stood still and my life flashed before my eyes all at the same time. I was now in the matrix of old age, and what could I do to bend my way out of this one? After I recovered some level of consciousness, I blurted out to the representative, "Señora, I'm only 50 years old!"

I recently heard a comedian say that the truth about turning 50 is that you are now the youngest of the old people in the world. Very funny! I guess there's no denying that I'm now part of the freshman class of the chronologically advanced.

God's Word reminds us in Ecclesiastes 3:1, "There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens." This means we should approach every new season of life as a gift from God. I remember as a young person seeing headlines about how certain Hollywood stars still looked fabulous at 50. Sadly, most of these headlines were focused on outward appearances. Turning 50 myself has afforded me the opportunity to reflect on a different kind of beauty—the beauty of God's grace at work within me for the past five decades. Here are some highlights:

» I remember being 6 years old when the preacher one Sunday morning asked if anyone wanted to come forward to receive Christ as their

Savior. I was holding my mom's hand when I looked up and said to her in Spanish, "Mom, today is my day." I let go of her hand, walked forward, knelt with the pastor by the first pew, and prayed to receive Christ as my Savior. God's grace drew me to Jesus that day.

» When I was 27, I sat down with my wife to read a devotional for couples in which the author presented a question that changed the trajectory of my life: "When you turn 80 years old and look back over your life, what will you wish you had done?" At that moment I knew the answer: "Study to become a pastor." God's grace led me to become a minister in the Christian Reformed Church.

» I also remember being 40 years old and prostrating myself at the foot of a hospital bed where doctors were working. I cried out for God to spare the life of one of my children. By God's grace, we received our child back again.

I can testify that my life has always been lived by God's grace, whether I have found myself kneeling by a pew, standing behind a pulpit, or prostrating myself before a hospital bed. I can emphatically say that 50 is fabulous not because life is perfect or because better discounts are in my future, but because God is faithful in every season under heaven. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever! **B**



Felix Fernandez is pastor of South Kendall Community Church Miami, Fla.

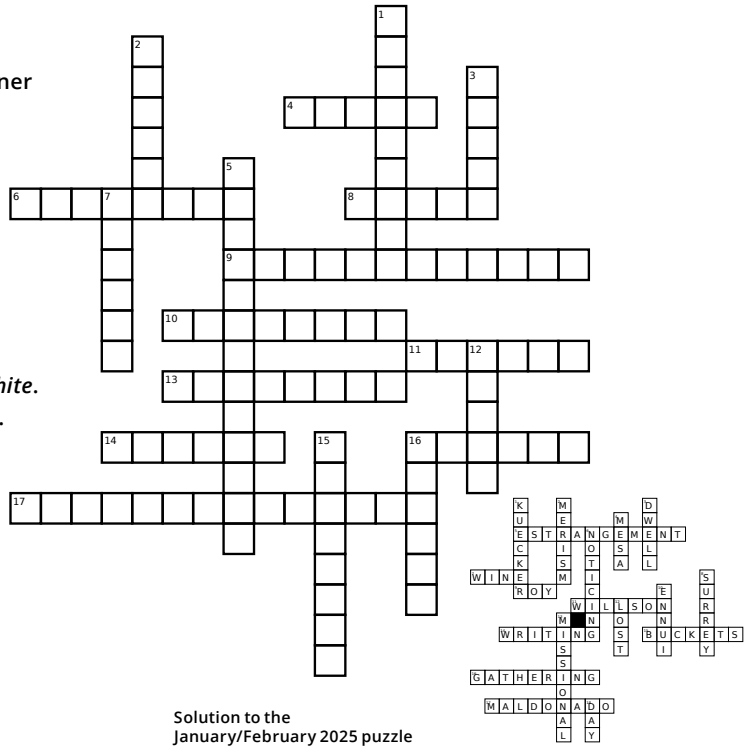
Find the answers to this crossword puzzle in this issue of *The Banner*! See the solutions in the next print issue.
 (Please note we do not publish Word Play in the July/August issue.)

