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LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT

When I was a pastor of a new church plant, I was privileged to witness how God used the Bible to change people and bring them together in His family. I still remember Joanne, who helped lead our first women's Coffee Break, and her excitement in helping people read the Bible for the first time. I also remember the joy of the people reading and understanding the Bible for the first time.

The "holy" exchange of people of faith pouring out their hearts and minds into the lives of others was something that made for disciples on both parts of that exchange. For discipleship and disciple-making, the Bible needs to come to life for people in their context.

The material in this issue of Forum Magazine will take us on a journey of engaging Scripture in various places and contexts. Even this past year, we (faculty, staff, and students) have been introduced to a new way of hearing God's Word through the Public Reading of Scripture.

This issue of Forum Magazine will take you to different parts of the world and different times (such as when Revelation was written). It is worth the journey of exploration, and we need to keep encouraging people to engage the Bible to grow as disciples of Jesus Christ.

In that same new church plant, I was privileged to become a trusted pastor to a woman in her 50s who had been abused. She was seeking to find out if God could really love her when someone so close to her had not. In one of our conversations, she confessed that she did not know the Bible and asked if it would be okay to start by reading a Children's Bible. You know my answer: "Yes, what a great idea!" I was so glad to buy her a Children's Bible to help her not just come to know the Bible but come to know the God who loved her.

In His Service With You,

Jul Medenblik
President



Features





Engaging Scripture in Uganda: A Cross-Cultural Context



MARY VANDEN BERG
PROFESSOR OF SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

Last August, I had the opportunity to teach at a conference in Uganda for a week. I was assigned a topic—The Kingdom of God—and my first thought was how to talk about that topic in the Ugandan context. I was fairly certain that the issues we had in the U.S. with respect to this biblical topic were likely to be different from those I would find in Uganda. Additionally, I was asked to preach at a village church. What would I need to know to adequately prepare for these two opportunities?

The missionaries I was working with, Calvin Seminary graduates Rev. Anthony Sytsma and Sara Sytsma, were very gracious in helping me with some of my questions while I prepared at home and after I arrived in Soroti. They offered key insights into various cultural habits and certain practices common in the churches that were valuable in my preparation. After my work was done, it was clear I still had much to learn. I recently interviewed Sara to learn more about teaching the Bible in Uganda. Many of these insights I had never considered and, I believe, could help us consider how best to teach and preach the Bible in our own contexts.

Mary V: How does the Ugandan context make biblical interpretation easier and harder than in the U.S.?

Sara S: In some ways, the culture of the ancient Near East in Bible times—both Old and New

Testaments—has many similarities to Ugandan culture and, actually, many African cultures. This can make it both easier and harder to interpret or apply the Bible here. Easier because there are things that Ugandans can understand and which are very practical in this culture. For example, Exodus 22:5-15 describes a variety of events that regularly take place right here in Uganda. But it describes things very few people in the U.S. would ever deal with. Another example would be Jesus' parables, many of which relate to agriculture. Some people in the U.S. may understand them, but many here know precisely what Jesus was talking about.

On the other hand, because of those similarities with the ancient Near East, it can be difficult for people to separate what the Bible requires us to do from what the Bible simply describes as something that was part of that particular ancient culture. For example, Genesis 24:53 is regularly used by people in Uganda as a biblical basis for why men must pay a bride price to their fiancé's family in order to get married. "See," they might say, "the Bible tells us we should do this thing that we were already doing in our pre-Christian culture." These sorts of things can be tricky to explain.

Mary V: On a related topic, how do the Christians in Uganda navigate the authority of scripture when what scripture says comes up against a particular cultural practice?



MISSIONARY SARAH SYTSMA INTERACTS WITH YOUNG PEOPLE IN UGANDA.

Sara S: No matter what culture we live in, we are always tempted to force Scripture to support our own cultural practices since we want to avoid uncomfortable changes. So, in Uganda, just like in the U.S., there are some areas in which the church goes along with the culture, even when scripture is against it. However, there are other areas in which the church really brings change in peoples' lives when they become Christians. One example is not participating in certain traditional religious circumcision rituals, which can include non-Christian practices. Another is that in the region where I live, drinking to the point of getting drunk has been a normal part of the culture during celebrations. The church strongly opposes that culture of drunkenness, and when people get saved, they give it up. Polygamy is also a common cultural practice, but the church does not allow members to take another wife. They are patient with those who already are in a polygamous marriage when they get saved and try to follow the teachings of the New Testament for such situations, but getting into polygamy while already in the church is definitely not tolerated.

Mary V: You mentioned to me that one challenge to Bible study in your context is that Uganda is more of a non-reading culture than a reading culture. Can you explain that a bit more, including how you help people study scripture in a non-reading culture?

Sara S: There are some Ugandans who are voracious readers, but they are the exception. Books and reading take second place to stories passed down verbally. Although it is common for people to passionately desire to have a Bible, often someone will obtain a Bible but never open it except on Sunday. In my work with people who read little or are illiterate, I have found reading the scripture passage out loud several times is very helpful. It allows the words to sink in. After the reading, the

group attempts to retell the passage using their own words. This allows them to show how they understood the passage. It is also good preparation for going out and sharing the Word of God with others, whether they can read it or not.

Mary V: As someone new to the Ugandan context, I was impressed with their devotion to Christ and the written Word. Given that, what is the most pressing issue with respect to engaging or teaching scripture in the Ugandan context?

Sara S: I think that the most pressing issue is not very different from what it is anywhere in the world. Christians need a deep love of the Bible, a desire to hear what God has to say to us, and a desire to respond by putting his words into practice. When we believe scripture is God's Word, we will love it and be willing to do the hard work of reading all of scripture, even when what the Bible teaches is counter-cultural.

I learned much from my short visit to Uganda and from working with Anthony and Sara. Clearly, I did not know all I could have known to engage the church there. However, one comforting thing to note is that no matter how clumsy my illustrations and explanations may have been, the Spirit was clearly at work, given the warm responses I received to my sermon and the many questions generated through my teaching. Considering our context is essential, but those considerations should never push us to silence because we fear not knowing enough. Regardless of our worries about contextualizing the gospel's message, the Spirit goes ahead of us to accommodate our efforts with those we are called to serve.



THE JUDAEAN WILDERNESS

THE FIFTH GOSPEL



SARAH SCHREIBER ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF OLD TESTAMENT
GARY BURGE PROFESSOR OF NEW TESTAMENT

The “Holy Land,” or land of the Bible, has always played a prominent role in the Christian understanding of faith, as it is the setting for many biblical events. A resident Christian population in the land dating to the apostolic era continuously witnessed the location of events there. And that witness continues to this day. As one monk in Jerusalem likes to say, the land is the fifth gospel in our canon.

Professor Gary Burge and I led students in the “Taste And See: A Tour of Israel and Palestine” course this January. The title of this course is especially meaningful, as scholarships for the trip come from seminary supporters who are passionate about students experiencing the land with all five senses. Their generosity makes the trip affordable for our students and makes the land a tactile memory, useful for future teaching and preaching illustrations.

This two-credit travel course takes place during the January term between our fall and spring semesters. The top of the year is an excellent time to visit this region. The tourists are not there, the vistas are clear since there is no humidity, and the heat of the Middle Eastern summer is a thin memory.

So, this winter, we took off from Grand Rapids to continue in the longstanding tradition of pilgrimage to the land of the Bible. Scholars Origen and Eusebius of Caesarea were both guiding pilgrims to biblical sites. The first pilgrim diary was written in the mid-4th century by a woman named Egeria, and we visited numerous spots she identified for Christian travelers who would come after her.

Through this course, we were not just pilgrims—seeking a deeper meaning to our faith story through what we see in this land—but also students because we examined the history of Biblical events and studied the material and archaeological evidence for them.

But unlike pilgrims of faith and students of biblical history alone, we also took one more step. We discover that what is important is not just what occurred in antiquity. There are communities of Jews, Muslims, and Christians (often forgotten in the modern narrative) who today share this land. We heard their stories and tried to comprehend the rival narratives that have made this one of the most controversial regions in the world.

Sometimes our guest speakers came to our hotel, and sometimes we learned from them in their life and ministry settings. Two of our most meaningful on-site visits included times of fellowship with Christians from the Nazareth Baptist School community and the Tent of Nations. Our conversations were rich and thought-provoking, and they gave us a deeper understanding of what it looks like to follow Jesus in the land today.

In addition to communal connections, Scripture came alive for students on this trip. Things our students have read in the Bible for years suddenly clicked into place when immersed in the sights and sounds of the Bible.

For example, we listened to Scripture and spent some quiet devotional time on a hillside called Wadi Qelt, where you can see from Jerusalem to Jericho. It is not a smooth path between cities, but tiring and treacherous. This is the setting for the parable of the Good Samaritan, and we can imagine the challenging trek of both the robbers' victim and the Samaritan who paused his journey to assist his neighbor. This is also a journey that Jesus himself had to make, as we read in Luke 19.

Seeing Jerusalem high above us on the hillside brought to life the idea of "going up" to Jerusalem, as memorialized in the Psalms of Ascent. The rocky hillsides and cut stones everywhere helped us to understand the widespread imagery in Scripture about God as a rock or stronghold.

