

FORUM

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Looking Back & Looking Ahead

COMMEMORATION OF THE *25th* ANNIVERSARY
OF WOMEN'S ORDINATION IN THE CRC



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25 YEARS & COUNTING!

This past year, I celebrated 25 years of ordained ministry in the Christian Reformed Church in North America. It was 1995. That year also marks a significant transition in the CRC. It was in that year that Synod officially opened the office of Minister of the Word to women.

As anyone who lived through that era remembers, this opening came with hesitancy and “back and forth.” Synod decisions were revised, amended and for one season even reversed. The offices of deacon and elder have their own history in this story, but today we focus on the office of Minister of the Word.

That hesitancy and “back and forth” still exists in the CRC. In the end, Synod decided that there were two equal and valid interpretations of Scripture and called the church to honor and respect those who held either view.

The CRC was also cautious as they considered the best way to acknowledge this history. A celebration of this anniversary is a painful commemoration for some families and for many church families, some of whom left the CRC to form what came to be known as the United Reformed Church (URC).

At the same time, I want to give you a picture of men and women who, in obedience to the call of God, come to Calvin Theological Seminary as part of their faithful response to the Lord Jesus Christ.

I can give witness to the fact that God is working through His church and through His people – male and female. One of the people who I would testify helped me and others in this journey is

Calvin University Pastor Mary Hulst. Mary and I were classmates in seminary and we remain colleagues. Mary and I served together in student government and we helped each other make it through comprehensive exams as members of the same study group. It has been a joy to see how God has used and is using Pastor Mary and so many other women in ministry.

We commemorate the anniversary of women’s ordination and we desire to deepen our expressed commitment to the education and formation of students (women and men) who seek to follow God’s call.

When someone asks me how long my wife Jackie and I have been married I usually say – 39 years **and counting**. In response, people usually say – “Congratulations!”

I added that phrase – and counting – a number of years ago, because I wanted my answer to indicate a marriage that was not ending or finished. I wanted to articulate a continued commitment that will hopefully (D.V.) take Jackie and I to 40 years of marriage and beyond.

As a parallel, in this time of remembering and reflecting on the decision regarding the ordination of women as Ministers of the Word in the CRCNA, I would like to say 25 years **and counting!** Let us respond – “Congratulations!”

May God find us faithful to that ministry and may our students find a hospitable community of learning to explore and respond to that call of God! We can do nothing less.



JUL MEDENBLIK
Calvin Theological Seminary President



Nominate a Calvin Seminary Alum for the Distinguished Alumni Award for 2022.

Nominations can be emailed to sempres@calvinseminary.edu
Due date: December 31, 2021



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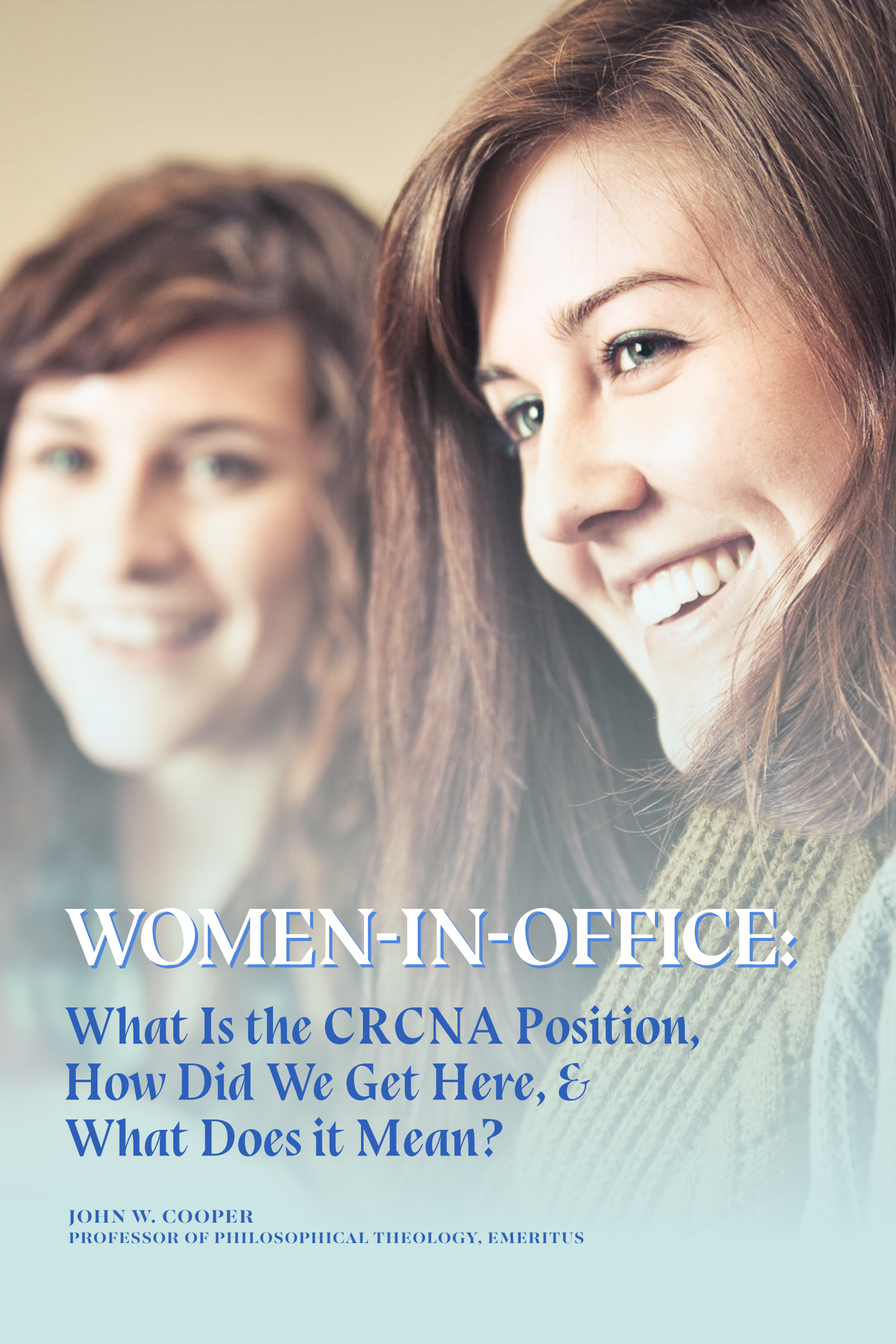
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WOMEN-IN-OFFICE:

What Is the CRCNA Position, How Did We Get Here, & What Does it Mean?

JOHN W. COOPER
PROFESSOR OF PHILOSOPHICAL THEOLOGY, EMERITUS

It is twenty-five years since the Synod of 1995 opened all ecclesiastical offices to women, and it took twenty-five years of study and debate until it made that decision. It is worth reviewing this half-century development so that current members of the CRCNA understand what our position is, the reasons for it, and what it implies for other challenging cultural issues.

How We Got Here. The 1960's began an era of significant change and reform of gender relations and the roles of women in marriage, society, the economy, and politics. Women began taking on an expanding range of non-traditional jobs, professions, and leadership roles. The question naturally arose, "what about the offices of the church?" The traditional answer was "because the Bible reserves those roles for men."

But during the 1970s, Synod decided to take another look at Scripture. Almost every year for over two decades, the ordination of women was on its agenda. It commissioned extensive studies of the authority and proper interpretation of Scripture, ecclesiastical office, male "headship," and women's participation in the ministries of the church. Study reports, overtures, and synodical sub-committees considered the length and depth of the arguments pro and con for the ordination of women.

Vote-counts were often close, one way and the other. In 1978 Synod opened the office of deacon, closed it the next year, and reversed it again in 1984.

All offices including evangelist were opened in 1990, subject to ratification in 1992. Synod 1992 permitted women to engage in diaconal work, teaching, and proclaiming Scripture but without ordination. In 1993 Synod reopened all offices to women, but Synod 1994 narrowly reversed that decision.

What Synod Decided. Synod 1995 narrowly opened all offices again, pending a final decision in 2000. After twenty-five years of debate, it concluded that both positions are validly derived from Scripture and that both should be allowed and that debate would temporarily cease. Specifically, it gave each classis authority to decide whether member congregations could open all offices to women, and whether they could be delegates to classis meetings. No congregation is required to ordain women, and a number of churches ordain women as deacons but not as elders or ministers. When a majority of churches in a classis favors opening all offices, then that becomes its default position. The same policy holds for Synod: The word male was removed from the Church Order's qualifications for the offices when a majority of the

classes favored doing so, and female officer-bearers were then delegated to Synod. (Synod had a panel of female advisors for a number of years before women delegates.)