Down

1. Six of these are in the news section this month
2. The United Church of this country is a World Renew local partner
3. How to fight false witness
5. Calvin University's Center for _____ Student Development
7. Ted _____ stars in *A Man on the Inside*
12. High point of a wave
15. Address for the CRC Ministry Support Center: East _____
16. The 2025 _____ Conference is in Jakarta, Indonesia

Across

4. Gal _____ plays the evil queen in the new live-action *Snow White*.
6. One of three languages used in joint worship in San Jose, Calif.
8. Open Doors publishes a World _____ List
9. "There is a time for everything" book
10. Adapted from Min Jin Lee's novel of the same name, _____ is now in its second season on Apple TV+.
11. Creed that turns 1,700 years old this year
13. Something too many have begun to worship
14. A Resonate missionary in Kenya
16. Producer of Family Fire
17. Support and _____ should always go together



Solution to the January/February 2025 puzzle

Thank You!

Thank you Network community for 15 years of resources, stories, questions and answers. The Network exists to support people involved in their congregations. You've made it a success. Visit crcna.org/Network to continue:

- Exploring over 7,000 ministry resources
- Connecting with others in your role
- Asking your questions and share your insights

DEADLINES: Ads for the April issue are due March 7, 2025; May: April 4, 2025. Subject to availability. Details online at thebanner.org/classifieds, or for display ads see thebanner.org/ads. Advertising in *The Banner* does not imply editorial endorsement.

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

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

Congregational Announcements

MARANATHA AT MESA AZ Maranatha Church of Mesa AZ plans a celebratory event for Harry and Grace Weidenaar for 50 years in the ministry and retirement on 3/2/25 with a card shower. Please send cards and notes to Harry Weidenaar, 3055 N Red Mtn, Mesa, AZ 85207



URGENT NEED FOR BIBLES In communities around the world, believers out-number Bibles 300 to 1! You could be an answer to their prayer by donating Bibles today. We accept Bibles in any translation in any condition. English Bibles needed for English speaking believers. Please call/text/email Jess at Project Bible Runners: 217-273-9497 projectbible-runners@gmail.com for more information.

Denominational Announcements

CLASSIS NORTH CASCADES will be meeting on Feb 27, 2025 at First CRC, Lynden WA at 7 pm.

Church Positions Available

UNIQUE OPPORTUNITY FOR A FT SR. PASTOR at Golden Gate CRC (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@ggcrc.org.

Obituaries

BRUXVOORT, KATHY, 74. At home with the Lord October 31, 2024. Beloved wife of Carl, lov-

ing mother of Micah (Katia) Bruxvoort, Jordan Bruxvoort, Kelsey (Bryce) Wagg, devoted grandmother of Rio and Remy Bruxvoort, Amos and Abigail Bruxvoort, Elliot and Finley Wagg.

LANTING, CONNIE Connie May (Olds) Lanting (1950 - 2024), 74, of Valley Center California, died on December 23, 2024 at 4 pm, holding hands with Stewart who had cared for her for the past 15 years when she had dementia.

She was born in Grand Rapids, Michigan on February 6, 1950. She attended Westside Christian Grammar school and Grand Rapids Christian High School. After raising a family she went back to college and earned her associates degree from Palomar Community college. She grew up in Michigan, lived in Hawaii and southern California. She was a loving homemaker. During her life she loved Jesus, her family, traveling the west, camping, coloring, games, and bicycling, including across the United States.

She is preceded in death by her father, Charles Olds, mother, Mona (Haan) Olds, brother Chuck Olds and sister Bonnie Vanloo.

She is survived by her loving husband, Stewart; three sons, Caleb (spouse Laura), Chad (spouse Sarah), and Cooper (spouse Katie); and 5 grandchildren, Kale'a, Titus, and Ryker (Caleb & Laura); and Soren and Calvin (Cooper & Katie).



MEDEMA, JULIE KEEN (age 97) went to be with Jesus on Jan.16, 2025. She is survived by her husband of 69 years, Ted Medema; children: Sue Medema, Daniel (Karen), Steve, Bob (Beth), Tim (Jo), Bruce (Jodi); 9 grandchildren and 11 great

grandchildren. Julie was a loving wife and wonderful mother. As a pastor's wife, she poured her heart into the people of the churches they served. Her strong faith, love for her Lord, and gentle smile touched so many lives. We miss her greatly, but rejoice in resurrection hope!