If you are on campus soon, we would love to connect you with a student who traveled in the footsteps of Jesus. Their reflections touch on community, culture, and scriptural context and have expressed how the experience forever changes their hearts.

CHURCH OF THE NATIVITY, BETHLEHEM



WESTERN WALL, JERUSALEM



TEMPLE MOUNT, JERUSALEM





*“But the
word of our
God endures
forever”*

(Isaiah 40:8)

THE BIBLE CORE AND THE NEW CURRICULUM AT CALVIN THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY



WILSON DE ANGELO CUNHA
PROFESSOR OF OLD TESTAMENT

In the fall of 2022, Calvin Theological Seminary rolled out its new curriculum, centering on four primary learning outcomes: gospel, person, context, and calling. We hope to “provide tools that will deepen the student’s understanding of the biblical gospel, nurture the pastoral identity of the person, foster skills for engaging in contextual and constructive theological reflection and application, with the calling of equipping students for the work of ministry.” Each course we offer at CTS devises learning goals for all four of our general learning outcomes, irrespective of a course’s primary theological area. These four pillars highlight the long-standing integrative approach of theological education that has been a unique feature of CTS for years.

Here I want to call attention to the “Bible core,” which more deliberately aims at helping students understand the “gospel.” The “Bible core” comprises four required Bible courses:

two twin courses called “the Mission of God in the Old Testament” and “the Mission of God in the New Testament” approach the Bible as a unified narrative that witnesses to God’s mission in the world. The “Mission of God” courses, rooted in the Reformed tradition, emphasize a single redemptive history across two testaments. They also study primary theological themes as they develop in the Old and the New. The biblical narrative’s unity, not fragmentation, is the emphasis of these two core courses. They also touch on Christian vocation and identity formation and on providing a biblical theological foundation for ministry.

More particularly, “The Mission of God in the Old Testament” studies the Old Testament from a larger picture perspective. First, it helps students develop a firm grasp of the OT’s larger narrative framework. Because we often learn the OT and the NT following its main canonical sections, students may leave seminary with a good grasp of

*“But the Advocate,
the Holy Spirit,
whom the Father
will send in my name,
will teach you all things
and will remind you
of everything I have
said to you.”*

(John 14:26)

the parts but a poor understanding of the whole. Contrarily, students should understand how the OT works together and appreciate its larger narrative structure. We believe seminary training should work against a fragmented view of the OT, and “the Mission of God in the OT” seeks to do just that. Second, students should understand the OT as a theological witness to God’s mission in the world. A feature of modern Biblical studies is to focus on literary and historical issues, especially historical background material to the OT. These studies have produced tremendous insight into our understanding of the OT’s message. However, there is a danger of getting lost in historical reconstructions and losing sight of the OT’s higher-level message about God’s ways in the world. Therefore, students should learn to parse the OT’s theological message regarding the mission Dei and God’s call for participation in his mission. And third, students should get acquainted with the OT’s eschatological view. Here the Wisdom Literature and the Prophets are essential. They portray the vindication of the righteous, the wicked’s demise, and God’s renewal of his creation (see, e.g., Psa 1:6; 37; 73; Isa 11:1–10; 65–66). Such a message encourages Christians living in uncertain times when evil seems to have the upper hand and the wicked seems to prosper. In this respect, OT eschatology encourages nurturing a waiting community that longs for the decisive arrival of God’s kingdom.

In addition to the “Mission of God” courses, CTS also requires students to take “Interpreting the Old Testament” and “Interpreting the New Testament.” These core courses allow for a deeper engagement with a canonical section or significant theme in the Scriptures. Encountering God in the pages of Scripture is a profoundly transformative and formative experience that requires careful listening. One scholar said it well: “Between the horizon of the text and that of the reader, a creative tension develops which calls for the affirmation of the status quo or for the openness and courage to accept a new self-understanding.” As such, the primary goal of the “Interpreting” courses is to help students develop hermeneutical skills to carefully listen to God’s voice, not to silence it with preconceived beliefs. Thus, the four Bible courses in the new curriculum hope to help students

understand the gospel message, especially its deep roots in the Scriptures of the Old Testament.

For students looking for an even richer engagement with the Scriptures, the new curriculum offers four courses on Biblical languages. Biblical Hebrew I and II cover the entire Hebrew grammar. Students reach a milestone when they read all of Jonah in Hebrew. The course reviews significant aspects of Hebrew grammar and syntax while introducing students to Hebrew exegesis. Greek I and II cover the entire Greek grammar while offering interpretive nuggets throughout. These language courses provide students with lifelong skills to read the Scriptures well. As an alternative, not an equivalent, the new curriculum offers one semester each of “Hebrew tools” and “Greek tools.” These courses do not intend to give students Hebrew or Greek knowledge. They instead focus on understanding the most rudimentary features of each language (e.g., the alphabet and some representative vocabulary) to facilitate using printed and electronic tools (e.g., commentaries, dictionaries, Accordance, Logos Bible Software).

In curricular conversations at a confessional institution like CTS, it is essential to remember that “curriculum development” is only part of the equation. The other is the work of the Holy Spirit in calling, equipping, and guiding (John 14:26). Would you please consider making CTS a regular item in your personal and congregational prayers? Pray that the Holy Spirit will breathe life into all our teaching efforts. Curriculum reflection and planning aside, we ultimately depend on the life-giving work of the Holy Spirit.

READING SCRIPTURE IN THE COUNTRY WITH THE LARGEST MUSLIM POPULATION IN THE WORLD



YUDHA THIANTO
PROFESSOR OF HISTORY OF CHRISTIANITY & REFORMED THEOLOGY



“Your Word is a lamp for my feet; a light on my path, Psalm 119:105,” I said clearly and confidently as I stood in front of the students, teachers, and staff of my entire school while holding a lit tapered candle. This Bible verse and how my teacher explained its meaning to the students at school that day shaped the way I read the Bible for the rest of my life. I was in second grade and living in Indonesia.

As minorities in the country with the largest Muslim population in the world, Christians face challenges every day. While the country’s constitution ensures the freedom to practice religion, in reality, it has not always been simple. Being surrounded by Muslim neighbors makes me—and other Christians in the country—fully aware that we are called to bring the truth of the Bible wherever we go.

Most Indonesian Christians recognize that some Bible stories resemble those in the Quran. There are people in the Bible who are also mentioned in the Quran: Adam, Abraham (who the Muslims call Ibrahim), Ishmael, Moses, David, Solomon, Jonah, and even Jesus are among them. The difference is that whereas the Bible provides fuller pictures and stories that build toward the history of redemption in Jesus Christ, the Quran often mentions these names in fragmental sayings that do not clarify the whole story or teachings. Understanding this difference becomes my entryway to share the light of God’s word in the Bible with my Muslim friends and neighbors who are willing or eager to know. Using the similarities as a starting point, I often find myself discussing or explaining the significance of the biblical people to them. In each encounter, I start by asking what they know based on their reading of the Quran. And when they find it hard to explain the depth of the significance of these people in what they believe, I broaden their understanding by telling the fuller story from the Bible.

My favorite Quran book or surah, meaning letter, is Surah Maryam, or “The Letter of Mary.” It is Surah 19 in the Quran. It resembles the first chapter of the Gospel of Luke. The surah opens with the story of Zechariah, a pious elderly man who cries out to God because his wife is barren. He asks God to give him a son. An angel then visits him, announcing that his wife will bear a son and that he will name him John (Quran 19:7). When Zechariah asks for a sign, the angel tells him that he will not be able to speak for three days. With that, he becomes mute. When his

son is born, Zechariah, already able to speak again, names him John. When John is born, God speaks, saying that John is a righteous man (Quran 19:14-19).

Then, the story in the Quran switches to that of Mary, a young woman who leaves her family to go East. There, she is visited by the angel Gabriel (Quran 19:17). The angel announces that she will have a son. In her bewilderment, Mary asks him how this can be, considering she is still a virgin. Gabriel replies that what may seem difficult for humans is easy for God. He will make Jesus a sign for humanity and a mercy from him because he has already decreed it (Quran 19:21). In her labor pain, Mary experiences a miracle. God provides a stream of flowing water under her feet (a reminder of the story of Hagar and Ishmael in Gen 21:19) and ripe dates from a palm tree. Later in the surah, we read that Mary returns to her family, only to be misunderstood by her brothers for committing adultery and bearing a son out of wedlock. At this point, the Quran identifies Mary as the sister of Aaron (Quran 19:28). We see here that the Quran does not distinguish between Mary, the mother of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke, and Miriam, the sister of Moses and Aaron (Ex 15:20).