Synod 1995 did not explain the conflicting interpretations of the biblical texts or how both conclusions could be drawn from Scripture. An informative summary is found in The Report of the Committee to Review the Decision re Women in Office for Synod 2000.

Two Interpretations of Scripture. What follows is my own summary of the positions—their significant agreements and the crucial disagreement. Both affirm that males and females equally image God, are equally culpable for the fall, equally redeemed by God's grace in Christ alone, equally filled and gifted by the Holy Spirit, equally share in Christ's offices of prophet, priest, and king, and equally destined to reign with Christ in God's everlasting kingdom. Both positions recognize that women in the Bible (such as Miriam, Deborah, Huldah, Lydia, Dorcas, and Priscilla) lead, teach, proclaim the Gospel, and serve diaconally. Both sides (with

The key difference is whether the limits in Scripture are enduring and unchanging principles, like the Ten Commandments, or...

minor dissent) agree that “headship” pertains to marriage—not all male-female relations—and is not a “chain of command” but a relationship of mutual submission in which the husband should take the lead in laying down his life for his wife as Christ did for the church (Eph.5:21ff.). Both sides encourage women’s participation and leadership in society, culture, and church (except office). (It is wrong to accuse those who oppose women’s ordination of implying that women are inferior to men.) Both positions recognize that Scripture limits women’s roles in communal religious activities—Old Testament male priesthood, for example, and Paul’s assertion that women should not teach or have authority in worship. The opposing positions share significant common ground.

The key difference is whether the limits in Scripture are enduring and unchanging principles, like the Ten Commandments, or historically situated and possibly changeable regulations, such as dietary and ritual practices, permitting slavery, prohibiting interest, and monarchical government. Those who oppose women’s ordination interpret the limits as enduring principles. They have good grounds, unless there are sufficient reasons to conclude otherwise.

To see why the restrictions might not be permanent, however, consider some debated issues in I Timothy 2:8-15, the text with the most definitive limits. First, Paul might be addressing married couples rather than all men and women because the Greek terms for man/husband and for woman/wife are the same, and he addresses child-bearing and marriage (Gen.2). Second, the word “authority” does not occur elsewhere

in Scripture, and there is extra-biblical evidence that it meant “illegitimate or dominating authority” (for example, the priestesses of Diana in Ephesus, where Timothy was, led men in sexual rituals) rather than the servant authority that Jesus enjoined. Further, although here Paul does not permit wives/women to teach their husbands/men, in Acts 18:26 he commends Priscilla for teaching Apollos. Most significantly, some of Paul’s instructions in verses 8-12 are universal and enduring—men praying peaceably and women dressing modestly. But we have judged other instructions to be culturally situated and not enduring—raising hands to pray, and not wearing gold, expensive clothes, or braided hair. The question therefore arises whether Paul’s not permitting women to teach or have authority is an enduring principle or an historically situated regulation. The traditional position claims that it must be an enduring principle because Paul appeals to the order of creation and the fall in verse 14.

But I Corinthians 11:3-16 suggests otherwise. Paul gives clear guidelines for all the churches about hair length and head coverings for men and women when they pray and prophesy during worship (women are not required to keep silent). He bases these rules on headship, the creation of man before woman, and the natural difference between men and women. But Old Testament men wore long hair and covered their heads for prayer, so Paul’s appeal to headship and creation order does not imply that his instructions in I Corinthians 11 are universally binding principles. Since Scripture interprets Scripture, there is good reason to conclude that Paul’s instructions based on creation and the fall in I Timothy 2 are likewise not changeless principles.

historically situated and possibly changeable regulations, such as dietary and ritual practices permitting slavery, prohibiting interest, and monarchical government.

The debate about I Timothy 2 is typical of the other relevant texts as well. It exemplifies why the Synods of 1995 and 2000 allowed both positions, odd as it seems for a church that professes the unity and clarity of Scripture.

Did the CRC concede to Political Relativism? Accepting two contradictory interpretations of Scripture might seem like adopting the subjectivism that infects current culture wars: truth is in the eye of the beholder; opposing ideologies each have their own facts and reality; reasonable adjudication is impossible. Does the CRC position on women’s ordination imply that we are merely reading our own preferences back into the Bible?

No. A more accurate analogy is deciding legal disputes. In some court cases the evidence so strongly favors one side that the verdict is “beyond reasonable doubt.” Other cases are closer but can be decided by “the preponderance of the evidence.” But sometimes the evidence is so even or debatable that conscientious judges and jurors cannot reach consensus. On the issue of women’s ordination, the CRCNA is like a “hung jury.” This result is neither ideological relativism nor political pragmatism. It is the old Reformed principle, “bind only where Scripture binds.” After decades of conscientious deliberation, we are not (yet) able to discern whether Scripture binds us about the ordination of women.

Women in Office and Same-Sex Marriage

Professor Cooper, you have been asked a number of times this question - Does Women in Office Lead to Same-Sex Marriage? What is your response?

No. In an earlier Forum article (“Not Like Women in Office: Scripture, Hermeneutics, and Same Sex Relations,” Fall 2015, <https://legacy.calvinseminary.edu/wp-content/uploads/Forum-October-2015-Copy.pdf>), I explained why it does not, and how the same Reformed approach to Scripture that supports women’s ordination rejects same-sex activity. I cannot summarize the debate again here. Suffice it to note that the synodical study reports of 1973 and 2020 extensively examined the relevant texts and the pros and cons of interpretations for both sides. They concluded that these texts are “clear, consistent and compelling” (2020 Report) in forbidding any type of same-sex activity. Only one position is validly derived from Scripture. The CRC’s position on the ordination of women therefore does not lead to same-sex marriage.

Since 1973 Synod has also repeatedly pledged love, hospitality, and full participation in the life of the church to same-sex attracted people, and to support them in the daunting challenges they face. May the Lord move us all to live up to that commitment.



JOHN W. COOPER
Professor of Philosophical Theology,
Emeritus

PARTNERS IN THE GOSPEL

THE WORK AND CALLING OF JOAN FLIKKEMA



In the kingdom of God, there are secret agents—those working behind the scenes quietly, but formidably.

Meet special agent Joan Flikkema.

A former teacher, Flikkema first became interested in the roles of women in ministry as she learned about gender disparities in education. Then she noticed the struggle of women trying to find their place in the church. Ever since, she's been investing her time, writing, and financial resources to support and encourage women in their theological training.

Flikkema is committed to ensuring that women who are called to ministry are also equipped for ministry. To that end she has founded and supported a breadth of scholarships at Calvin Seminary, including the Joan Flikkema Scholarship for Women in Ministry, named in her honor. Flikkema's support has directly influenced the life of countless women at the seminary, some of whom are featured in this issue of The Forum.

And it all started with a question.

Has God forgotten to be gracious to women?

When Flikkema heard this title, and the talk that accompanied it by a speaker in the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRCNA) denomination, she didn't feel bound by the constraints of 1970s America on women.

"That title inspired some of us — women and men together — to become partners in the Gospel," says Flikkema. "We wanted to affirm and celebrate God's gifts to women for ministry."

Soon after, Flikkema became one of the founding members of the Committee for Women in the Christian Reformed Church (CW-CRC).

We were motivated by an understanding that each generation is called to make the world a better place



Seated: Dorothy Van Hamersveld, Jim DeJong, Joan Flikkema, Joan Huizenga
Standing: Gary Bekker, Dale Van Hamersveld, Maynard Flikkema, Nick Huizenga

“It was difficult for women who had gifts for ministry and sensed God’s call to advocate for themselves,” Flikkema reflects. “The CW-CRC became their supporters and advocates.”

The group’s purpose, Flikkema says, was to develop understanding of and support for women who had gifts (which) prepared them to serve in ministry.

Because financial support for women in seminaries was almost nonexistent, the CW-CRC established the Women in Ministry Scholarship Program. At first, CRCNA women received support to attend various seminaries in the Reformed tradition. Later the program shifted its focus to Calvin Seminary.

“We were motivated by an understanding that each generation is called to make the world a better place,” Flikkema recalls. “Roberta Hestenes, a strong Christian and leader at a Christian university, said that the key question is not what is God’s will for my life? but how can I participate in the Kingdom?”