ROETERS, PETER R. 87, of Elmhurst IL, formerly Willowbrook IL, went home to be with his savior on January 2, 2025. Beloved husband of the late Marilyn, nee Dekker; loving father of Beth (Robert) Medema and Daniel (Stacey) Roeters; adoring grandfather of Stephanie (Casey Kamps) Medema, Emilia Medema and Angelina Roeters; step grandfather of Victoria, Elizabeth and Alexander. Peter was a loving and devoted father and grandfather. He loved using his handyman skills at home and in his church. He was a member of Western Springs CRC for over 55 years. Peter loved spending time in Holland Michigan. Peter will be especially missed by his favorite granddaughter.



VANDERSTEEN JEAN G. (RIEMERSMA) (May 21, 1940 - January 5, 2025) kept her eyes on Jesus and arms reaching out to people. She served the Lord as a missionary to Nigeria, a teacher, chaplain, and active church member. Her authentic kindness and energetic spirit will be missed by family and friends, including her children, grandchildren, and her husband of 61 years, Dirk VanderSteen.

Anniversary

WEDDING ANNIVERSARY 70 YEARS

VANDERLAAN, JACK AND MILLIE (VANDERMARK) Many of you have touched our lives and we ask you to thank God, as we do, for his blessings in 70 years of a loving and caring relationship. In the past 70 years, through God's grace, we have developed a friendship, raised a family, mourned the deaths of a son, daughter, and granddaughter, and built a treasured marriage. We plan to celebrate our anniversary with our two children and spouses, six grandchildren and our great grandson. We thank God for them! We happily live at Waterford Place, 1725 Port Sheldon St; Apt G

SPH is Calling You to join
INTERNATIONAL CHRISTIAN EDUCATION IN INDONESIA
 Find out about a 30-year-old Christian school founded on and fueled by:
True Knowledge, Faith in Christ & Godly Character
WE ARE SEARCHING FOR
 Christian educators called to be heads of school, principals, curriculum coordinators, teachers, to serve in theologically Reformed, Christ-centered K-12 schools in **Indonesia**
 Find out more about us @careersph sph.edu/career

407; Jenison, MI 49428. 754-264-2814; laanj2@gmail.com. Praise God From Whom All Blessings Flow!

Employment

SEEKING EUROPEAN AUTO TECHNICIAN
For busy independent family owned repair shop in Bozeman MT. Excellent pay and benefits. Inquiries: theuautoworksinc.com or 406-586-3709

TRUCK DRIVERS Zeeland greenhouse looking for motivated CDL A & B drivers for deliveries. Get paid well by the HOUR, not the mile! Drivers rewarded for dedication & hard work. Full & part time (seasonal) positions starting mid-April through start of June, also opportunities in the fall. Be home Sundays. Some Saturdays may be required. All expenses - trucks, fuel, & tolls, are covered by the company, not the driver. Retired? Great extra income if you have a current CDL, medical certificate, & good driving record. Contact Amy: 616-875-7211 for info or @ Meadowridge: 8952 Tyler St. in Zeeland

Products and Services

I CAN LIST YOUR HOME FOR \$1000 OR 1.5%.
1992 Calvin grad will list your property using a Low Fee Business Model - full service, with savings. The system works! 160 closings in 2023, and over 125 lifetime Banner clients. We help clients buy properties as well. Contact Doug Takens of Independence Realty, 6801 Gettysburg, Hudsonville, 616-262-4574 or takens@sbcglobal.net

REMODELING? Call Ken DeVries today for a free estimate on windows or kitchen/bath renovation. 616-457-5880. Since 1985. www.homework-construction.com

REPAIRS/REMODELING Retired W. Mich carpenter, lifetime CRC, will exchange work on your cottage for stay there. 616.430.6155

Real Estate Sales / Rentals

4 SALE-TRAILER & MEMBERSHIP IN SHADY SHORES, GUN LAKE MI furnished 3 Bed, 1.5 Bath, large eat in Kit, Family Rm and Shed \$175k USD Call 708-650-7806

ANNA MARIA ISLAND CONDOS Large pool, beach access, free WiFi, 1&2 Bedroom, 1 block to beach. \$900-\$1200 a week. Contact Tim at 941-704-7525 redekercondosonami.com

COTTAGE FOR RENT 4 bed, 3 bath, updated. Sleeps 12, Hess Lake, MI private waterfront. \$2,000/week. Call Lonnie 616-942-0048.