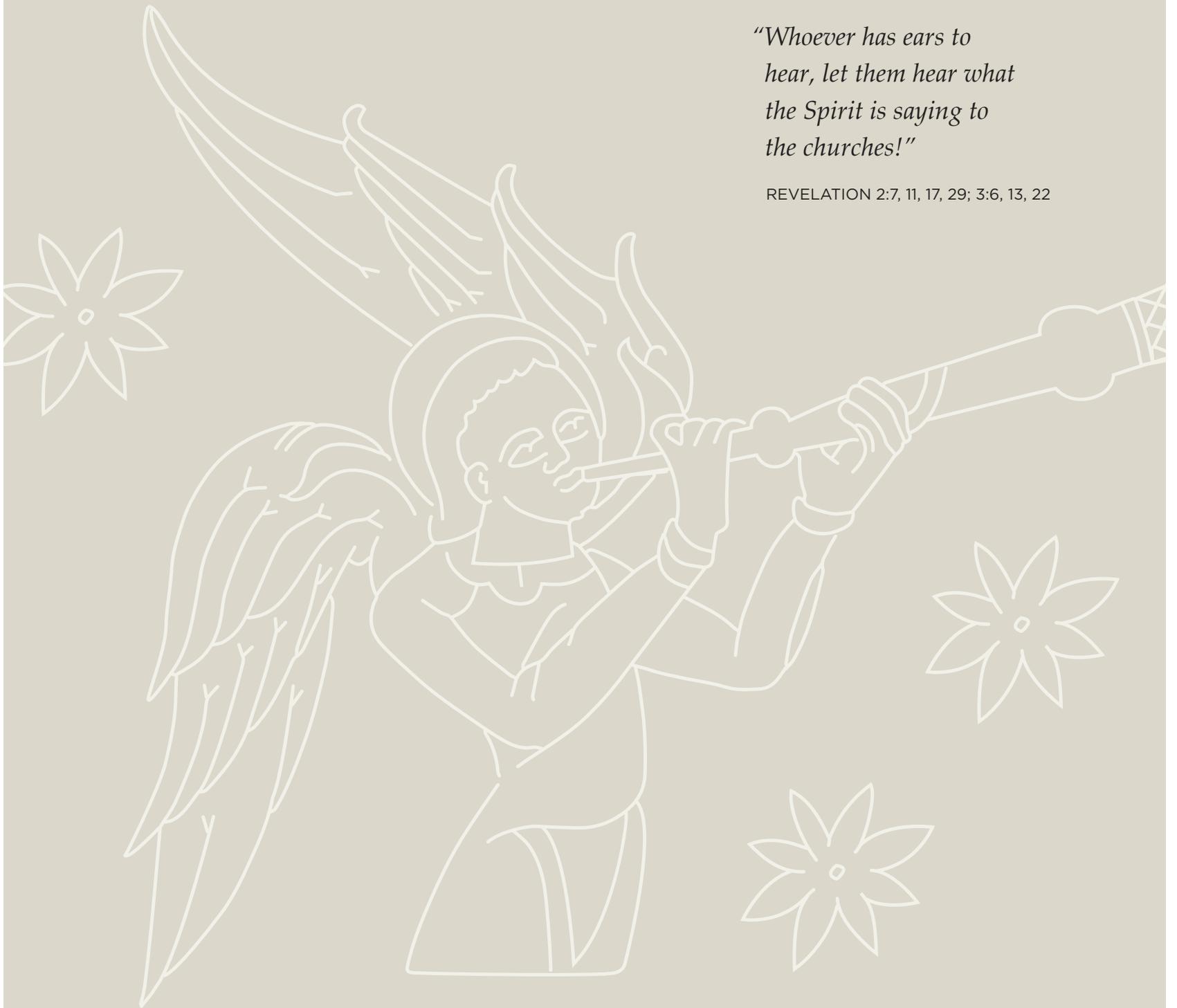
I often use Surah 19 to teach my students in Indonesia and the U.S. how to engage our Muslim neighbors and friends. The Quran carries some echoes of the Bible’s testimonies. Our task is to turn the echo back to its source in the Bible. This is how we can bring the light of God’s Word into the lives of the people around us.

For Indonesian Christians, understanding the Bible well is foundational not just for our walk as followers of Jesus Christ but also for witnessing our Muslim neighbors. Living in a country where being a Christian, at the very least, means that most people see us as less than equal or, in more challenging situations, considered a threat in need of suppression. Carrying out the message of the Bible and ensuring that the words guide our life is a real everyday challenge. In Indonesia, whether I teach in a seminary classroom, preach a Sunday sermon, lead a Bible study group, or speak to people informally, I couple my biblical knowledge with an awareness of how I can reach those interested in knowing more of the message of the Bible based on what they have learned in their own religious context.



*“Whoever has ears to
hear, let them hear what
the Spirit is saying to
the churches!”*

REVELATION 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22



Hearing the Book of Revelation with ‘Two Ears’

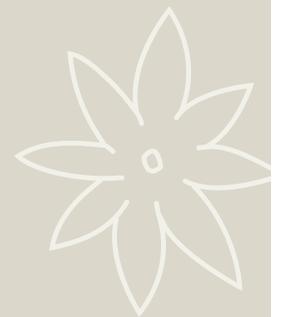


JEFFREY A. D. WEIMA
PROFESSOR OF NEW TESTAMENT



A book of the Bible that simultaneously both intrigues and intimidates Christians is the book of Revelation. On the one hand, readers are captivated by the striking imagery and otherworldly descriptions of various creatures and events in this final book of scripture. On the other hand, readers struggle to understand what is going on clearly. They can easily become frustrated as to what God is saying, not only to the original audience in 1st-century Asia Minor but also to 21st-century believers today.

A big reason why many of us struggle to understand the book of Revelation is that we fail to listen to its message with “two ears.” One ear is required to catch its many allusions to the Old Testament. Although the book of Revelation has almost no explicit quotations from the Old Testament, it is saturated with allusions to key words, phrases, and events from the first half of the canon. Since most of us do not have this first “Old Testament ear,” we easily miss these allusions, and so fail to grasp the meaning of the biblical text. But another ear is similarly needed to hear the many allusions to the Greco-Roman world of John, the author, and his 1st-century readers. Since most of us do not have this second “ancient world ear,” we also miss these allusions and once again fail to understand well what God is saying in his word.



The Old Testament Ear

An example of the need to hear the book of Revelation with an “Old Testament ear” is found in the opening of the letter to Philadelphia (Rev 3:7-13). The Jesus who is about to speak to this church is introduced with three titles: “These are the words of the Holy One, the True One, the one who holds the key of David—what he opens no one can shut and what he shuts no one can open” (Rev 3:7b). The first and the third of these titles come from the Old Testament and so are especially effective as a polemic, that is, an argument against the local Jewish community who were particularly pro-active in persecuting the Philadelphia church.

Jesus introduces himself in the first Christ title as “the Holy One” (3:7b). This title often appears in the Old Testament—including some 25 times in Isaiah—as a key title for God. Jesus’ use of this divine title to describe himself is a not-very-subtle way of

saying something important about who he is, that he, too, is God. Before this truth about the deity of Jesus is dismissed as something that all Christians already know, it is important to remember what Jesus' followers in Philadelphia were facing: strong opposition from the local Jewish community vehemently denying the claim that Jesus is God. It would be especially comforting for these persecuted Christians to hear at the very beginning of this letter that the Jesus for whom they are suffering is "the Holy One"—that Jesus is indeed God.

Jesus further introduces himself in the third and significantly longer Christ title: "the one who has the key of David; what he opens no one can shut and what he shuts no one can open" (3:7b). This Christ title closely echoes the words of Isaiah 22:22. The backstory of this not-so-well-known passage from Isaiah goes like this:

In ancient Israel, no one could have direct and immediate access to the palace and the king; people instead had to go through the "M.O.P."—the Master of the Palace. He had the "key," that is, total control over who could enter the palace and meet with the king. In the days of the good king Hezekiah, the person who held this powerful position of the "M.O.P." was a man named Shebna. Shebna did something that revealed his vanity and selfish ambition: he had a grave made for himself cut out of solid rock in a special location where only the kings had graves. God was so displeased with Shebna's arrogant action that he promised to give his powerful position as "M.O.P." to someone else. This new person was promised "the key of David," a clear symbol of his authority as "M.O.P." In fact, this new person would have such total control over who had access to the palace and the king that "what he opens no one can shut and what he shuts no one can open."

This Old Testament backstory explains the meaning of the third Christ title: Jesus is now the "M.O.P.," the Master of the Palace, the one with total control over who has access to "the city of my God, the new Jerusalem" (3:12). Jesus is the one with absolute authority over who can enter the kingdom of God.

This third Christ title also involves an important polemic against the Jewish community in Philadelphia. Judaism was officially recognized as a protected religion by the Roman state. The Jews made special arrangements with the Roman authorities that allowed them to meet in their synagogue buildings and be exempt from participating in pagan sacrifices that were such a big part of everyday civic life and by which you could publicly demonstrate your loyalty to Rome. Christianity, however, was not an officially recognized religion, so when Jesus' followers similarly refused to participate in pagan sacrifices, they were persecuted. To avoid this persecution, many Jewish Christians continued to be members of the local synagogue, taking advantage of the fact that most people could not distinguish Christianity from Judaism. Over time, however, the Jewish leaders realized that Christians in their synagogues were taking advantage of the protection that Judaism afforded, so they took steps "to close the door" on these Jesus followers, that is, to excommunicate them from synagogue membership.

In the third Christ title, Jesus tells the Christians in Philadelphia: "You may have been kicked out of the synagogue, but you have not been kicked out of the kingdom of God. Remember that I have the key of David. Remember that I am the "M.O.P."—the Master of the Palace. I have opened the door for you to approach God fully and freely and to enter God's kingdom, and what I open, no one can shut—neither the Roman authorities nor the leaders of the local Jewish synagogue."



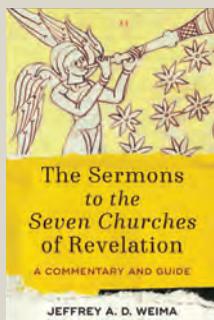
The Ancient World Ear

An illustration of the need to hear the book of Revelation also with an “ancient world ear” can be seen in the opening of the letter to Ephesus, where Jesus is introduced as the one who “holds the seven stars” (Rev 2:1). This Christ title emphasizes the power of Jesus that involves a polemic not against the local Jewish community but against Rome and its assertion of power. The Roman emperors liked to present themselves in coinage as demigods whose power extended beyond Earth to control the planets and the stars. After the death of his 10-year-old son in AD 83, Domitian declared the boy to be a god, and his wife, Domitia, the mother of a god, issued a coin in his son’s honor. This coin portrays the deceased boy sitting on a globe in a position of power over the world. In his outstretched arms, he holds seven stars, which represent the seven planets, to depict his heavenly dominion over the whole universe.

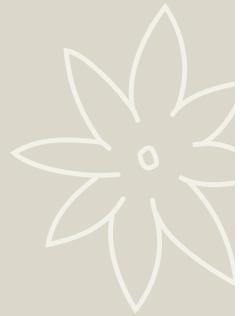
The later emperor Hadrian (AD 117-138) issued a coin with his image on one side and a crescent moon and seven stars on the other. The not-very-subtle message is that Hadrian is so powerful that he controls things that happen not only on Earth but also in the heavens among the moon and seven stars. Therefore, the depiction of Christ in the first title as the one who “holds the seven stars” involves a challenge to Roman power. Jesus, who has already been identified earlier in the book of Revelation as “the ruler of the kings of the earth” (1:5), is once again portrayed as the one whose cosmic power exceeds the claims of Rome.

Modern Hearers of the Book of Revelation

The Book of Revelation has an important message for its original, 1st-century readers and contemporary, 21st-century readers. Instead of being intimidated by this final book of the Bible, Jesus’ followers today should listen carefully to its divine message with two ears. Christians need to make use of study Bibles, commentaries, and other resources that help them hear the many allusions to both the Old Testament and the ancient world. “Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches!” (Rev 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22).



In 2021, Jeffrey Weima published a commentary with Baker Books on the seven letters or “sermons” to the churches of Revelation, which won a “Commentary of the Year” award and has been translated into Korean.

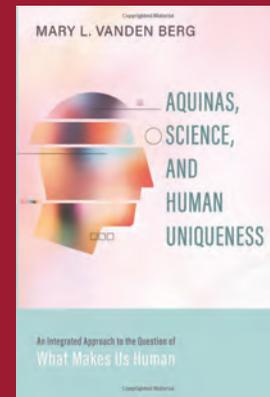


Seminary news





CTS Faculty Mary Vanden Berg Publishes Book on Human Uniqueness



Aquinas, Science, and Human Uniqueness: An Integrated Approach to What Makes Us Human

What is a human? Are we just a random collection of organic material? Is there something special about humans, something unique? What characteristics or behaviors might suggest humans are unique and different from other creatures? Or are there any such characteristics? In her new book, *Aquinas, Science, and Human Uniqueness: An Integrated Approach to What Makes Us Human*, Dr. Mary Vanden Berg addresses some of these basic questions about humans.

She begins by retrieving Aquinas's structural understanding of humans as beings with a unique place in the hierarchy of existence. With that as a foundation, Vanden Berg digs into the biblical text, exploring various ways the Bible describes human persons beyond the basic designation of humans as the image of God. She moves from this Biblical portrayal of humans to what we can learn from science about humans, particularly biological science and evolutionary psychology. She helpfully includes a chapter suggesting ways to consider how one could understand and appreciate the stories of science and Scripture without necessarily feeling the need to harmonize.

Working with the ideas drawn from Aquinas, the Bible, and science, Vanden Berg asserts that humans are special because humans—and humans alone—are material-spiritual, intellectual, and worshiping animals. When combined, these characteristics set humans apart from all other non-human animals. Well-known theologian Kevin J. Vanhoozer writes that Vanden Berg “makes a persuasive case for retrieving Aquinas’s notion of the soul’s intellectual capacity as the best way forward for doing justice not only to human uniqueness but to the human dignity of the disabled as well.” Old Testament theologian John W. Hilber also recommends the book writing that Vanden Berg “provides an uncommon integration of theological acumen, careful exegesis, informed science, and pastoral engagement.” The Forum encourages our readers to read this intriguing work about the special uniqueness of humans.

Responding to a Critical Need: Calvin Seminary Launches MA in Clinical Mental Health Counseling

Master's degree will help meet national and global needs



DANJUMA GIBSON
PROFESSOR OF PASTORAL CARE

Across the United States, there is a need for licensed mental health counselors at the national, state, and local levels. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics projects that the employment demand for mental health therapists and counselors and addiction and behavioral counselors will significantly outpace the employment average in all other labor categories.

In fact, by 2031, the number of mental health counselors is projected to increase by 22%, representing more than 43,000 openings per year over the next decade. According to the Department of Labor, drivers of the demand for mental health professionals include states seeking alternatives to incarceration for people with addictions and other mental health ailments and military veterans seeking mental health care.

Pine Rest Christian Mental Health Services in Grand Rapids, Michigan, is one example of an employer striving to meet a societal need. The organization is currently in the market to add more than 200 employees.

“There are so many Michiganders who are today struggling with the pandemic, with changes in family life, work, and school. We’ve seen unprecedented increases in the number of people seeking care over the past two years,” said Gretchen Johnson, DNP, RN-BC, Pine Rest’s chief nurse executive.

What would it look like for community mental health challenges to be met with excellence within the U.S., Canada, and nations worldwide? More programs are needed to equip future counselors for licensure through a high-caliber curriculum, clinical-placement experience, integrated-faith practices, and theological understanding for Christian professionals.

In February, the Calvin Seminary Board of Trustees approved a Master of Clinical Mental Health Counseling (MA in CMHC) degree program, with courses slated to begin this fall. The 60-credit program will include religious and theological foundations, clinical counseling, and clinical practice coursework. The program is available to students worldwide, who may choose from on-campus, fully remote, or hybrid



course delivery. The seminary is in talks with three clinical placement sites in Grand Rapids and is open to other placements in the communities of distance-learning students.

Seminaries throughout North America have been offering professional counseling degrees as one of many products of theological education for decades. What makes the clinical mental health counseling degree a form of theological education, as in its adoption at Calvin Seminary, is that it requires an integrative approach of biblical and theological competency and counseling psychology throughout the program.

This approach is akin to other areas in theological education, including teaching, musicology, philosophy, history, archeology, or leadership. In these subjects, social science is integrated with other forms of Christian life and praxis to advance the Kingdom of God and the redemptive witness of the gospel message to every part of creation. Moreover, Calvin Seminary will provide future MA

in CMHC students with institutional distinctives like exposure to Reformed life and tradition, intellectual rigor, and access to trusted Christian faculty.

We are excited about this missional program launching at the seminary, and we have already seen an incredible amount of interest among faculty, placement sites, and prospective students. Please join us in praying for the inaugural class and the impact of this program worldwide.

Dr. Danjuma Gibson, an experienced scholar, theologian, and psychotherapist, serves as the founding director of the MA in CHMC program. To learn more about the program and to apply to join the inaugural class, visit: go.calvinseminary.edu/counseling.



CTS TAKES BOLD NEW STEP TO FURTHER SUPPORT CANADIANS



SHAWN BRIX
CANADIAN CHURCH RELATIONS
LIAISON

At their October 2022 meeting, the Calvin Theological Seminary (CTS) Board of Trustees made the bold decision to accept Canadian dollars (CAD) paid toward tuition at par with the U.S. dollar (USD). Over the past half-decade, the average exchange rate between the CAD and USD has been roughly 30% but has been as high as 45%. For the last several months, it's hovered in the 35% range. Accepting CAD at par is a huge saving for Canadian students who have chosen CTS to be further equipped for Kingdom service.

Although CTS serves an increasingly diverse body of students as the official seminary of the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRCNA), it recognizes its unique responsibility to serve churches in the US and Canada. Because the exchange rate put Canadian students at a distinct disadvantage, the CTS Board of Trustees knew it was time to do away with the historic obstacle to those living north of the 49th parallel. The decision was a clear indication of the seminary's firm commitment to serving a bi-national denomination.

CTS President, Jul Medenblik, called the news "an answer to prayer." Presently, the seminary provides about \$1.4 million a year in scholarships. While these funds already serve to make CTS more affordable than many seminaries, this new initiative pushes affordability to new heights. Not only will it bless existing students from Canada, but it will also attract a whole new generation of Canadians to make CTS their choice for pursuing further theological education.

While CRCNA classes in Canada often pay a portion or all of a student's tuition, they are encouraged to see this new initiative as an opportunity to further support the students under their care. A classis can determine that their cost savings in tuition go towards a student's books, travel, health care costs, and other family needs.

The CAD/USD parity initiative applies to all first-level Masters' degrees (MDiv, MA, and MTS programs) and was implemented in the Winter Semester of the 2022/23 academic year. It was made possible through two Canadian charitable foundations that appreciate the seminary's vision and mission. Medenblik said, "I want to especially thank our Canadian donors who were deeply involved in developing this initiative. It will mean so much for generations to come."



Empowering Students Through Competency-Based Theological Education



AARON EINFELD
DIRECTOR OF LIFELONG
LEARNING & PARTNERSHIPS

In his book *Leadership Revolution*, author John M. Perkins reminds us that when God wants to do something in the world, he often calls humans to leadership roles to make it happen. Moses is one case study in this. When God was ready to free the Israelites from slavery, he called Moses to carry out the work. Similarly, at the Great Commission, Jesus asks the disciples to train new disciples in the way of Jesus. Since its founding, the Christian Church has continually adapted how it equips leaders and forms disciples based on the technology and needs of a particular time in history.

Throughout the early Church, pastors trained other pastors in an apprenticeship model. Pastors learned a way of life through day-to-day practice with seasoned mentors. Together, pastors studied scripture, practiced spiritual disciplines, and learned the knowledge and skills required for serving the growing Church. This apprenticeship training was relational, embodied, and took place within the church. Leaders learned by doing.

Seminaries, as we know them in the West, are a relatively modern invention. For the most part, seminaries in the United States and Canada are modeled after the university systems imported and adapted from medieval Europe. Universities

were a significant development because they solved an efficiency problem: One instructor could teach a large classroom of students. Universities also solved an access problem. In the apprenticeship model, the apprentice is limited by what their mentor can provide. University students gained access to an entire faculty of biblical and theological experts. Students gained relationships and perspectives beyond their church contexts. Faculty could dedicate their entire lives to unpacking the mysteries of scripture and sharing their discoveries with students.

But this new model came at a cost. Students had to leave their ministry setting to go to school. Ministry training happened in the classroom instead of the church. Consequently, the structure of theological education resembled a university, with its sprawling divisions, departments, disciplines, and subdisciplines. For example, the field of theology splintered into subdisciplines: practical, systematic, historical, and biblical. These subdisciplines created artificial boundaries between subject areas that fragment rather than integrate the student-learning experience. These socially constructed categories artificially separate the head, hands, and heart.

Then came the internet and the Digital Age. Online learning enabled students to remain in their ministry context while accessing formal theological education. Information became ubiquitous, and students no longer needed to access a university for expert information. Still, the first generation of distance-learning programs at seminaries focused on accumulating academic credits rather than demonstrating integrated competency for ministry.

Now, there is a new ministry training and leadership development that is gaining traction: Competency-based theological education. This ancient-future training combines the best apprenticeship, university, and distance-learning learning models.

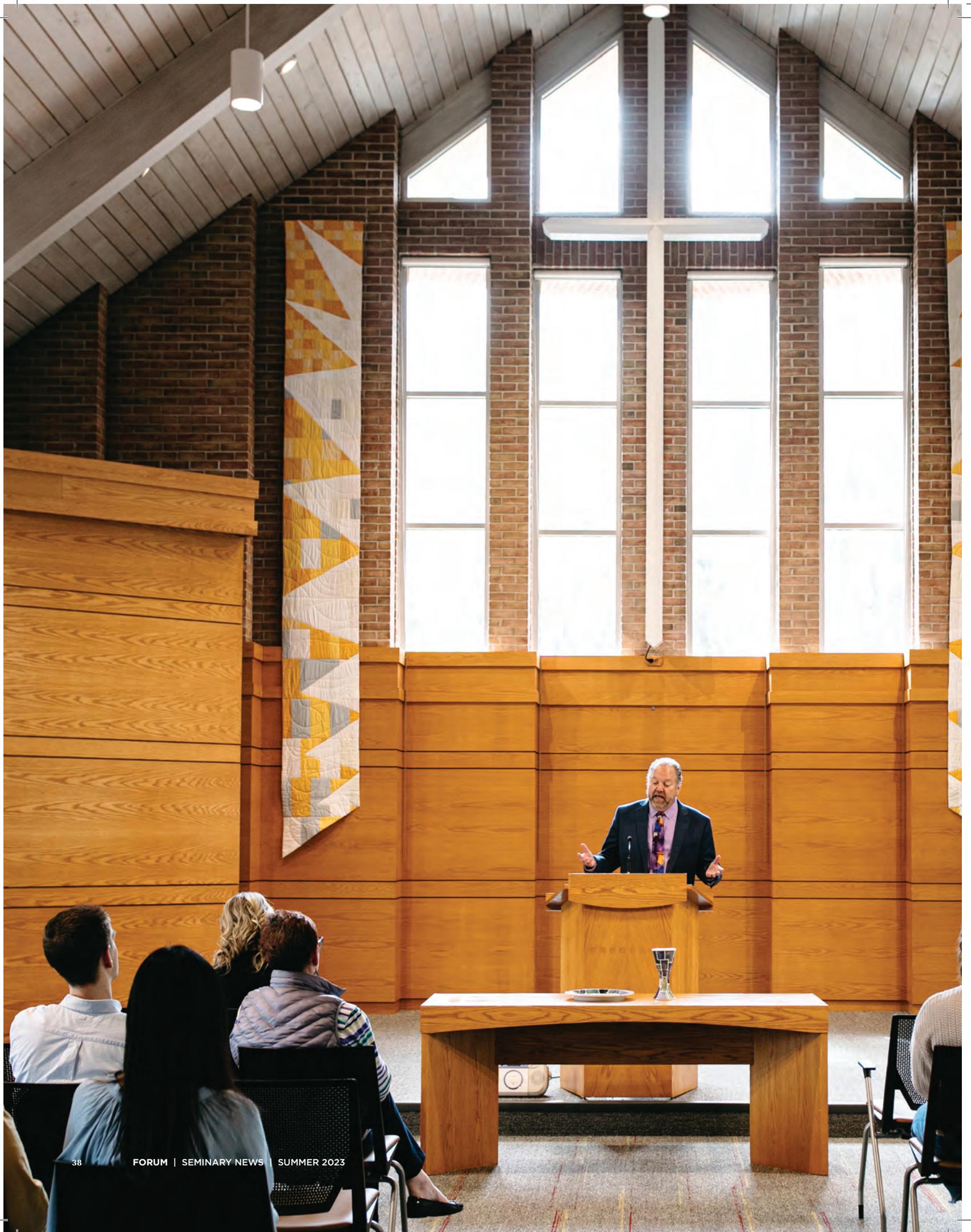
In light of this, Calvin Seminary launched Empower in the fall of 2022. Instead of completing traditional classes, students in the program are guided by a three-person mentor team to develop competencies for ministry. These competencies each encapsulate a combination of knowledge, character, and skill. For example, to demonstrate competence in the Bible, students must be able to do more than convey the content of the Bible. To achieve biblical competency, students must demonstrate to their mentor team that the gospel shapes their character and ministry practice.

The mentor team includes a CTS faculty member and experienced ministry leaders who coach, guide, and assess students as they develop and demonstrate competency for ministry. Students complete a program when they demonstrate sufficient competence in all program competencies. Simply put, Empower moves the leadership development process back into the church. Through expert team mentoring and in-context learning, students develop the head, hand, and heart in a more relational and integrated way.

We've seen initial success with 24 students and two partner organizations (Sunlight Community Church and Grand Valley State University Campus Ministry) participating in our pilot version of Empower.

Become a student or mentor or learn more about Empower: calvinseminary.edu/empower.







THE COMPELLING WORD: THE CENTER FOR EXCELLENCE IN PREACHING



SCOTT HOEZEE
DIRECTOR OF THE CENTER FOR
EXCELLENCE IN PREACHING

Calvin Seminary's Center for Excellence in Preaching (CEP) is in the first year of a five-year grant program funded by Lilly Endowment. Lilly granted CEP \$1 million to implement its proposed program as part of its new Compelling Preaching Initiative. A primary goal of the Compelling Preaching Initiative is pursuing answers to a two-fold question: What constitutes compelling preaching today? And how is such preaching best delivered given the significantly altered ecclesiastical landscape that has come about due to the global pandemic and multiple years of fierce partisan political divides and disputes?

In this first year of the grant program, CEP is one of just over 30 entities and institutions to receive a \$1 million grant from Lilly Endowment. Each program has its distinctives and methods. The program CEP proposed centers once again on Peer Learning Groups. In this first year, CEP established 16 such groups. These highly ecumenical groups now include about 160 pastors from the U.S. and Canada.

Each year, the Peer Learning Groups will be asked to look at one specific aspect of the church's contemporary preaching and worship environment. For 2023 the main focus is on the new reality of hybrid worship and preaching, as people now often tune in to worship services online rather than attend in person. Some church members have taken to attending virtually almost every week, while others alternate in-person attendance and virtual attendance. But pastors everywhere are cognizant that how their sermons are now heard and received has changed. What's more, the new hybrid dimension to worship and preaching is just one of the more significant alterations to church life resulting from a culture saturated with technology, devices, screens, social media, and more.

In 2023, the pastors in these Peer Learning Groups will grapple with this environment. What are the challenges and obstacles this atmosphere presents to preachers? What new opportunities does this afford for preaching? Are there novel ways to think about the delivery of sermons, and if so, what might those look like? Can pastors experiment with new approaches from which others could also learn?

In addition to Peer Learning Groups and new focus areas, CEP will convene various colloquia on Calvin's campus with conversations centered around the learning that emerges from the Compelling Preaching Initiative. It will bring influential preachers, Peer Group Leaders, and others together for focused, in-person interaction. Additionally, through the coordination leadership of the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship, Lilly Endowment will convene annual gatherings of representatives from all grantee institutions. By 2024, these annual gatherings will bring together leaders from a wide ecumenical swath of American seminaries, universities, and other entities, all pursuing the goal of making preaching in the church more compelling for the 21st century.





CTS Community in First Year as Public Reading of Scripture Site

It is midday on the campus of Calvin Theological Seminary. From the halls of the newly remodeled seminary building, students, staff, and faculty go to the Student Center, where the sun shines through a circular stained-glass window high in the center of the room. Everyone is starting to get hungry. But before dining together, it's time to share in feasting on God's Word in community. Members of the seminary community pull up chairs around one of the round tables and experience the Public Reading of Scripture.

The Public Reading of Scripture (PRS) movement is an initiative of the Grace & Mercy Foundation of New York, N.Y. that promotes reading scripture aloud in a group setting.

"PRS reflects an ancient biblical practice—going back, literally, to Moses and Mount Sinai—that has been rediscovered in recent years," said CTS Dean of Students Jeff Sajdak. "The Grace & Mercy Foundation began the practice among businesspeople in New York City, and it is spreading globally."

Sajdak said the seminary was invited to apply for a Grace & Mercy Foundation grant supporting PRS on campus. The seminary's weekly practice of PRS, supported through grant-funded meals and student-leader stipends, began in the fall.

"We hope to continue next year and beyond," said Sajdak.

The foundation also funded travel for Sajdak and CTS President Jul Medenblik, the program's advisors, and four seminary student leaders to travel to New York for a retreat to learn more about the history of the practice.

One of those leaders is MDiv student Julia Gho. Gho says PRS is worthwhile both personally and communally.

"I've been personally strengthened because I've been able to immerse myself in the Word and meditate on it," she said. "I feel



CTS DEAN OF STUDENTS
JEFF SAJDAK

that CTS has been strengthened to come together more and freely share what they've experienced at each PRS session."

According to Master of Theology student Benet Dogonyaro, one of the student leaders, PRS helps those at the seminary to make stronger connections every week.

"Although I read the scripture personally, listening in a community helps build relationships with others," said Dogonyaro. "For example, those you sit together with this week would not likely be the same people you would sit with the next week, which provides opportunities for establishing relationships."

PRS student leader and MDiv student Nathan Roels agreed. "As a community, it has been great to grow together, to discuss the Word together, and to listen to God together."

As a first-year student, Roels jumped right into the first semester of PRS and has already seen the benefits.

"I find the accountability of communal scripture reading helpful, as well as the pace and length of the reading," Roels reflected. "PRS has strengthened me in my scripture reading, bringing light to new passages and helping me to grow deeper in my love for God."

Another student leader, MDiv student Helen Aku, said the seminary's PRS gatherings remind her of her experiences growing up in Nigeria.

"It really helped me a lot in the knowledge of the Bible," she said of the practice. "It gave me the opportunity to listen to the passages, the stories, and then make meaning out of them apart from the church setting."

Alums and friends of the seminary are invited to join the weekly PRS gatherings—email semDOS@calvinseminary.edu for more information.

To view a video about the Public Reading of Scripture at the seminary, visit calvinseminary.edu/forum.



NEW STAFF & FACULTY



MEET

Wendy Fisher

LIFELONG LEARNING
PROGRAM COORDINATOR

In Lifelong Learning, we collaborate to equip leaders for transformation as they navigate their calling. This mission combines many of my passions: working with people, supporting ministry leaders, encouraging and noticing transformation, and creating systems that implement a vision.

I grew up in Lowell, MI, but my vocational path has led me to call many places home: New York City; Boston; the U.S. Virgin Islands; the Blue Ridge Parkway, with A Christian Ministry in the National Parks; New Haven, CT, for divinity school; East Lansing, MI, for my seminary internship; Prinsburg, MN, serving with Unity CRC and Rice Hospital; Deerfield, IL, for my husband's Ph.D.; and Kathmandu, Nepal, where we were privileged to teach young pastors. Since returning to Grand Rapids, I have been a part-time instructor at Kuyper College and was the interim Associate Director of Student Life at Western Theological Seminary. In 2004, my husband and I completed the Special Program for Ministerial Candidacy at CTS (with the bonus of meeting each other!). In this way, Calvin Seminary has also been a home for us, and I am grateful to be back in this community that profoundly shaped my family and me.

As part of Lifelong Learning, CTS recently launched our new competency-based theological education (CBTE) learning path called Empower. This itself has

involved a lot of learning! I was drawn to work on CBTE due to how valuable I found my own theological education and my strong desire to make it accessible to more students. My theological education served me in my roles as a ministry leader, hospital chaplain, and instructor and in my own discipleship, church membership, marriage, and parenting. Currently, my husband and I have two growing teenagers. They tower over me in height, delight me with their humor, and help me with technology. (Truly, I could not have met the online teaching demands of COVID without them! And, as their at-home teacher, I hope I offered them a bit in return.)

In this season, I understand an aspect of my vocational calling: companioning others on the spiritual journey and encouraging encounters with God. This happens in my practice as a Spiritual Director, shaping my Lifelong Learning coordinator role—as I help implement educational opportunities, resources, and support for ministry leaders and students. I pray with Paul that “we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit” (2 Cor 3:18).



MEET

Amy Hwang

ADMISSIONS COMMUNICATIONS
COORDINATOR

I was born in Grand Rapids, MI, while my father attended CTS in the 1980s. Through CTS, God prepared him for his ministry as a theologian and pastor in South Korea. Through my father's ministry, I have witnessed the impact of CTS and Reformed theology on the Korean Church. It gave me a deep appreciation for this institution and opportunity.

I am excited to be part of the team that shares with the world and the Church the vital role of CTS in faithfully preparing leaders who nurture disciples and serve the church. We can showcase our fantastic faculty and thought leaders to the world and share the distinguishing marks of what makes our denomination and seminary unique. In a broken and increasingly divided world, the Reformed Church, Reformed theologians/pastors, and Reformed theology matters more than ever.

I believe CTS is called to raise Reformed leaders who are biblically faithful and contextually effective in their ministry of the Word. It is my hope and prayer that prospective students will seek out CTS because of its rich Reformed heritage, and alums and donors will be excited to engage and continue to support CTS as their lifelong learning community.

NEW STAFF & FACULTY



MEET

Jack Phillips

FACILITIES MANAGER

I grew up in West Michigan and graduated from Calvin University in 2002 with a Bachelor of Science, interdisciplinary in engineering and business. After college, I was a controls engineer in the automotive industry for 10 years.

I returned to Calvin as the Assistant Director of Facilities in the mechanical department for the next 10 years. While at the university, I assisted in our department's sustainability efforts that helped drop electrical demand by 19% and water consumption by 25%. We solved other campus problems like improving air quality and lowering Chloramine gas levels in the pool area by adding a UV filter.

For the past year, I have worked for a builder doing remodeling and new-build construction. I am excited to be working at the Seminary because of the good work we do here in helping to make a space conducive to learning. I enjoy the community and relationships with coworkers and students. I like solving difficult maintenance problems and planning equipment replacements and upgrades. I have a passion for sustainability to increase efficiency and lower costs.

In my role as the Facilities Manager, I handle all aspects of maintaining the building and surrounding areas. We handle everything from daily cleaning to large construction projects. We handle fire alarm systems, fire suppression, locks and doors, elevators, electrical, plumbing, carpet cleaning, apartment maintenance, HVAC, building automated systems, and scheduling.

Outside work, my wife and I have five kids who keep us busy. We enjoy family time and being outdoors as much as possible. On a nice day, you will find us outside playing a game of basketball, kickball, or wiffleball in the yard. We love to swim, be by a lake, or just marvel at God's creation. We also love to travel around northern Michigan in the summer.



MEET

Dr. Gabriela Tijerina-Pike

DIRECTOR OF LATINO MINISTRIES
AND ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF
NEW TESTAMENT

Dr. Gabriela Tijerina-Pike is on a mission, and she's no stranger to missional work. She has served as a missionary in the U.S., Costa Rica, and Mexico. She's taught at schools in all three of these countries and online, drawing on her vast knowledge of the Bible, theology, and ministry. She has also blessed countless readers through her writing and editing work in Christian and devotional literature.

Joining the seminary's community of scholars is a crowning blessing for Dr. Tijerina-Pike. "We know that through the years, God crowns us with his favors," she explains. "I think one of his favors for me was the opportunity to gain higher education and faculty experience to eventually come to serve along with the team of staff and educators at CTS. Their passion for teaching sound doctrine accompanied by rigorous spiritual care for the training of ministers of the Word has led me to commit my best efforts to keep CTS classrooms filled with students."

When she is not teaching, Dr. Tijerina-Pike and her husband, Sky, enjoy spending time outdoors, visiting family, and dreaming of future writing pursuits. The seminary community is already gaining wisdom and knowledge from Dr. Tijerina-Pike's scholarship and experience.

"I expect to lay a solid foundation for Reformed theological education in Spanish," she says. "I believe that, if the Lord does not come in the next 150 years, CTS could celebrate a 300-year anniversary with the addition of another hundred generations of Latino graduates that become ministers of the Word in Spanish: ministers that commit to the proclamation of the Gospel and persevere in the godly reformation of the Church around the world."

NEW STAFF & FACULTY



MEET

Dr. Daniel Daley

PROFESSOR OF NEW TESTAMENT

In an effort to find the right fit, Dr. Daniel Daley made a list of the kind of learning community he hoped to join:

- Where the Bible is taken seriously
- Where questions are encouraged
- Where students and faculty have the ability to probe the faith together in an encouraging environment

“I believe CTS is such a place,” he says.

As Professor of New Testament at CTS, he has wasted no time investing in the teaching and formation of ministry leaders.

“At CTS,” says Dr. Daley, “I am most excited about spending time with students, helping them along this stage of their faith journey, exploring the Scriptures together, and participating with Christ in the development of the next generation of church leaders.”

Prior to joining the seminary faculty, he completed a Ph.D. at Trinity College Dublin and a fellowship in biblical studies at the University of Leuven (Belgium).

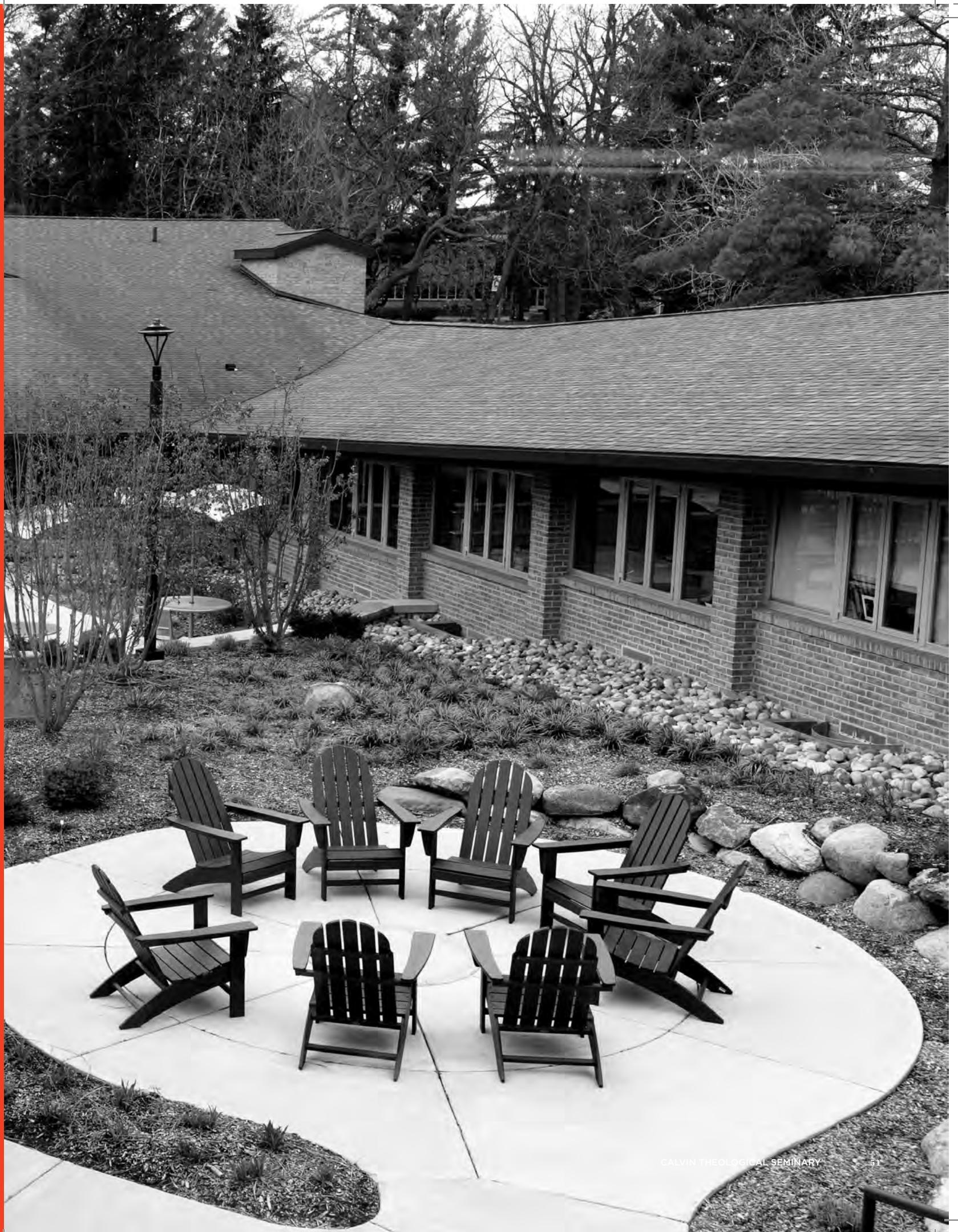
“I hope to bring a conversational and relational approach to scholarship and classroom teaching,” he says. “I am coming out of 10 years in the academy, so I hope to bring fresh approaches and insights from the most recent research trends and developments into CTS’s thriving community of students and faculty.”

Before his doctoral work, Dr. Daley served in vocational ministry as a pastor in Nevada. Dr. Daley and his wife, Brennen, have three children, ages 18, 16, and 11. The family enjoys European travel, including visits to art museums and historical sites.

Whether he picks up literary fiction, nonfiction, nature writing, or poetry, Dr. Daley is always reading something new. And, as an avid sports fan, he spends most mornings with a cup of coffee, watching games from the previous night.



Alumni news





A LETTER FROM THE DIRECTOR OF ALUMNI ENGAGEMENT

What a gift to be a part of building the seminary's relationship with alumni around the globe. This is another way for us to share in your ministry work, celebrate personal achievements, and highlight unique ways God works through the lives of the Calvin Seminary community.

In the last several years, my work as Director of Alumni Engagement has allowed me to reconnect with many graduates of CTS and receive feedback about their experiences. What did they appreciate about their time at Calvin Seminary? What do they wish they had learned but didn't? How can we support them in their ministry? There is much more to learn from you, but covering the world and sharing these stories with everyone is difficult. This is why we have dedicated space in this new Forum to shine the light on the work of our alumni.

We are so proud of the ministries our graduates are growing, their work, and the kingdom they are building. Witnessing your creativity and dedication is exciting!

I would love to hear how Calvin Seminary can support you as we build this space together. How can we help you in your ministry as you transition to new roles? How can we come alongside you to better serve the church? Be sure to join the Calvin Seminary Alumni Facebook group and subscribe to the Alumni Newsletter. I will keep you updated on everything happening at the seminary, and you can share your work with other alumni around the globe.

If you have something that you would like to see highlighted on our Facebook page or in this space, please send information to alumni@calvinseminary.edu.

Sincerely,

Jennifer Settergren
Director of Alumni Engagement



From MDiv to Missional Partnership

Seminary Grads Lead Ontario Church Into New Possibilities



JOSH FRIEND & NICOLE MCLEOD

Fresh out of Calvin University in 2012, Nicole McLeod (Veenkamp) planned to return home to Canada to become a worship director. However, finding an open role proved difficult—very few churches in Canada were hiring. A connection at a church in California offered her a position as a worship director, but it would require a visa.

She had hoped someday to earn her Master of Divinity (MDiv), but the day came sooner than expected. By obtaining a student visa for Calvin Theological Seminary's brand new hybrid MDiv program, she could have the immigration standing she needed to work at the church in the U.S. and get a jump start on her seminary studies.

But the paperwork was delayed. McLeod sat in her vehicle in Canada, packed and ready for the MDiv orientation in Grand Rapids, just waiting for the visa to arrive from her mail carrier. Once she had the document in hand, she started the car and headed to Grand Rapids for the opening social of her program. There she would meet her classmate Josh Friend.

Another member of the inaugural hybrid MDiv cohort, Friend was active in full-time ministry in Ontario when he began pursuing his MDiv. He and his wife, Tiffany, had two children and would add one more to their family and move to serve in Alberta over the course of the MDiv program.

The degree, in its initial layout, would take McLeod, Friend, and their classmates five years to complete. Along the way, there were formative discussions.