“Our group wanted to help women who had the gifts and talents for ministry to honor that call.”

But, in many ways, Flikkema and the CW-CRC would have to pave their own path.

“As advocates for women in ministry, our group had to challenge interpretation of Scripture, church order, and cultural patterns. We emphasized the importance of not quenching the Spirit.”

Like the early Christian church, which dealt with its own identity issues, Flikkema says that the church has continued to experience crises of identity throughout history.

“Our group began to build on new forms of understanding and actively explaining and modeling the roles of women in ministry,” Flikkema explains. “When we began in the early 1970s we understood that a cultural shift takes about fifty years to emerge and go through formation and implementation and acceptance, and that appears to have taken place in the CRC for women in ministry.”

It is important to note that the decision of calling and appointing women to ecclesiastical office within a CRCNA church is a decision made by the specific congregation.

CRCNA.org notes: “All congregations in the Christian Reformed Church in North America may allow women to serve in the office of minister, elder, deacon, or commissioned pastor. The CRC recognizes that there are two different perspectives and convictions on this issue, both of which honor the Scriptures as the infallible Word of God....”

For the churches open to calling women, there are women open to their calling.

“Women are showing in their ministry roles that they are very capable and well qualified for church leadership,” Flikkema notes. “They are needed for gender balance in our churches. They are living out their callings in many ways as pastors and chaplains. They nurture Kingdom citizens.”

Left to Right:
Joan Huizenga, Dorothy Van Hamersveld,
Joan Flikkema, Donna Sieplinga



Flikkema has aimed to help fill the gap of financial support for women training for ministry. She is filled with gratitude for the many women and men who took seriously their calls to be co-workers in the Kingdom and were part of the project to provide pathways for the ordination of women.

“The women in seminary programs need support,” she says. “As human beings they need social support. They also need professional support through networking in the church. They need financial support for their studies. They need the encouragement of others as they study and connect in their ministries.”

Attending Calvin Seminary, Flikkema says, provides an environment for women to establish these valuable connections. Flikkema encourages the Reformed community in what she calls their significant place in western Michigan and the Christian world.

“Women and men together can be the human resources that improve the quality of life in our communities,” she reminds us. “We are living in times when we need all of the resources that we can have to provide insight and strength for spiritual survival.”

JOAN FLIKKEMA
CW-CRC Representative

TWENTY-FIVE YEARS ON:

JUST LOOK AT WHAT GOD HAS DONE!

A quarter of a century has passed since the Synod of 1995 opened all ecclesial offices to women in the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRCNA). In that time, more than 200 women have been ordained in the CRCNA and served in various ministries in North America including ministers of the word, commissioned pastors, chaplaincy, teaching, and the professoriate, to name a few. While the numbers bear witness to how much progress has been made, the testimonies of women who are serving in various ministries provide a deeper and broader view of what God has done in and through their ministries.

We asked a number of women who are ordained in the CRCNA and who are Calvin Theological Seminary alumnae to share their testimonies, guided by the following two questions:

What do you want people to remember or know at this point in time about the ordination of women in the CRCNA?

What counsel, advice or encouragement would you give to women at a seminary or others who are considering going to a seminary to pursue a ministry calling?

In their testimonies below, we see their journeys into ministry that are sprinkled with joy, resilience, challenges, pain, and faithfulness. We hope that you will be encouraged by their testimonies and with gratitude acknowledge "...just look at what God has done!"



AMANDA BAKALE

ORDINATION: OCTOBER 4, 2012

I want folks to recognize the absolute good fruit of women's ordination in the CRC. While we could have had arguments and disagreements 25 years ago, what we couldn't see was the fruit of women's ordination in our denomination. Now we can. The gifts and calls of women into the pulpit and the pastoral study and into people's lives has produced such good fruit: faithful preaching of God's word, the people of God cared for and visited, our tiny ones baptized, the bread broken and cup shared at Christ's Table, the little girls and boys who see a diversity of leadership at the front of their church, the mentorship between generations of women, and the absolute persistent faithfulness and hard work shown by so many sisters in the past quarter of a century.

It's worth it! It is so deeply worth all the struggle and hard work, persistence and resistance, disappointment and challenges. For every person that walks out on you presiding at the Table or while you preach, there are multitudes more who are grateful for your leadership, your presence, and your gifts for ministry. Especially precious to me are the little girls who will never question whether they can be a pastor because of your presence at the front, in the pulpit, and in their lives. Thanks be to God.

CHELSEA HARMON

ORDINATION: APRIL 3, 2011

Imagine all of the unique expressions of ministry that have been added to the CRC in the last 25 years. Just look at what God has done!

Consider the seminary stage as the first step of many in ministry. The nuance and richness of God's vocational calling will take years for you to discover, explore, and put into practice. So if "the fit" doesn't seem right, or that "itch" isn't being scratched, seek on! Never settle for less than what God wills for you.



ERIKA DEKKER

ORDINATION: OCTOBER 15, 2000

Women in ministry are in ministry because we are responding in faith to a God-given call. I have yet to meet a woman in ministry who is doing so out of a desire to prove a point or who wants to "shake things up". Instead we are simply and profoundly attempting to live out our call and our vocation. Frederick Buechner famously wrote, "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."



For women in ministry, our deep gladness meets the world's deep hunger in the many and diverse places and spaces of ministry, as pastors, chaplains, professors and more. At the same time, our deep gladness is often also a place of deep sorrow and pain. Sometimes this is due to the actual ministry, but more often the deeper sorrow and pain arise from being denied the opportunity to be God's ministers in these places of need.

I have been exceedingly fortunate to have immediate and extended family who have always supported and affirmed my call to ministry. Further, given my context, I have been surrounded by women in ministry at church (elders, deacons, pastors) and at work (fellow chaplains). Since women in church office have long-ceased to be an "issue" for me and many of my immediate colleagues, I have been able to live into the beautiful matter-of-factness of both women and men serving in ministry in the capacity that most fits them. And I can unequivocally assert that my congregation, my workplace, my family is stronger and better and more fully reflects God's own diversity because of it.

Connect with and talk to women who are in ministry! Whether it be a long-term mentoring relationship, a one-day shadowing experience or an informal conversation, these can be a source of encouragement and discernment.

JANA VANDER LAAN

ORDINATION: NOVEMBER 11, 2007

I want people to know that our Lord Jesus is using the ordination of women to grow and strengthen his church. I have witnessed this in my own local context. Several people have joined the congregation where I serve as co-pastor with my husband because of the model of shared leadership between men and women that we represent. I am grateful to see past hurtful exclusions by the church being healed and communion with God through the church being restored because of the ordination of women in the CRCNA.

Surround yourself with a mentor or two or three. Make the time to sit at their feet and learn with them. For these mentors know what is like to be on the road of ordained ministry, have navigational wisdom, can hold your hand through the struggles, and will dance with you in the joys.



INSOON GHO HOAGLAND

ORDINATION: JULY 28, 1998

I want people to remember what the LORD says about the day of the LORD [Joel 2: 28-32]. God has poured out His Spirit on all people: young and old; male and female; black, yellow, white, and a mixture of these colors. When God uses His people to bring His salvation there are no limits, no boundaries.

I'd like to encourage fellow women who are at a seminary or others who are considering going to pursue a ministry calling with these words of Joshua 1:6-9: "Be strong and courageous because you will lead these people to inherit the land...Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified: do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go."

As you received God's calling to a ministry no matter what obstacles and challenges you face, you should keep your eyes on Jesus and remember who has called you. It is not you who chose to follow but God chose you and led you where you need to be, therefore, "to act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8b). Our calling is not to change the world, but we are the embodiment of Jesus Christ our LORD. As a follower of Christ, we all should be imitators of our LORD Jesus Christ as Paul said in his letter to the Philippians (2:1-11, NIV).



DENISE POSIE

**CALVIN SEMINARY'S DIVERSITY, EQUITY & INCLUSION DISCIPLESHIP COACH
IDI QUALIFIED ADMINISTRATOR**



In commemorating the 25th Anniversary of the ordination of women in the CRCNA, in particular, over the last several years as director of Leadership Diversity Women's Ministry, I have heard voices of lament and joy from both women and men. We lament concerns about the length of time it takes for women to receive a call, be a senior pastor, and receive a call after the first call. We celebrate the opportunities where women are thriving in using their God-given gifts and experiences for kingdom purposes.