FOR RENT CONDO Condo ,50+living, 2 bedroom 2 bath, Area Forrest/Cascade, 1995.00+deposit Txt 616.340.6038

NAPLES AREA, FL Gated 2 br. condo. Great pool. Easy access. Beautiful walking area. Vermuda Pointe Check internet Vanderbilt Lakes. By month 616.560.2895.

ORANGE LAKE RESORT FL 5 mi to Disney, 4 golf courses, 7 pools, many family activities. Sleeps 8-12, Multiple openings, \$ varies. Call/txt Ken 616-291-5052

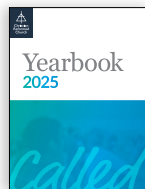
VACATION HOMES NEAR DISNEY FL Sunny Day Oasis has 2, 3, 4, & 5 BR homes 30 min to Disney. All with a community or private pool. Call/txt Ken 616-291-5052 www.sunnydayzoasis.com

Advertising helps you
connect with the CRC
616-224-5882
ads@thebanner.org

YEARBOOK 2025

Print version includes:

- Denominational offices directory
- Classical stated clerks and member churches
- Churches and ministries
- Ministers and commissioned pastors



This is the last year we will be printing copies!

To order, visit FaithAliveResources.org/Yearbook, call 800-333-8300, or email Orders@FaithAliveResources.org

Regular Edition \$13.20^{US}/\$^{CDN}

Spiral Bound \$14.30^{US}/\$^{CDN}

PDF Download \$7.00^{US}/\$^{CDN}

Available March 2025

The Yearbook will continue to be available online at crcna.org/Yearbook. FREE access to:

- Directory of churches
- Classical personnel, statistics, and more
- Churches' current and former ministers
- Directory of ministers and commissioned pastors



PAUL'S MISSIONARY JOURNEYS IN GREECE | OCT 13 - 24, 2025



MORE INFO

GUIDED ITINERARIES

EXPLORE. CONNECT. EXPERIENCE

THE GOLDEN AGE OF SPAIN

Apr 24 - May 7 | Pastor Hal & Jeanie Oakley

A JOURNEY: C.S. LEWIS'S ENGLAND

Jun 10 - 19 | Dr. Bill Kuhn

COASTAL CROATIA: BY LAND & SEA

Jun 12 - 23 | Dan & Amy Hermen

WINE TOUR OF GERMANY

Jul 3 - 13 | Casey Horn & Amy Waller

SCOTLAND: HIGHLIGHTS & HIGHLANDS

Aug 8 - 18 | Eric Van Tassell & Courtney E. Brewster

2025 EUROPEAN HANDBELL FESTIVAL

Aug 19 - 29 | Deborah Rice & Keith Cole

AMSTERDAM TO BRUGES: A SCENIC BIKE & BARGE TOUR

Sep 9 - 18 | John & Rachel Witte

BENTHEIM HERITAGE TOUR

Sep 9 - 22 | Mary Ann Knott

BIRDING TOUR OF THE NETHERLANDS

Sep 15 - 25 | Philip Vande-Riet & Sophia Witte

PAUL'S MISSIONARY JOURNEYS IN GREECE

Oct 13 - 24 | Dr. Jeffrey A. D. Weima

BEST OF SOUTHERN ITALY

Oct 13 - 24 | Denise Iarossi Taylor & Mike Bellomo

SOUTH KOREA & JAPAN

Oct 15 - 28 | Don & Kathy DeGraaf

BONHOEFFER & CHRISTMAS MARKETS

Nov 28 - Dec 8 | Mark Vermaire

MONTREAL & QUEBEC CITY

May 3 - 11, 2026 | Nate & Deb Barendse

PORTUGAL & SPAIN: RIVER CRUISE

Sep 11 - 21, 2026 | Nate & Deb Barendse

SIGN UP TODAY!
wittetours.com/banner

LOOKING FOR SOMETHING ELSE?