"We had a pretty close cohort," McLeod said of her MDiv Class. McLeod and Friend both noted the meaningful relationships they made in the group they were both placed in. With a background in worship, they were both part of the team that started chapel services for hybrid learning students. Perhaps most valuable in building community during their program were the intensive weeks for hybrid students.

“You’re together intensely for those times twice a year, and you are outside your normal context,” McLeod said. “So you take a step back from your ministry context, from everything else, and you’re in this place very intentionally with these other people. You can talk about what’s going on and have those kinds of discerning conversations with each other.”

McLeod said that being classmates—and friends—from a distance made students like her and Friend accustomed to connecting digitally. McLeod, or “Pastor Nicole” as her congregation knows her, has been Director of Worship since 2018 at Hope Fellowship Church in Courtice, Ontario. Throughout her time at the church, she has stayed in touch with MDiv classmates across Canada, like Friend in Alberta. These alumni agree there was a seamless transition to keeping in touch after the program, and their cohort remains supportive.

So supportive that many members of their graduating class were there for Friend’s installation service in 2022 when he became teaching pastor, alongside worship pastor McLeod, at Hope Fellowship Church. Fellow alumni made it a point to stand with Friend and McLeod as they started a new era of leadership for their church.

“When I am weak, she is very strong, and I hope to do the same for her,” Friend said of his partnership with McLeod, which helps them to lead the church in its missional work.

But Friend, currently in the Doctor of Ministry (DMin) program at the seminary, is quick to note that even with a new pastor, the church’s mission remains the same—using its resources to further the work of God’s kingdom in context.

With the help of his professors, Dr. Cory Willson and Dr. Mariano Avila-Artaega, Friend held a vision-casting retreat for his church at the beginning of April. But it wasn’t a traditional process that resulted in a mission statement. Willson and Avila-Artaega encouraged Friend and his classmates to ask their congregations, “What if God’s church doesn’t have a mission? What if God’s mission has a church?” And that’s the question Friend brought to his retreat.

Friend says the church is looking at how God empowers their congregation to serve their immediate community and what resources they offer. One such resource is Hope Fellowship’s large piece of land, a portion of which was gifted from another church. While the church already hosts many ministries, a community garden, and a counseling center on its property, Friend and McLeod have been in conversation with their congregants, the city mayor, and the greater Courtice community—all while discerning God’s leading through prayer—to consider how the land might best build shalom and serve existing needs in the area.

“It’s similar to our time at the start of the MDiv distance learning program,” McLeod said of this planning process for the land. “There’s a lot of room for creativity.”

And, just as she waited packed and ready to begin her MDiv program, McLeod is eager to get started in whatever God calls Hope Fellowship to next.

“God has given the land to us for this reason,” she said. “We really want to use it not just for our church but for our community and God’s kingdom.”

DISTINGUISHED ALUMNI: ALLEN & LYNN LIKKEL



For many years, Allen and Lynn Likkell have worked in communities all over North America, planting churches, nurturing these churches, and developing new church leaders. It all started with a summer internship in Mt. Rainier National Park and a full-year internship in Anchorage, Alaska, where their passion was awakened for serving as missionaries among seekers. They then served churches in Waterloo, Iowa, East Islip, New York, and Nanaimo, BC.

Allen worked formally for Christian Reformed Home Missions for nearly 40 years. Allen and Lynn always worked as a ministry team, helping build leaders and new congregations. Following 20 years of church planting ministry, Allen served in New Church Development and as Director of Regional Ministry Teams for CRHM. This work involved recruiting, training, coaching, and connecting leaders throughout Canada and the USA.

Ordained as a Minister of the Word and serving initially in the Mill Creek CRC in Mill Creek, WA, Lynn has served on staff at Madison Sq. CRC and Sherman St. CRC. She completed Clinical Pastoral Education while in a residency at Bronson Hospital in Kalamazoo, MI. She recently served as a Parish Chaplain through the ministry of Mosaic Church in Bellingham, ministering in the church and the community.

At the end of November 2010, Allen retired from his position with Christian Reformed Home Missions. Allen and Lynn moved back to the Pacific Northwest. Allen has continued to coach church planters and provides leadership and team development for organizations and churches as a Gallup Inc. StrengthsFinder Coach. Allen also began serving as a part-time Development Associate for Calvin Theological Seminary, focusing on the Pacific Northwest and Western Canada.

Allen and Lynn serve as Calling Pastors for the older members of Third Christian Reformed Church in Lynden. They are engaged in a community project called Racial Unity Now, promoting racial unity and understanding through book studies, films, and relationship building. They are members of Mosaic Church, a church plant in Bellingham, WA, which began in 2010.

The Likkells have four children. Eric is the pastor of Emmaus Road, a CRC church plant in Seattle, and a jazz musician. Brett is a UX Engineer at T-Mobile in Seattle. Dana is a special education teacher in Spring Lake, MI. Natasha is an adoption counselor and children's book author living in Dublin, CA. Allen and Lynn have 13 grandchildren and one great-grandchild to keep them busy.



ALLEN AND LYNN LIKKEL (CENTER) WITH THEIR CHILDREN (LEFT TO RIGHT) BRETT, NATASHA, DANA, AND ERIC

Based on lessons learned, the following advice is offered to those entering ministry as ordained pastors.

- Given the cultural wars and climate of divisiveness, ministry is difficult in the church and society. Go into ministry with your eyes wide open and be prepared for the challenges. This means you have to be very clear about your identity in Christ as His follower and have a clear sense of your calling.
- Ministry is also incredibly rewarding as you see the power of the Gospel transforming people's lives. Always have contact with people in the community who do not know Christ or are still in the early stages of seeking him. This will keep your focus on Christ's mission to "see and save the lost" and keep the main thing as the main thing.
- Regardless of the vocation of your spouse, both of you must be committed to your calling as a pastor. The church and community members need to know and experience that both of you are committed to and truly love them.
- Live a balanced life with priority time for family, recreation, and hobbies. Develop a sense of humor. Make some good friends with whom you can laugh and cry.
- Remain humble and teachable.



“My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”

(Corinthians 12:9)

DISTINGUISHED ALUMNI: STAN MAST

My journey into the ministry began at a Reformation Day Rally in southeast Denver in 1962. As Dr. Peter Eldersveld of the Back to God Hour preached, I distinctly heard God calling me to the ministry. That was the last thing I wanted to do; my dream was to be a high school teacher and coach. But the certainty of that call was overwhelmed by resistance and kept me in ministry in the hard times when I wanted to flee like Jonah.

That call led me to Calvin College and Seminary, where I received an excellent education in the classic Reformed world and life view during the turbulent 60s. The most important thing that happened to me during those years was meeting the lovely woman who would become my wife. Sharon has been my strongest supporter and my most intelligent critic. God blessed us with two strong sons who gave me much joy and kept me humble.

I have fond memories of our time at the Seminary: rigorous theology classes taught by no-nonsense theoreticians balanced by down-to-earth practical classes led by warm-hearted pastoral types; raucous laughter in the coffee shop and potluck dinners in ramshackle apartments with classmates who would become lifelong friends; Friday afternoon basketball games and the all-college touch football championship; intellectual and spiritual growth in a warm family atmosphere.

But I wasn't quite prepared to be a minister yet. That would come in the graduate school of hard knocks called the church. On my endless journey toward becoming a good preacher and a better Christian, I served four very different churches: a tiny mission church in the big city of St. Louis (Trinity, 1971-74), a missional church in the bustling western city

of Colorado Springs (Cragmor, 1974-78); a rural/urban church in the rapidly growing small town of Byron Center, MI (Heritage, 1978-87); and a historic tall steeple church in downtown Grand Rapids (LaGrave, 1990-2012). In the middle of all that, I had the privilege of serving as Coordinator of Field Education at Calvin Theological Seminary (1987-90).

My greatest joy in ministry has always been preaching the Gospel. So, I was delighted when I was appointed Adjunct Professor of Preaching at CTS right after my retirement in 2012. Contributing to the growth of students and practicing preachers brought a deep sense of fulfillment into my retirement years. And I rejoice that after nine years at CTS, I still have the privilege of serving as an Interim Minister of Preaching in local churches.

Along the way, I've tried to keep up with changes in the world, even as I clung to the historical faith of my youth. So, I pursued a ThM in systematic theology at CTS in the 1980s and a DMin in preaching at Denver Seminary in the 1990s.

I don't feel all that distinguished, but thanks for noticing me. Throughout my life, God's words to Paul in II Corinthians 12:9 have proven true. "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."

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David Vandokkumburg is an MDiv student whose interests include studying Scripture, congregational ministry in urban settings, and communicating the gospel effectively in contemporary contexts. He is concurrently taking classes and serving as an intern at a local church, which allows him to apply what he is learning in the classroom to an actual ministry context. Through the internship, he is also gaining valuable experience in preaching.



Debbie Jin is an MDiv student who is passionate about missions, intercultural studies, and evangelism. She has a strong desire to help other people draw closer to God and learn more about God's Word. Debbie has been deeply impacted by seminary professors and mentors who have emphasized the importance of healing and grace. Because of them, Debbie has grown in her capacity to extend grace to others and to engage in the work of pastoral care.

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JUL MEDENBLIK, PRESIDENT

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