I would like people to remember God's faithfulness even under challenging circumstances. Holding our two positions on the ordination of women has not been easy or without pain. God holds our past, present, and future in his hands. Each generation has its own story and is part of a bigger story yet being told. The beauty of this journey is that women are not alone and unsupported in their call, a transition from one ministry to another or service in a challenging ministry context.

I advise and encourage women to have one or more mentors to journey with them, whether pursuing a ministry calling or considering going to a seminary. Be willing to make connections with women and men leaders and pastors who have been where you discern God's leading. Prayerfully, listen, observe and be curious. Have a teachable spirit and trust God's plan, even when you cannot see your way forward.

JOAN DEVRIES

ORDINATION: FEBRUARY 3, 2002

I grew up in a time when women could not be considered for office bearer roles, and certainly not as pastors. So as a little girl I wanted to become a missionary because it seemed that women's abilities and passions could be used in that field. How glad I am that women's participation is now officially embraced by many based on giftedness and calling. The present church is a fuller reflection of the image of God, and can carry out its mission more effectively.

Although official validation may be available, sadly there are still contextual obstacles to women thriving in leadership. Many of these are unacknowledged, and you may have to fight to have a fair voice at the table. Seek out mentors, spiritual directors, counselors and prayer support as needed to flourish in your beautiful calling. The church needs your gifts and voice. Well done, good and faithful servant!



MARY HULST

ORDINATION: SEPTEMBER 29, 1996

I am very aware that others took significant risks so that I could be ordained. I know that some worked year after year after year, suffering the ups and downs of synod after synod, to do what they knew was right. They were responding in obedience to the prophet Joel and the apostle Peter so that we could follow in the footsteps of Esther, Deborah, Phoebe, Priscilla and so many others.

I remain so very grateful for the confidence placed in me by my congregation, classis and denomination back in 1996. I pray that the fruit that is born out of the ministry of women in the CRCNA (lay and ordained), will continue to strengthen congregations, the denomination, and the church of Jesus Christ for generations to come.

Ministry is the best job in the world! You have a front row seat to what God is up to in a life, a church, or a community. Go to seminary and get as much training as you can and then get out there! The church needs you. Email me if you need encouragement.

RUTH HOFMAN

ORDINATION: AUGUST 24, 1996

Women have long done the hard work of being Church—serving as volunteers for everything from nursery duty to caring for shut-ins. They operate with soft power that relies on conversation, consensus and community in the face of authority, aggression and autonomy that society seems to reward. With ordination, women may be seated in places of power but the Church can be grateful that they still lead with the soft touch of humility and grace.

Prepare for the rhythm of bi-vocationality and count it a privilege to do the work of Christ in whatever sphere of influence God is calling you. Always be mentoring the next generation.



SHEILA HOLMES

ORDINATION: OCTOBER 8, 1998

God continues to open avenues for the mission of sharing the Gospel in greater ways within the CRCNA in women being ordained. The fact that we celebrated the one hundred years anniversary of Joanna Veenstra missionary work shows that God calls women to minister in the lives of his image bearer wherever people do not know who he is. God is using women to touch lives in places where men cannot enter. The same Holy Spirit is showing God's power and glory through adversity no different than what we see in the Scriptures. He did not take the popular people of society but the ones he could pour out his power and receive the glory.

Continue to listen to the voice of God in your calling and let no one dissuade you from pursuing anything different. It may mean being actively patient as God opens the doors or windows because He is preparing you for greatness.



MARY-LEE BOUMA

ORDINATION: AUGUST 23, 1997

When asked in 2014 by a CTS 20th reunion committee for a memory of seminary years, the first word which came unbidden into my mind was pain. As a CRC pastor since 1994, the joy God has given me in equipping believers to build communities of Jesus followers ministering in their neighbourhoods, workplaces, and campuses has long since eclipsed the difficult seminary and subsequent three years being unordained in the pastorate. Unfortunately, however, too often I hear current stories from CRC women of similar painful experiences of rejection, hostility, disrespect and casual humiliation while at Calvin Seminary or looking for a call or in ministry. (Of course our Black, Latin, Asian and Indigenous sisters and brothers are only too familiar with such experiences.) In a denomination in which only 4 of our 49 classes forbid women's participation in their classes, it is past time for us to fully celebrate the gift of every contemporary Priscilla, Phoebe and Junia among us.



THEA NYHOFF LEUNK

ORDINATION: APRIL 22, 2001

I give thanks for those who spent so many years advocating for women in office. From 1973 on, male and female voices spoke out and continued to speak until women were not only able to be deacons, but elders and ministers; appointed to denominational positions and finally, delegates to synod. Until we have a single position on this issue, however, women's ordination in the CRCNA will always be experienced as a "less than" to men's.

Honor the call God has placed on you and persevere despite the obstacles and difficulties you'll experience. Find allies who will support you, encourage you, and pray for you; you will need them.



MY CALLING

BY SARAH SCHREIBER

Sarah, pictured with husband, Ryan Schreiber '08, at his ordination at Grace Christian Reformed Church in Grand Rapids, MI

On the floor of Synod in 1996 a group of bright-eyed candidates was approved for the ministry of the Word in the CRCNA. That year, for the first time, some of those candidates were women. This summer our denomination commemorates twenty-five years of women serving in ordained ministry. I am thankful for this opportunity to reflect on the milestone in light of my own calling.

In 1996 I was not aware of denominational affairs. I was a shy seventh grader at Holland (Michigan) Christian Middle School preparing to make my profession of faith at Park CRC. During this time, others whom I did not know—both men and women—charted a path for me to follow. I admire these trailblazers. I also acknowledge the pain of this moment in our denomination's history: one in ten congregations left the CRCNA fearing our church no longer listened to the Word of God.

Now twenty-five years later I am a beneficiary of that history, grateful to have an office in the faculty hallway at Calvin Theological Seminary. Here with God's help I teach students to correctly handle the word of truth. I have the amazing opportunity to introduce new groups of bright-eyed students to the Hebrew alphabet and more: the book of Jonah in Hebrew, how to read the Old Testament slowly and carefully, and the one grand story of scripture. I see our students delight in the law of the Lord in a new way. Our students are following their own callings. I admire them also.

I am grateful to God and to our faith community for this ministry opportunity. Yet as a woman there are sometimes painful challenges. There are also unique advantages and daily opportunities to reflect on God's grace-filled work in the world and how I am being conformed to the image of his Son.

For example, studies of academic institutions have demonstrated that women on faculty are approached more frequently by students in distress than their male faculty colleagues. These students bring



not only academic concerns but also deeply personal ones. When such a student knocks on my door—or knocks virtually via Zoom or email—I am reminded how honored I am to be trusted, perhaps partly because of my gender. Being a woman equips me for ministry. Yet this ongoing and sometimes unequal caregiving takes an emotional toll. Other deadlines remain. I am encouraged when I remember Jesus who faced the constant press of human need. He is the Good Shepherd to me and to our students.

Another significant challenge faced by women leaders with families is the fact that these women typically carry a greater proportion of household management and perform more unpaid care than their male partners. These women strive to cultivate a professional persona, but during this pandemic many have found themselves bouncing a toddler while video conferencing with their male peers. I've been there. To be a woman in ministry often necessitates finding strength in humility, resiliency, and flexibility. After all, Jesus himself turned his own interruption of bouncing toddlers into a moment of blessing and teaching on the very kingdom of God.

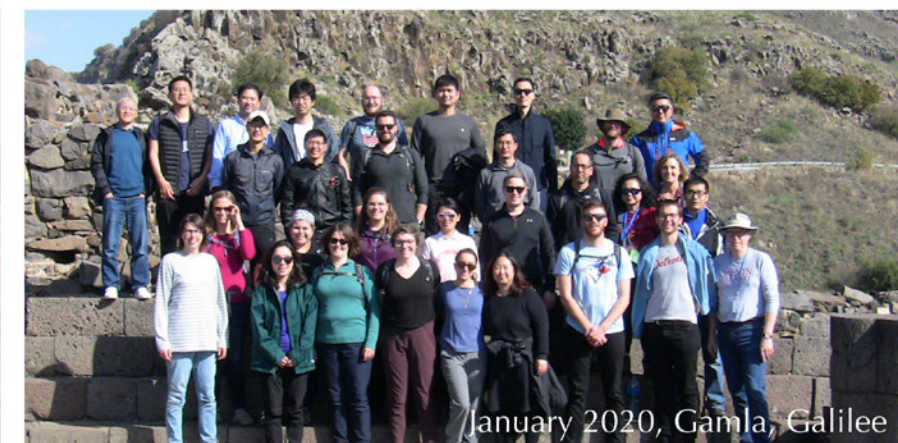
Even after twenty-five years, being a woman in ministry still is not the norm in the CRCNA.

I have found myself in routine situations that become silly and awkward, such as wondering where to clip a lapel microphone pack on my dress or where to lactate. Yet some situations continue to strike me as quite sad, like advising an aspiring minister who will face more difficulty finding a call than her peers who are men. I am reminded of our Lord who ministers to a broken world as it is. Jesus himself ministered despite not meeting norms—he was from Nazareth and the son of a carpenter. Throughout his ministry Jesus gracefully defied expectations: eating with sinners, healing on the Sabbath, washing his disciples' feet, and befriending women. Our Lord is still a friend of women. I know he is with me in my office.

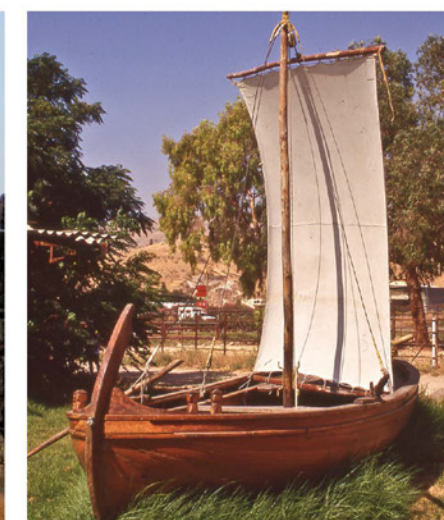
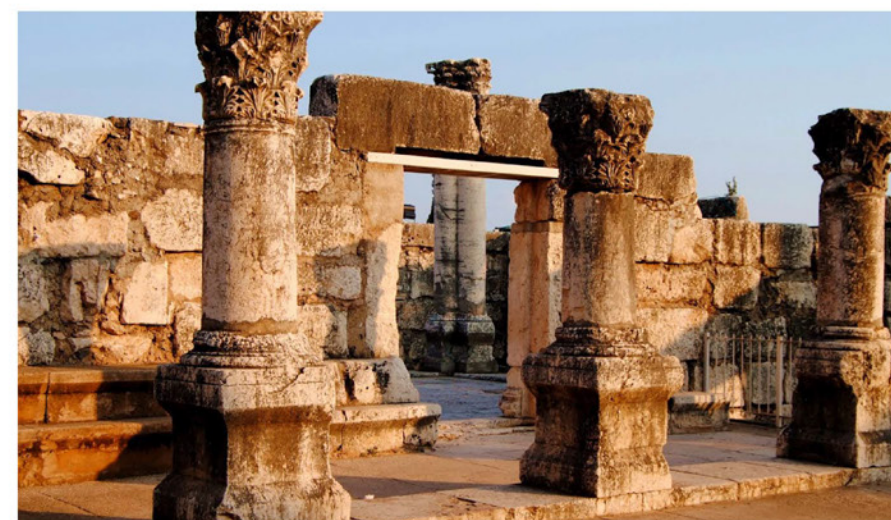
Reflecting on twenty-five years, I am grateful for the opportunity to follow my calling. I am grateful for trailblazers. I am grateful for a community that has tough conversations on how to be faithful to the Word of God, which I love. I am grateful for our students and colleagues at Calvin Theological Seminary. Most of all, I am grateful for our Lord Jesus Christ who is always with me.



SARAH SCHREIBER
Associate Professor of Old Testament



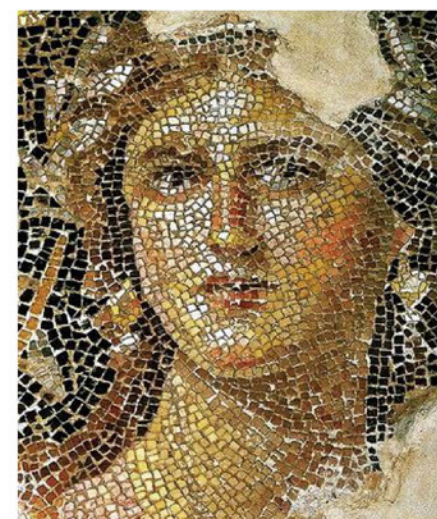
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Mary Vandenberg is a Professor of Systematic Theology at Calvin Seminary, the first tenured female professor. She recently sat down to discuss aspects of her teaching, ministry, and calling.

FOLLOWING STEP BY STEP

HOW WERE YOU CALLED TO SEMINARY?

My call to seminary came later in life. I was a graduate of Calvin College, where I studied biology. After graduation I worked in a couple different jobs before we had our first child. With his birth, my husband and I decided I would not return to paid employment. I became a full-time homemaker at that point. We received the gift of two more children in the next several years. In addition to home-making, I volunteered many hours at church and at our kid's school as well as working part-time on and off.

There were a number of moments in my life that led me to seminary but one huge influence was my love of the Bible, something nurtured in Bible Study Fellowship. In my late thirties, as my youngest child was nearing school age, I began asking God what was next for me. As I was praying one day, and asking God this question I heard the question back, *what about seminary?* I had never in my life thought about seminary studies so this sent me on a journey of discerning if seminary could be in my future.

HOW DID YOU CHOOSE CALVIN SEMINARY?

During this time of discernment, I attended an event held by Calvin Seminary at a local church. It was about discerning one's call to seminary. The registrar at the time, John VanderLugt, convinced me to try taking a class.

I chose to take the course "Doctrine of Salvation" with Dr. Neal Plantinga. I had read his book on sin and was excited for the possibility of being taught by him. I had a lot of questions and knew almost nothing about theology. The first day of class Dr. Plantinga told us that a living faith is a faith that asks questions, a faith seeking understanding. When I heard those words I felt like the spirit was saying, *you found your place.*

WHAT WAS YOUR EXPERIENCE LIKE AS A STUDENT, AND HOW DID YOU TRANSITION TO THE FACULTY?

I had no plan when I began my studies, but soon enrolled in the Master of Theological Studies (MTS) degree program. During that time I had

DESPITE DIFFICULTIES, GOD HAS BLESSED ME HERE AT CALVIN SEMINARY.

I AM SO GRATEFUL GOD CALLED ME HERE.

the opportunity to work as a teaching assistant with Dr. Dan Kroeze at Kuyper College. I ended up focusing on Old Testament studies, and was encouraged by some of my professors to consider doctoral work. After finishing the MTS degree I taught Old Testament Survey at Cornerstone University where I was once again encouraged to consider doctoral work.

Wondering if God was suggesting I pursue teaching, I applied and was accepted into the Ph.D. program at Calvin Seminary. Although I intended to study the history of Old Testament exegesis with Dr. Richard Muller, in my second quarter of doctoral studies I took an atonement course with Dr. Ronald Feenstra and switched into Systematic Theology. During the fourth year of the program I had the opportunity to teach courses at Calvin Seminary, Western Seminary, and Kuyper College. These opportunities affirmed my calling to teach.

The following year, in order to focus on finishing my dissertation, I turned down all teaching opportunities except for teaching one course at Calvin Seminary. In December of 2007 Calvin opened a position for teaching, and specifically invited women and minorities to apply. After a rather grueling interview process, I was offered a position teaching Systematic Theology and Old Testament in May 2008 and was affirmed by Synod in June 2008.

WHAT HAS BEEN DIFFICULT ABOUT YOUR JOURNEY?

WHAT HAS BEEN LIFE GIVING?

Several things were difficult. I did not know where all of this education was leading. I enjoyed the MTS program and made good friends but I did not have a clear sense of a specific calling other than to continue my studies. That uncertainty remained into my PhD studies and was frustrating at times. In addition, the Ph.D. was a very challenging and very lonely time. I think following God often isn't easy. The stories of the people in Hebrews 11 make that clear.



And then there is the impostor syndrome that many professional women face. Questions like, 'am I good enough,' or 'do I measure up' remain close to the surface, even as a professor. What is important, however, is that throughout my time as a student and also as a professor, I can testify that God who called me is faithful. He is at work within me, reminding me I am not alone. (Phil. 2:13) Remembering this during really tough weeks or when I feel like I just don't fit gives me encouragement to persevere.

Despite difficulties, God has blessed me here at Calvin Seminary. I am so grateful God called me here. Some days I still find myself surprised and almost giddy that I have the privilege of spending large blocks of my time doing what I love – wondering and thinking about God. The best part of my work is interacting with students. These interactions are very often life-giving, glimpses of grace. Teaching energizes me and the lack of face to face contact with students this past year has been hard. My mission has always been to teach in a way that shows students why theology matters and what

difference good theological thinking makes in life. In the end, I hope my teaching points students to God as he has revealed himself and that it makes them want to know and love God more. I hope to leave them wondering and thinking, not having all their questions answered, just like my professors did for me. I hope I am a piece of their formation that pushes their faith to continue to seek understanding, even when that understanding comes cloaked in mystery.



MARY VANDEN BERG
Professor of Systematic Theology

Interviewed By
AMANDA GREENHOE



MOMENTS IN MINISTRY FORMATION

STUDENTS SHARE THEIR EXPERIENCES AT CALVIN

BY AMANDA GREENHOE

“I was called to seminary in a moment, essentially.” MDiv student Kristy Bootsma says, as she sits down for a Zoom conversation with two other women studying at Calvin Seminary.

The Edmonton, Alberta native is remembering that moment of clarity five years ago when she suddenly received her calling.

“From the tips of my toes to the top of my head I was filled with the Holy Spirit,” she explains. “It was something I’d never felt before. God said you will do this. And I knew that ‘this’ — the only word for that was ‘pastor.’”

“Here I am, send me,” she responded, echoing Isaiah’s commission in the Old Testament. And she found Calvin Seminary was a good fit for her next steps.

HEARING AND DISCERNING

It is then that Nicole Romero, a third year MDiv student, jumps in the conversation on calling.

“My call to seminary was not nearly as organized,” she says, nodding to Bootsma. “To tie a word to it, I come back to the word ‘whirlwind.’”

After completing her undergraduate studies in intercultural studies, Romero had envisioned herself living overseas or connecting with her Honduran roots in Central America. All of her opportunities were leading to serving outside of the U.S.

However, once offered a position teaching English in Indonesia with the Peace Corps, she sensed she needed to turn it down. It was then that past conversations came to Romero’s mind. A professor and a supervisor during her undergraduate years, both Calvin Seminary alumni, had separately posed the same question: “Have you ever thought about seminary?”

What is that? thought Romero. What could I do?

Recalling these questions led Romero to Calvin Seminary to jump into the MDiv program.

Fellow student Gail Ashmore, who is pursuing an MA in Ministry Leadership through distance learning, shares some of her own questions about her role in ministry. They were questions for which she didn’t have all of the answers when beginning her seminary journey.

“It was this step of obedience and abiding in the Spirit one step at a time,” she recalls.

***“God has taken me so much further
than I could ever imagine.”***



Gail with husband Sam and sons Zion and Judah



Kristy leading SERVE in Wyoming



Nicole on a trip with Calvin Seminary to Capernaum, Israel



Kristy on a trip with Calvin Seminary to the Holy Land



At first, Ashmore says she looked for the approval and affirmation of others. But in time, she learned that God’s imagination is bigger than what others could offer.

So Ashmore took the first step towards seminary, feeling called not to a specific role, but to God himself. Soon she began discovering her enthusiasm for pastoral leadership. Now, she says, she’s dreaming about completing the MDiv.

“God has taken me so much further than I could ever imagine.”

WOMEN OF WELCOME

At the time she was called, Bootsma didn’t have a clear picture of a model for being a woman in ministry. After more than 20 years spent in the church, she knew only of one female youth pastor. Today, she can’t count the number of women in ministry she not only knows of, but with whom she’s personally connected.

Bootsma says that the mentorship aspect of seminary has been absolutely crucial in her formation.

“I was unprepared for how important mentorship would be,” she says, noting that a leading guide in her journey has been Dr. Rev. Mara Joy Norden at The Community Church, an RCA ministry in Ada, MI.

Norden, Bootsma’s internship supervisor, has become “a friend when ministry doesn’t always feel friendly.”

The future pastor says of her mentor, “She has encouraged me to lean into what is good and lean into what is hard. She’s been able to identify gifts

in me and encourage questions in me.”

“She models what a ministry leader should be.”

Romero can’t imagine her seminary experience without her own mentor, Ann Kapteyn, a Bible translation consultant and former missionary-in-residence at the seminary.

“She has been such a foundational person in my life as well as in this seminary journey,” Romero reflects.

Romero and Kapteyn, who has served in Brazil and Cameroon for two decades, found an immediate connection through their interest in communication among and between cultures. The pair also dialogued about their tendency to feel overwhelmed at times, recognizing that the spaces they walk in as women can be unfamiliar to them and toward them.

Ashmore says that her mentor, Rev. Samantha DeJong-McCarron, has been just as influential. DeJong-McCarron, Vocational Assessment and Discernment Specialist at Calvin Seminary, often reminds Ashmore that “we are human beings, not human *doings*.”

This realization, Ashmore notes, frees her to “not lead out of a place of productivity but to lead out of a place of Jesus’ healing and love.”

OPEN DOORS

Ashmore has also taken comfort in this principle as she has witnessed the pace of her own “productivity” ebb and flow. Her first seminary experience, at a different institution, provided “inner transformational work,” she says, preparing her to let go of fears she had harbored

as she began to walk into ministry training.

That work was needed, she says, but slow — “like molasses.” That all changed when she found the MA in Ministry Leadership program.

“When I came to Calvin,” she reflects, “I felt like it went from molasses to sprinting.”

Ashmore said she found a community of support in everything from the admissions process, to financial aid, to faculty and staff speaking into her giftings.

As she looks toward graduation from seminary—an educational space that once had intimidated her - she finds herself saying, “I don’t want it to be done.”

Romero won’t have to worry about her theological training being done anytime soon. After completing her MDiv, she will undergo several steps to become a board-certified hospice chaplain. It’s a path she couldn’t have predicted, but one she couldn’t be more excited about.

Romero knew the calling was “not of her own making” when she woke up with the idea of hospice chaplaincy, and needed to do a Google search to discover what it was and just how intense preparations would be.

“I found out it was a huge undertaking,” says Romero. But her determination to pursue the calling came with an unexpected affirmation.

When someone close to her entered the dying process, she was able to come alongside the woman’s immediate family and pray through the experience, which she remembers as “a sacred

and special and hard time.”

Romero knew she needed to put into practice her pastoral care training and be present with the woman and her family throughout the hospice journey. Now she feels confident there will be more individuals and families to walk with in the future when she is granted chaplaincy.

–

It’s soon time for the three women to sign off and head to their current work with it’s own mission: Bootsma to a meeting, Romero to writing papers, and Ashmore to tend to her young children.

In closing, Ashmore reminds her fellow students of something she tells all future seminarians, and particularly women, about the journey.

“Don’t lead from your own sufficiency,” she says. “Do this with your shepherd and lean on him.”

AMANDA GREENHOE
Writer



ANNIE MAS-SMITH
Director of Communications



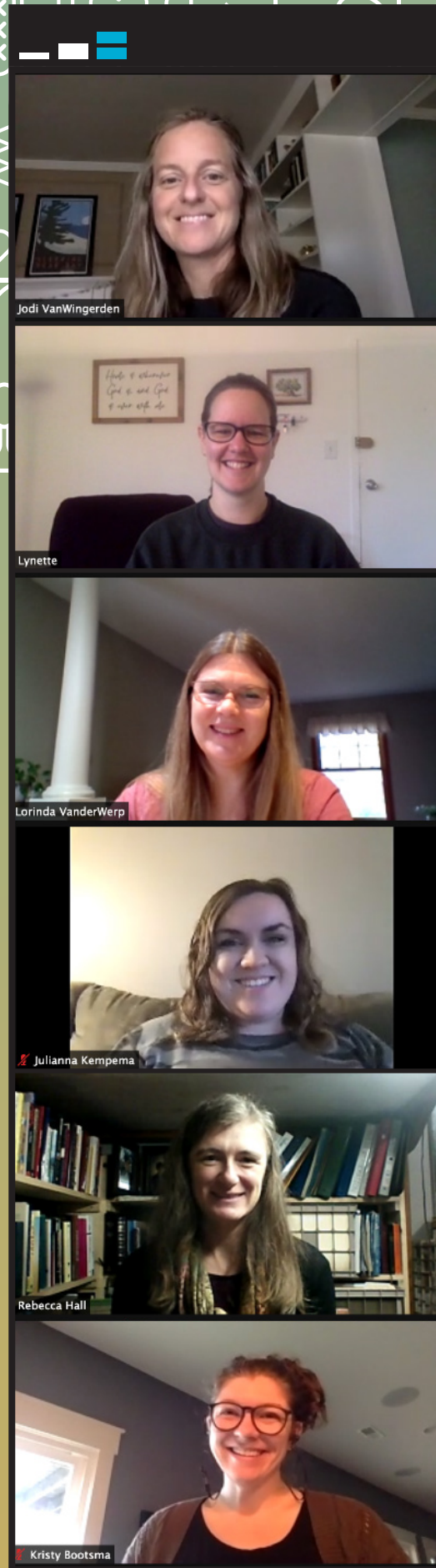
AARON EINFELD
Director of Admissions and Enrollment Management

SONGS OF

When the call went out to churches to make opportunities available for preachers at Calvin Seminary who are women, Palo Alto CRC, a congregation currently without a pastor, responded enthusiastically. Located in Silicon Valley, California, between the West Coast cities of San Francisco and San Jose, this small, vibrant congregation has been worshiping without a pastor and via Zoom throughout the COVID pandemic.

Luke Seerveld, a member of Palo Alto CRC, was tasked with finding pulpit supply for the Advent season which brought him to Calvin Seminary's website. *"In perusing the Calvin Seminary's website, we noticed that churches without pastors could make a request to have a seminarian preach for them. For each request there was a nominal limit of three Sundays. An email exchange resulted in asking whether a group of seminarians might be willing to collaborate on a series for Advent."*

When the request went out, Jodi VanWingerden, a current Calvin Seminary Master of Divinity student, was first to hear of Palo Alto CRC's need. She reached out to fellow classmates to band together around a common idea: *"What if we worked as a team to develop an entire Advent series for this church?"* Jodi, together with her classmates Rebecca Hall, Lynette van de Hoef, Lorinda VanderWerp, Julianna Kempema, and Kristy Bootsma, created a series entitled Songs of Redemption, focused on the lives and songs of the women in the narrative of Christ's birth.



REDEMPTION

"Collaborating with other seminarians to serve as pulpit supply for a congregation in need was a novel and beautiful instance of the Church at work. I felt so uplifted by the cooperative spirit which led to a creative thematic Advent and Christmas series," reflected Rebecca, "Being all women, the suggestion was made that we work with songs of women throughout the Bible, starting with the obvious Christmas angle in Elizabeth and Mary's Songs. The challenge was to incorporate "a Christmas theme into Old Testament songs" and finding "God's salvation narrative through the Old Testament proved to be one of the riches of this series."

Leaders at Palo Alto CRC were enthusiastic about the entire plan. The congregation went out of their way to welcome the students, recording the sermon as well as arranging a personal "Meet the Seminarian" video. The congregation took this second step simply to make sure that everyone would get a chance to meet the student preacher for each week.

"The opportunity to be ministered to by our denomination's pastors-in-training in such a holistic way, while feeling alienated from each other and the world during a pandemic, was a wonderful gift. We received feedback from the

participants on both sides that they were lifted up by the experience and God was glorified! We are truly grateful for the seminarians and the seminary for making this possible," said Luke of the experience. "Apart from the obvious blessing of being led by varied voices in a series that hung together so thematically and organically, it was also a purposeful opportunity for us as a congregation to become more comfortable led by more than one gender so that when we get around to calling a new pastor our default will be more diverse."

By all accounts the sermon series was a great success. It combined team work, the envisioning of a spiritually nourishing sermon series, a partnership between Calvin Seminary and a local congregation and great, adaptive preaching from our student colleagues.



ANNIE MAS-SMITH
Director of Communications

NEW BOOKS

FONT OF PARDON AND NEW LIFE: JOHN CALVIN AND THE EFFICACY OF BAPTISM

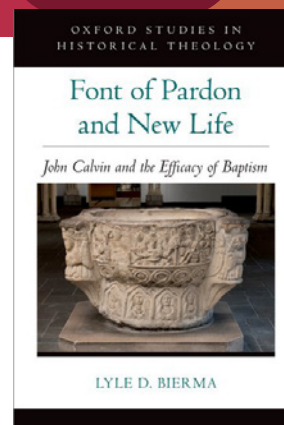
BY LYLE BIERMA

OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, FORTHCOMING, SUMMER 2021

What did John Calvin teach about baptism? Did he believe baptism itself brought with it forgiveness and new life, as was the common belief of his time? Did he see differences in the significance of baptism for adult converts and infants? What impact did his views on baptism have on Reformed theology as a whole?

Lyle Bierma explores these questions in *Font of Pardon and New Life: John Calvin and the Efficacy of Baptism*. The book is being published by Oxford University Press as part

of its Oxford Studies in Historical Theology series. The book traces Calvin's teachings on baptism chronologically through his life, examining his books, commentaries, sermons, and other writings. Bierma, Professor of Church History at Calvin Seminary, challenges the view that Calvin's teachings on baptism changed drastically over time, finding instead that the core of his teachings as stated in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* remained relatively consistent throughout his life. Bierma concludes by looking at the legacy of Calvin's teachings on baptism in Reformed confessional thought.



LIFE QUESTIONS EVERY STUDENT ASKS: FAITHFUL RESPONSES TO COMMON ISSUES

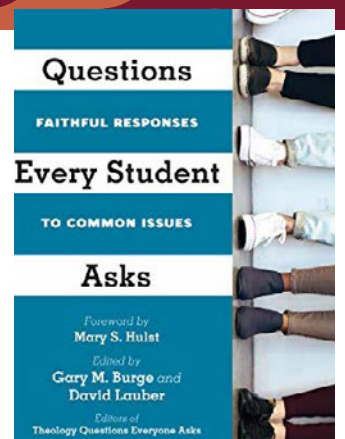
EDITED BY GARY BURGE AND DAVID LAUBER

IVP ACADEMIC, 2020

Teaching students involves not just the formal tasks of the classroom but also offering mentorship and wisdom in more informal and personal conversations with students about their deepest questions. "We recognize that our students are whole people and not simply members of a class," Gary Burge writes with co-editor David Lauber in a preface to *Life Questions Every Student Asks: Faithful Responses to Common Issues*. "They are growing, struggling, questioning, and wondering about the large issues of life as young adults." The book has undergraduate students in mind but offers wisdom for readers at any stage of life with vocation, marriage, wealth, suffering, and doubt.

In his chapter on community and friendship, Burge, Dean of the Faculty and visiting Professor of New Testament at Calvin Seminary, draws on the work of theologians Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Christine Pohl for insights into the importance of social belonging. Acknowledging that isolation can occur

even in the midst of busy college campuses and church buildings, Burge emphasizes that forming mutually dependent relationships is essential to being human and to living out one's faith. "I need to be someplace where, when I am at my lowest, there are others who are willing to help lift me up," Burge writes, adding that in such communities "there is genuine reciprocity and ... listening, lifting up others, guiding the lost, and providing wisdom are our assignments too."



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DISTINGUISHED ALUMNI: JOHN DE VRIES

John De Vries began his mission work in India with an ambitious but unusual goal: make an impact by staying out of the way.

“The goal was not missions as we think of it,” he says. “It’s Indian people reaching Indian people.”

Today, De Vries says God has blessed this vision beyond what he could have imagined.

John states with humble amazement how the organization he founded, Mission India, has grown from one office in a rented house to 70 regional offices on the subcontinent, each with dozens of staffers, all of them natives of India. In 2018, Mission India recorded nearly 3 million commitments to Christ from churches using its materials and it helped plant over 11,000 worshiping groups.

De Vries, who stepped down as the organization’s president in 2002 has remained active as a writer and fundraiser, giving credit to his staff and to God. “I haven’t done anything other than have a vision,” he says.



His vision of minimizing the footprint of white missionaries was ahead of its time. De Vries said it came from reading reams of literature about missions, and from intuition.

“Just think of the difference between your neighbor coming over to talk about religion with you, rather than someone from a different country. There are immediate roadblocks to overcome,” he says. “This idea has become much more accepted today. People have realized that missions can be done best by local members of the nations you want to reach.”

“I haven’t done anything other than have a vision”

De Vries credits his studies at Calvin Theological Seminary, not for giving him all the knowledge he needed, but for helping to form him as a seeker of wisdom.

“It made me a lifelong student, more than anything else,” says De Vries, who graduated with a Bachelor of Divinity degree in 1961. “Then when I got out of seminary, I had a desire to self-educate. I continued to read and learn as much as I could about missions.”

India initially seemed an unlikely place for his work to take root. After working there briefly for the World Home Bible League in the early 1970s, De Vries says when he left, he prayed the “Jonah Prayer.” “I said, ‘God, I will serve you anywhere, but please don’t send me there again.’”

As with Jonah, De Vries says, God had bigger plans. Now De Vries speaks both of his love for India and of his disbelief that it is often ignored by the west.

“I’ve fallen in love with India,” he says. “I love the country with my whole heart. It’s a fascinating place. But for being the second largest nation on earth, it’s still one of the last countries people think about.”

De Vries says he is still processing what it means to be named a distinguished alumnus of Calvin Seminary.

“It’s a tremendous honor,” he says. “But I don’t deserve it.”

Shortly after speaking with us for this article, John DeVries’ health declined and he entered hospice care, where he died in October 2020 at age 83. Calvin Seminary awarded John DeVries the Distinguished Alumni Award posthumously during the planned May 21, 2021, commencement ceremony.



Check out the video:

<https://vimeo.com/554390728>



NATHAN BIERMA
Instructional Designer

DISTINGUISHED ALUMNI: EMMANUEL SABA BILEYA



Emmanuel Saba Bileya came to Calvin Theological Seminary in 2012. A pastor in the Christian Reformed Church of Nigeria, Bileya was pursuing a Master of Theology degree in Worship, studying worship practices such as the use of the Lectionary of weekly Scripture readings in preaching and worship.

In a letter to President Medenblik upon his arrival, Bileya expressed his appreciation for scholarship funds that enabled him to study at Calvin Seminary. He said he would like to demonstrate his gratitude by washing all the windows of the seminary building. And he did, one by one, cleaning the dozens of windows around the building, donating his work and his time.

The memory of Bileya's generous gratitude, his eagerness to study worship, and his heart for building the church in Nigeria and around the world shaped the memories and the grief of the Calvin Seminary community after learning in June 2020 that Emmanuel and his wife Julianna were murdered in Nigeria. The couple were working on their farm in the state of Taraba when they were ambushed and shot by militiamen. They leave behind eight children and a congregation they cultivated.

In the weeks before his death, Bileya wrote to some of his former professors urgently pleading for prayers for peace amid tribal conflict in his region.

"It is war," he wrote. "The Tiv tribe is in a serious war with my people, the Jukun/Itchen tribe. So far more than 10 of our villages have been completely destroyed and people killed. The Jukun/Itchen tribe has retaliated by destroying Tiv tribe's villages and killing their people as well. ... Many people have fled the town for safety, including my family, but I have remained in Mararraba praying and hoping for God's restoration of peace and protection of the town and church."

While Nigeria has suffered decades of inter-religious violence between Muslims and Christians, Bileya wrote that both of the tribes engulfed in this conflict were majority Christian, many of whose churches were

planted by the same North American missionaries, and that the conflict stemmed from a farmland dispute. He wrote that the local government, beset by the challenges of religious conflict and managing the COVID-19 pandemic, was incapable of keeping the peace.

"Sometimes I feel like leaving Nigeria to work somewhere else that is more peaceful. I am tired of the insurgencies, communal clashes, armed robbery, kidnappings, poor economy that renders us live hand to mouth, and other serious vices. God the Sovereign is our only hope."

In a Facebook post, John Witvliet, Director of the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship and Professor of Worship at Calvin Seminary, recalled Bileya as a student and a colleague.

"He loved books, and was eager to organize shipments of books he could use with his students and colleagues in ministry," Witvliet wrote. "He was also very interested in analyzing the similarities and differences in ministry contexts in various places around the world, insisting that he needed to learn from as many different contexts as possible in order to discern what faithful ministry should look like in his context."

Witvliet supervised Bileya's thesis, which was entitled "The Liturgical Use of Spiritual Gifts: Discerning Next Steps in Contextual Nigerian Practice." He completed his degree in 2014. Bileya also studied at the

Robert E. Webber Institute for Worship Studies in Jacksonville, Florida.

In a letter to the Calvin Seminary community, President Medenblik recalled Bileya's presence in the community and in particular his gesture of washing the building's windows. "I will not look at those windows the same way from now on," Medenblik wrote.

"The news of Emmanuel and his wife Julianna's killing stunned and saddened me beyond words," wrote Albert Strydhorst, program manager for the Timothy Leadership Training program and adjunct professor of missiology at Calvin Seminary. "I will always remember Emmanuel's hope for peace and reconciliation between those in conflict. I'll remember his heart for church-planting and theological education in Nigeria. For several years in the late 1990's and 2000's I worked with him in these areas, especially as he coordinated Timothy Leadership Training in the CRC-N. I'll remember the energy and talent he brought to leading praise and worship with a remarkable beat, inspired and sharpened by his participation in the Calvin Symposium on Worship. And the love and concern he expressed for his wife and children during those months of separation during his CTS studies. And finally, his work as a pastor with his congregation in Mararraba--staying and praying and hoping for God's restoration of peace."

Check out the video:
<https://vimeo.com/554390480>



NATHAN BIERMA
Instructional Designer

DISTINGUISHED ALUMNI: STANLEY JIM



When commencement at Calvin Seminary transitioned to an online ceremony in May 2020 in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, it prevented the opportunity to celebrate two distinguished alumni in person. For one of them, Stanley Jim, the deadly virus threatened his church and community more severely than almost any other area in the United States.

In early May, the Navajo Nation, located in portions of Arizona, New Mexico, and Utah, reported a per-capita rate of infection that was exceeded only by New York and Louisiana, and suffered hundreds of deaths. Poverty and lack of infrastructure made the area especially vulnerable.

“It’s gone down dramatically, but it had spiked pretty high,” says Jim, pastor of Window Rock Christian Reformed Church on reservation land in Arizona. “We had lockdowns for a lot of weekends from Friday evening to Monday mornings, until the numbers began to go down.”

Jim is one of many pastors whose churches have had to make drastic adjustments in their

worship and ministry, though few faced the threat of the virus at such a scale.

“We gather outside for drive-up services, in vehicles parked six feet apart,” Jim says. “We’re also doing Zoom ministry for all of our services, Bible studies, and council meetings. That’s working for us until we can come back together.”

The pandemic has been the greatest challenge for Jim since he came to Window Rock in 2016, after 17 years working for Christian Reformed Home Missions (now part of Resonate Global Mission). There, he was the driving force behind the Red Mesa Indigenous Leadership Development Program, which cultivates native pastors and leaders in Navajo

and Zuni churches. He also helped move native churches to self-sufficiency and phase out subsidies from Home Missions.

Then, Jim says, his calling was to return to pastoring a church.

“My passion was really being a pastor,” says Jim, who served First Navajo Christian Reformed Church in Tohatchi, New Mexico, after his ordination in 1996. “I wanted to get back to that.”

Today, whether driving up to worship at Window Rock or tuning in online from multiple states, worshipers hear Jim preach in both Navajo and English.

“People are drawn to that. The elderly are drawn to it, and the young people have learned some of the Navajo language that way,” Jim says. “I often hear from them that the message is clearer to understand when you hear it in both languages.”

Jim says studying at Calvin Seminary helped to prepare him to reach across cultures.

“It helped me to articulate Jesus’ ministry in our context,” he says. “Now the doctrines that I preach here, they’re in our context, in the language that we speak. I’m able to connect Jesus’ work and God’s whole mission with the culture that I’m in. I’m able to speak with the medicine men from a point of view that I’m not condemning them, but

bridging that gap in love. That’s what God did with us: sent Jesus into this world—he is the bridge to helping us understand who God is.”

And the path to building bridges, Jim says, is building relationships.

“As I go out on the streets, I see people down and out, drug addicts and alcoholics. I have conversations with them, listen to them, get to know them, and some lives are changed,” Jim says. “People come to me, non-churchgoers, and they tell me, ‘You are our pastor.’ They come to me asking for prayers.”

While Jim said he learned a lot from the predominantly white Christian Reformed Church, he says this emphasis on building relationships is something he wants to offer back to the white church.

“Western thought and the Western mind is all about results, results, results,” he says. “Early on I began to realize that I was always working for some kind of result—how many people did you contact, how many came to the Lord?”

“Native culture isn’t about results, it’s about relationships. When Jesus ministered here, his work was about building relationships. One of the things I think Western culture needs to learn is that it’s not so much about results. We as Christians should be more relational.”



Check out the video:

<https://vimeo.com/554390143>



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