Our Vacation Consultants can help!

witte Travel & Tours

Grand Rapids, MI | 616.957.8113

Global REACH Global IMPACT

Your ad here reaches over 200,000 members, impacting the kingdom and growing your business!

Call for a no-obligation consultation.

616 224-5882
ads@TheBanner.org

When you give a legacy gift...

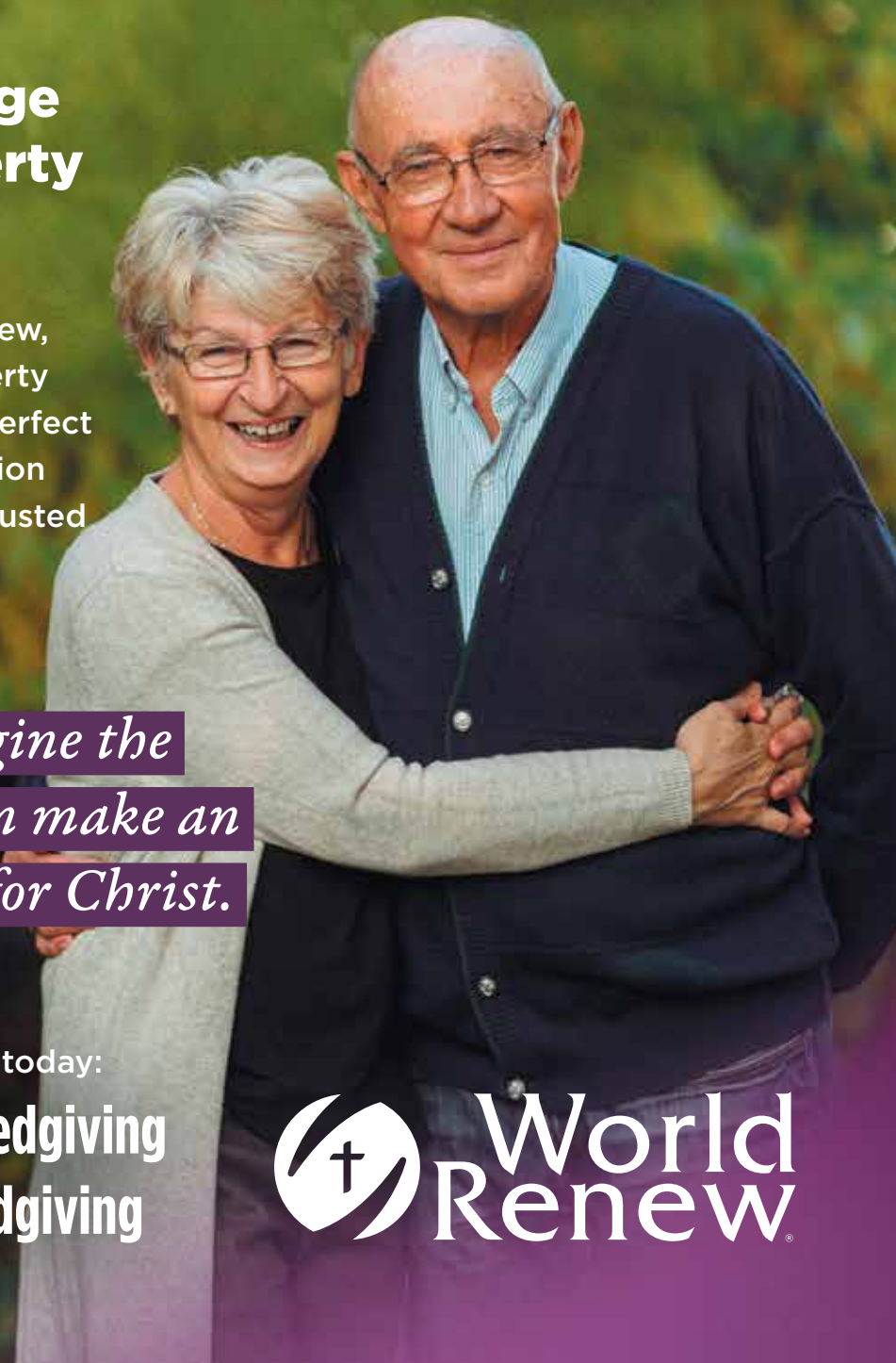
**You help to change
the story of poverty
for families.**

When you give to World Renew, you change the story of poverty for generations. Now is the perfect time to schedule a conversation with World Renew and our trusted gift planning experts about your estate.

*Together, let's imagine the
ways your story can make an
eternal difference for Christ.*

Renew hope in another story today:

worldrenew.net/plannedgiving
worldrenew.ca/plannedgiving



MISSIONS UPSIDE DOWN



JOIN US AS WE JOURNEY

Missions Upside Down is a **free**, six-part video series that takes you around the world and back again, honoring those hard at work in missions while also asking challenging questions about traditional models of missions.

Hosted by CRCNA pastor, Aaron Baart, *Missions Upside Down* was filmed and designed for Sunday School classes, small groups, youth groups, deacons, and anyone interested in missions.

Videography by Mark Volkers.

ANSWERING THE CALL OF
THE GREAT COMMISSION IN
THE 21ST CENTURY AND BEYOND.



Stream the videos and download learning guides at missionsupside.com.

Until All Is Made New

Be part of a purposeful community that prepares you to be all that God created you to be—and do all that God created you to do. At Dordt University, you'll be equipped with practical wisdom to serve wherever God leads until all is made new.

Experience the Dordt community for yourself.
Schedule your visit at dordt.edu/visit.

*Digital Media Production
students helped film the Missions
Upside Down series!*



Receiving the Blessing

Even as a kid, I had
a deep sense of
awe and peace
when I heard the
blessing spoken.



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*.

“MAY THE LOVE OF GOD, and the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.”

I remember as a child hearing those words of blessing roll out over the congregation in Rev. Van’s full-throated bass voice. Even as a kid, I had a deep sense of awe and peace when I heard the blessing spoken.

As a pastor, I take great joy in offering God’s blessing to his people. At the end of the worship service I get to raise my arms and say, “Receive God’s blessing.”

My custom when offering the blessing in my church community is to raise my arms, bow my head, and wait patiently until everyone is completely quiet.

Because children are in the service it can be quite raucous, so sometimes I wait quite awhile while parents shush their children and try to bring some order to the chaos. Eventually, when all is silent, I recite those wonderful words of blessing to the gathered ones who stand with open arms and hands to receive them. When I have finished with the words “... be with you all!” the people adjust their arms and call out, “And also with you!” It’s the richest of moments.

There have been some wonderful moments surrounding the blessing, such as when the 3-year-old daughter of my co-pastor came and stood beside me and raised her arms in blessing along with me. Another sweet moment was when I got a text from a parent that showed a picture of her baby asleep in a carrier with his hands open as if receiving the blessing. It was amazingly cute.

One day I went to Costco to replenish supplies and had stopped at the food court for the obligatory \$1.50 hotdog and soda. I was enjoying people-watching as I lingered over the hot dog. I spied a mother and her

two little boys pushing a loaded cart toward the exit. I immediately recognized them as fairly recent members of our church. One of the boys saw me, broke into a huge smile, and waved. He then started tugging frantically on his mother’s dress. “Mom! Mom! It’s ...” Clearly, he couldn’t remember my name. “It’s ...” He stopped and frowned for a moment, then suddenly lowered his head, thrust his arms high in the air as if calling down a blessing, and shouted, “It’s him!”

Mom and I laughed at the sheer delight he took in making the connection. “Well, that’s a great thing to be known for,” she said. “It must be fun to be known as the guy who does the blessing.”

It is. 



Connect with Thrive

When churches connect with Thrive, we listen! We then equip and encourage church staff and volunteers by working with you to cultivate a flourishing congregation in your local context.

- Our **Regional Connectors** link churches and classis groups to the resources you need to grow and thrive.
- Our **Ministry Consultants** partner with churches to help you discern what flourishing looks like in your local ministry.
- Our **Operations Team** connects congregations with the right people to support and encourage you as you live out your missional call.

We're here to help!

Tell us about yourself, your church, and your question or unique circumstance: crcna.org/thrive



Scan this code to connect:

