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Engaging the Church

Spring 2013
It was a different time and a different context, but these words still challenge me. Do they challenge you?

_He can no longer have God for his Father, who has not the Church for his mother._

That insight and challenge comes from Cyprian, the bishop of Carthage, who died for his faith.

In an age where many people talk about a spiritual connection to God, but seem to avoid a physical connection to a local church, we need to ask what it means for people of faith to “engage” the church and for the church to “engage” individuals and families.

I still have the heartbeat of a church planter. I still remember September 29, 1996, as the date of the Community Grand Opening of New Life Christian Reformed Church in New Lenox, Illinois. I still remember that at that service 211 persons gathered together and the journey of what it meant to “be” church to one another began in a new way.

When you are a part of a church, there are ups and downs. I have seen people who were “hurt” by the church tentatively step back into a church building and I have seen people who never grew up in a church wonder if church people are “aliens.”

As you read this issue, I want to invite you to broaden this conversation to people that you know. Maybe you will read this issue and think of someone who needs to be challenged or someone who needs to be comforted.

May we all be encouraged in keeping with these words from Hebrews 10:24-25:

_And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching._
The Church: Who and Whose Are We?

Martin Luther, in his Smalcald Articles of 1537, says that even “a child seven years old knows what the Church is,” for they pray “I believe in a holy Christian Church.” Twentieth-century theology, however, has been much less confident: there has been a torrent of literature struggling with the question “What is the church?” Yale historian Jaroslav Pelikan sees ecclesiology, the doctrine of the church, as the theological focus of the twentieth century. He writes, “the doctrine of the church became, as it had never quite been before, the bearer of the whole Christian message for the twentieth century.” Fuller Theologian Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen similarly speaks of an “ecclesiological renaissance” in contemporary theology.

Perhaps John Stackhouse best helps us to see why ecclesiology is so important: “When we, the church, are confused about who we are and whose we are, we can become anything and anyone’s.” Ecclesiology is about understanding our identity—who we are. It is about understanding to whom we belong and why—whose we are. And if we are not explicit in developing our self-understanding in terms of our role and place in the biblical drama, we are likely going to be shaped by the idolatrous story of the dominant culture.

We can hardly begin to address such an important issue in a short article. However, New Testament scholar Herman Ridderbos has made three closely related and interlocking observations on the Bible’s teaching on the church: I believe these observations are a solid foundation upon which we may build our discussions and doctrines.

First, Ridderbos believes that the New Testament offers two fundamental perspectives on the church. On the one hand, the church is the people of God—there is continuity with God’s people in the Old Testament. That story helps to define who we are. In fact, the majority of the one hundred or so New Testament images of the church are taken from the Old Testament. On the other hand, the church is the body of Christ—there is discontinuity. The advent of the end-time kingdom in Jesus and by the Spirit brings something fundamentally new. The remaining New Testament images of the church describe in one way or another what is made new with the coming of Christ.

Because of the continuity between the New Testament church and Old Testament Israel, one must carefully attend to the Old Testament in order to understand the church today. Indeed, the Gospels picture Jesus as an end-time shepherd, promised by the prophets, whose main task is to gather and renew Israel. This gathered community becomes the nucleus of the new covenant people of God who are gathered from all nations. So it is no wonder the New Testament employs so many Old Testament images to define the church’s identity. It is essential, therefore, to understand the identity and role of God’s people in the Old Testament story.

When we look back into the Old Testament we see a number of things that define this community. They are a people who have been chosen by God, who has made them his own out of the depths of his love. They are a people who are bound to God in covenant, an image chosen from the ancient near east to describe the kind of relationship they had with God. They are a people who have been redeemed by God, liberated from idols and other lords to serve God alone. They are a distinctive or holy people called to live in God’s way over against the idolatrous ways of the nations. They are a people in whom God’s loving, renewing, and judging presence dwells. They are a people who have been chosen, bound in covenant, redeemed to be a holy community.
who know God’s presence for the sake of the world. God’s mission is to draw all nations, indeed the whole creation, to himself. And so God’s work begins in his people to whom he will finally gather all nations and the whole creation.

Israel’s failure to live up to their identity led to God’s judgment. However, the prophets promised that Israel would still be gathered and renewed so they could carry out their vocation. And, indeed, Jesus comes, gathers them, and in his death and resurrection accomplishes the salvation of God’s end-time kingdom. With the outpouring of the Spirit the newly gathered people of God now experience that new life of the kingdom. Thus, the New Testament church is the gathered and renewed Israel. Now in Christ, they are chosen by God, bound in covenant to him, and redeemed from idols to serve the living God. They are a distinctive people in whom God’s presence dwells for the sake of the nations.

In spite of all the similarities, we see the discontinuity between the church and the Old Testament people of God. The decisive events that stand at the center of the biblical story—the work of Christ: his life, death, resurrection, ascension, and his gift of the Spirit—have ushered in God’s end-time kingdom. There is a new power at work in the world; God’s Spirit will renew, heal, liberate, and restore. And the church shares in that new life.

This leads us to Ridderbos’ second observation: the church must be defined in terms of the coming kingdom. The “new” of the New Testament church is largely eschatological in nature. Ridderbos tells us that we must picture kingdom and church in terms of two concentric circles. The outer circle is the kingdom of God and the inner circle is the church. God’s rule is over the whole creation, but the church is the community where that rule is acknowledged and experienced. God’s reign is broader than the church—it is over the whole world and all of human society—but the church is a picture and firstfruits of that reign that will one day extend to all things.

We might define the relationship of the church to the kingdom in three statements.

First, the church is the place where the eschatological kingship of God in Jesus Christ becomes visible. God’s people now experience the end-time salvation of the kingdom. Since the Spirit has been given, they have been given a foretaste of the cosmic renewal that will one day fill the earth. As such they are previews of that future salvation in the midst of the world.

Second, the church serves the kingdom by announcing the good news that Jesus is Lord over all. This time is a time of the gathering all the nations of the earth into a community that shares in the salvation of the kingdom. This gathering through announcing the gospel is an eschatological event (Matt. 24:14). The already-not-yet era of the kingdom is characterized by the proclamation of the kingdom and the gathering of all nations into the kingdom community.

Third, the church is engaged in the struggle of Christ’s kingdom against the destructive powers of darkness in all areas of life as a witness to Christ’s all-embracing lordship. God’s people have taken a new form: they are now a non-geographical and non-ethnic community that lives in the midst of all nations. This creates a challenge that God’s Old Testament people did not face. In the Old Testament, Israel lived as a nation with their own story, their own culture, their own social institutions, all shaped by God’s word. The church of today, on the other hand, must live as members and participants of cultures that are formed by a different story that does not acknowledge Christ as Lord. For God’s people today, living counter to the idolatrous ways of their culture is a much more difficult and complex vocation as they engage the struggle of Christ’s kingdom against the powers of darkness across the spectrum of human life.

And this brings us to the last observation by Ridderbos: In the New Testament the word “church” can refer to both the people of God across the whole breadth of their lives as the new humanity and to a specific institution gathered and organized for so-called “religious” activities. So far we have primarily viewed the church from the angle of the first: it is the new humanity gathered to be a sign of the God’s rule over all of human life. But “church” can also refer to a specific gathered community organized to carry out various activities that build up and nourish the life of the kingdom.

The missional engagement of the church with its culture surely demands a people who are deeply nourished in their new life in Christ—and this nourishment happens within those specific churches. Acts 2:42 describes a community devoted to the Word of God, fellowship, prayer, and the Lord’s Supper. Each of these function as channels whereby the Spirit strengthens the life of the new creation. Likewise, Paul shows us the importance of the upbuilding work of the church in various places (e.g., Eph. 4). The strengthening of the inner life of the church for its missional engagement is absolutely necessary.

The church, therefore, is like an ellipse with two foci. Around the first it is rooted in the source of its life and mission. … The other focus is its engagement with the world.
Why Join a Church?

When Ryan and Clarice married and moved far from their home communities it was their intention to join a local church. Clarice was a member of a CRC church and Ryan was RCA.

The first few months after the move they attended the local CRC church. They did not find the minister or the style of music to their liking. Then they began visiting the RCA church close to their home. They didn’t find it any more to their liking, so they began to attend a large non-denominational American evangelical church. The preacher was engaging and the music was more their style. They continued to worship there every Sunday morning.

After a year of regular attendance they still had not joined the church. They were uncomfortable with contacting their home churches about a membership transfer and were unclear what the membership process in the new church involved. Not joining seemed to have some advantages. Although they contributed money in the offering plate each week, they avoided the financial expectations of regular members. It also allowed them the option of skipping out of other responsibilities of membership: no nursery duty, no potluck preparation, no committee obligations. It gave them an informal anonymity that allowed them to do as they pleased. And it gave them an easy out if the worship ever changed. If a new minister came or the music became unpleasant, they could pick up and leave. Clarice’s parents wished that she and Ryan would join the local CRC, but were grateful they regularly attended worship services.

The experience of Ryan and Clarice is not unusual. When Christian young people go off to college, they may worship on Sunday at a local church but their membership remains with their home church. Over time their membership in a distant family church seems increasingly irrelevant. This pattern of attending church without joining it follows many after graduation.

Here are the facts. In the 2012 General Social Survey it was found that in the United States, 20 percent of a nationally representative group were not part of an organized faith, a huge rise from 8 percent in 1990. More than 33 percent of 18- to 24-year-olds claimed “no religion,” compared to just 7 percent of those 75 and older. (The survey distinguishes individuals who are unchurched from those who claim to be atheists. The latter group is still only 3 percent of the population.)

The question for this short essay is whether choosing to affiliate formally with a local church is important. I will consider the question in two stages: first, by probing an underlying reason why many adults don’t officially join a church; and second, by examining the important biblical reason for joining a church.

An Underlying Reason for Not Joining

Some young people who have grown up attending church have a mistaken view of what a church is, and what church membership means. They think a church is like a retail store—a place where you go to get some things that you may need. What is it that a church offers that someone may need? The answer to that question is not the same for everyone. For some, going to church is a kind of habit they acquired in their youth. Sunday mornings just don’t seem quite right if you don’t go to a worship service. For some the music may be the draw. They may like the familiar songs, or the praise band, and the opportunity to sing along—a kind of group karaoke. Some may find the preacher inspiring or good at offering practical advice. Still others may enjoy the opportunity to see friends, like going to a coffee shop. When a person finds what she needs at a church she returns to the same church over and over, like many people who keep

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Why Join a Church?

returning to their local Cheesecake Factory or Target.

But such individuals may choose to keep their commitment to the church at arm’s length. They don’t want to be members. They want to keep their options open. They may find another establishment that they like better. Or the church they attend could change; it could get a new preacher, or change its music so that it is not a place they enjoy as much. Their own preferences also could change, so that what they once liked is no longer enjoyable. Joining a church involves some risks that one can avoid by simply attending. This strategy makes good sense if the church is like a retailer. Why should one commit to a single retailer when another may emerge as even more satisfying? I personally don’t own a Target card and I’m not a preferred Cheesecake Factory customer. I don’t want to feel any obligation to retailers; my loyalty is based on my perception that they are meeting my needs and, if that were to change, I want to feel free to go elsewhere.

The idea that church is like a retail store involves a significant confusion. A retailer needs to meet your felt needs, but the purpose of a church is to meet real needs, whether or not they are felt. One reason this confusion about the church is more prevalent today is that many people don’t feel the need for the kind of help the church offers. There was a time when so many lives were peppered with trouble and sad events that people could not ignore the brokenness of human life, and they therefore recognized the need of divine help. But many today are shielded from the common effects of sin and have lives of relative ease. The problems they experience seem to require doctors or politicians, not a pastor. So the church is not seen as something needed; rather it is seen as an option, like buying groceries at Walmart.

Why Joining a Church Is Important

We are social beings. We each have a need to have friends and to belong to some group. We associate with people who are like us in some respects. Perhaps we have the same occupation, or we have children the same age, or we went to school together. The community around which your social life is centered makes a lot of difference, because those with whom we share our lives have a significant influence on us. Their ideas slowly influence our ideas; their values impact our hearts. Sadly, many have abandoned the Christian faith because their social lives are centered around people who don’t know the Lord.

A church is the most important community to which a Christian can belong because Christians share a basic view of life that is much different than the currents of secular thought.

A church is the most important community to which a Christian can belong because Christians share a basic view of life that is much different than the currents of secular thought. We are exposed to these currents on a daily basis and it is a struggle for a Christian to keep the faith. Being surrounded by a church community is vital to consistently fortify one’s faith; without it faith is in real danger of atrophying.

At the same time, the church community is more than just a social group; it is rather like a family. Indeed, Paul refers to some of his fellow church members as “brothers.” Some refer to the institutional church as “mother church.” The church is both a place of love and caring, and also one of instruction, correction, and discipline. At some points in our lives we each need to have our ideas challenged, our consciences reawakened, and our hearts turned back toward the things of God. The church is an institution ordained by God himself for the nurture of his children. He instituted it for our good. This good comes to us informally in the fellowship of other Christians, and formally in the preaching of the word, in taking part in the sacraments, and in biblical discipling.

Yet there is another important reason to join a church. In 1 Corinthians 12 Paul compares the church to a human body, and says that a body needs all of its parts to function properly. Each body part is valuable and needed. A person without a hand, or with ears that don’t hear, or eyes that can’t see, or legs that are paralyzed, is still able to function, even if not fully. Paul is not saying that a person should belong to a church because of the benefits of church membership. He is saying that the church needs every Christian to join so it can function as God intends. It is what an individual believer can contribute to the life and fellowship of the church and the witness to Jesus Christ that should motivate him to join the church.

When a person becomes a Christian it is because the Holy Spirit has been at work in his heart and mind, and has given him the gift of faith. The Holy Spirit brings a variety of gifts, abilities, and talents to each Christian which are intended for the good of God’s people and for reaching out to those who need to hear of God’s grace in Jesus Christ. Some of these gifts are for kingdom work, so that a Christian is working for the glory of God in whatever job he has. Some of these gifts are for church work, so that a Christian can contribute by serving as a musician, or a nursery worker, or an elder, or a youth leader. Using the gifts that God has given in order to build up God’s family and draw others into it is a motivation for joining a church.

If a person thinks of a church as just another retail organization, there is little reason to officially join it as a member. The church is, in fact, a God-ordained institution. It is a place God has designed for spiritually nurturing his children, and a place where we can share the gifts God has given us for the benefit of our brothers and sisters in the Lord. Joining it is an act of obedience.
What Attracts People to the Church? 
(and what puts them off)

Last week one of our attendees, baptized a few months ago, sent this email to our Pastor of Hospitality:

Hi…

This morning I brought my brother and a friend of ours to church. The topic was perfect. My brother is having surgery this week. He has a hard time meeting people, so I didn’t introduce you. He’s not been to church in more than thirty years and I was a little nervous to bring him. But he wants to come back!!!!

I just wanted you and the church to know …

An email like that is music to our ears. Staff people and elders read it and want to dance around the church building. The gospel is making a difference. The church is truly “being the church.” Folks are daring to bring their friends. What good news!

(Of course, I could also provide emails from people leaving our church for the most flimsy reasons, but that’s another topic.)

Our question here is how can church leaders (and all Christians) help make such sentiments a regular part of church life? To the extent that our actions help folks along their spiritual path, what can we do? After twenty years in a church plant, and as part of a cluster of church plants, we are profoundly aware that no formula exists. We doubt easy answers. But over the decades we’ve found some things that work.

To sum it up in one statement, we work to build a church-wide missionary mindset. Lesslie Newbigin was born a Brit and then spent forty years as a missionary to India. Returning to Britain, he found it a “mission field” much like India. In his book Gospel in a Pluralist Society he asks, “How is it possible that the gospel should be credible, that people should come to believe that the power which has the last word in human affairs is represented by a man hanging on a cross?” He continues, “The only answer, the hermeneutic of the gospel, is a congregation of men and women who believe it and live by it.”

In this cynical world that is skeptical of Christians who want to “convert them,” he encourages congregations to live the gospel. This is the missionary mindset we’ve found so helpful. A community living the gospel truth doesn’t need hype or propaganda. We can speak honestly, our conversations shaped by the “modesty, sobriety, and realism which are proper to a disciple of Jesus” (p. 229).

How might we live out a church-wide missionary mindset? One way is to acknowledge the presence of spiritual novices and skeptics in our worship services. Consider a preacher’s prayer before the sermon, regularly called the “prayer of illumination.” Often that prayer is oriented around the preacher. I’ve frequently heard, and prayed, a prayer like: “May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be pleasing and acceptable in your sight.” Those beautiful words are from Psalm 19. But what if the orientation of the pre-sermon prayer shifted from the preacher to the spiritual skeptics present? Imagine such a renewed prayer of illumination as a ship’s rudder steering the entire sermon toward the deep grace of hospitality. Fred Harrell, Senior Pastor of City Church San Francisco, recently prayed this before a sermon:

Gracious God,
We ask now that you would meet us here.
We ask that you would meet us in the midst of our questions, in the midst of our anxiety, in the midst of our depression, and in the midst of our fog.
Meet us in the midst of our poverty and affluence, joy and pain.
Meet us in the midst of all of our glory and in our shattered brokenness.
Help us to believe that you understand and see us completely and your response is always to move towards us in restoring, in redeeming, and in healing love.
And help us to see that you’ve done this and are doing this now through the person and work of your son, Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray.
Amen.
What Attracts People to the Church?

Clearly his prayer isn’t only for the spiritually curious. Echoing the tone and language of the psalter, it gives veteran churchgoers permission, even an invitation, to ponder a sermon amidst the pain and doubt they bring to church.

Consider another example from a church liturgy. In an extended series on the book of Ephesians we came to the famous text for marriage, 5:21-33. We wondered how we might, as a key part of the service, pray for married and single people in our church. Our first draft of the liturgy included a prayer drawn from words of thoughtful believers:

God who loves us forever, hear our prayer.
In your faithfulness, you have brought us together to be one family—the family of God. Teach us to serve Christ together in Christian community. God who loves us forever, hear our prayer.
Single for a time or a life, devoted to the work of God, help us to offer our love and service to the building of the kingdom. God who loves us forever, hear our prayer.
Married, in relationships of lifelong loyalty, may we offer our lives to the same work: building the kingdom …

That text is wise. Even profound. But how do those words sound to a person who strayed into a church building for the first time in a decade? As a confession of faith, these words sing. But we wanted to offer a prayer that the brother of our emailing friend might offer. Here’s an excerpt of the prayer we used that day:

God, who loves us forever, hear our prayer.
We thank you for the beautiful gift of marriage—for bringing people together in relationships of lifelong loyalty to share life together, to encourage each other, and to work together to serve you.
We pray for all those who are married—whether they’ve been married months, years, or decades. May they share life together with joy, encouraging and supporting each other.
God, who loves us forever, hear our prayer.
We also pray for those who are not yet married, but are dating or considering marriage. Give them discernment in their relationships. May they honor each other and you in their thoughts and actions.
God, who loves us forever, hear our prayer.
And for those who are single, bring fulfillment in the relationships they have in community. Give them wisdom to neither over-value nor undervalue marriage.
God, who loves us forever, hear our prayer …

The differences are subtle, but crucial to creating a gospel-focused, missionary mindset. In a hundred ways, through our worship services, lobby conversations, and printed or Internet materials, we send signals about who is welcome and who is ignored. We don’t want or need to “dumb down” the gospel; rather, in the spirit of the gospel we want to say, “Jesus offers you grace.”

Some may argue, “But there are no spiritual novices in our church. Why should we bother to speak as if they are present?” One way forward is to imagine that in every empty seat or pew there sits a spiritual novice. When I was pastor of a church in a small town in Minnesota, we began praying for and talking as if spiritual novices were there for more than two years before any actually came. But in the end, they did!

This same hospitality works in sermons. One Saturday, during a recent “Gospel Preaching” seminary course taught in Sacramento, students presented the sermon they would preach in a church plant the following morning. One student’s assigned text was Ephesians 4:28, “Those who are stealing must steal no longer.” During her (very fine) sermon she said, “None of us here are thieves, but let’s talk about stealing because the text does …” When evaluating her sermon later, listeners suggested she might rephrase that section. After all, we pointed out, the Heidelberg Catechism speaks as if we are all prone to steal (Q&A 110). Being a teachable and clever Calvin Seminary student, she took our advice. Preaching her revised sermon in church the following day she began that section, “We are all ‘thieves …’”

After the service a woman offered the seminarian her heartfelt, tearful thanks for creating room in church for a thief like herself. The sermon’s revised words demolished the unintended, but too-frequent moral divide we create separating “good people” and “bad people.” Its renewed language presented, in the spirit of the gospel, ways for all those present to find grace.

A congregation-wide missionary mindset can refresh every part of church life. I’ve offered a few simple worship-focused examples to begin a conversation you might have in a small group or council room. Every congregation can find ways, custom to them, to live the gospel’s call to profound hospitality.

A few weeks ago I met with a couple that has been attending our church for the past year. She has cancer. Again. And they wanted to talk with me about pain and suffering. It turns out it had been fifty years since she attended church regularly. She stopped going after her brother died of leukemia at four years old. “We love coming here,” they told me, “because your church is real.” Behind the scenes we church leaders might say their evaluation is a result of a “missionary mindset.”
Church Engagement

A Roundtable Discussion

We asked a few faculty members if they would provide their perspectives on questions relating to church engagement. Below are some of their responses.

What is the role of the church in faith formation? What factors are especially important and what practices seem to be most fruitful?

Darwin Glassford: The church’s role is articulated in Article 28 of the Belgic Confession:

But all people are obliged to join and unite with it [a local congregation], keeping the unity of the Church by submitting to its instruction and discipline, by bending their necks under the yoke of Jesus Christ, and by serving to build up one another, according to the gifts God has given them as members of each other in the same body.

So the church plays a significant role in faith formation. Faith formation takes place within the context of a community. Paul envisions this community as one where all members are essential (1 Corinthians 12). This faith community cultivates an ethos that values instruction, accountability, the working out of one’s salvation, and serving each other. It also supports and encourages parents’ faith formation efforts at home. It is clear, from Scripture and research, that the presence of multi-generational relationships that value and respect each member’s role within the community of faith is an important contributor to a congregation’s faith formation efforts.

John Witvliet: In light of Darwin’s helpful perspective, I would add that our experience of church life shapes not only our knowledge, but also our vision for life and community, our capacity for relationships, and ultimately our capacity to trust God. And nearly everything that happens at church can end up being significant—from the way we pray there (or fail to) for the needs of the world, to the way we handle money, shape buildings, appoint leaders, and affirm spiritual gifts. I do also think that public worship is one particularly significant formative ministry. As we learn to listen to God’s word, to pray publicly, to sing praise, to celebrate communion, and to confess sin, we are not only learning about God, we are practicing how to speak, listen and commune with God. These are concentrated forms of how we are to live all week long.

Howard Vanderwell: Except in rare and exceptional circumstances, the church is central in the faith formation process. When I consider the pattern of Scripture and the early church, my own personal experience in the shaping of my faith, and observe what I see happening in the lives of others such as my children, grandchildren, and those I’ve pastored over the years, I become increasingly convinced of the vital role of the church.

A faith-forming church provides the means of grace as tools in the hands of the Holy Spirit, and creates a community where people who are being formed can live together with a deep sense of belonging and togetherness. The effective church, then, will be clearly and persuasively centered on the Word of God and also will make the sacraments accessible and life-giving. But it will also be a church that intentionally draws people of all ages together to share with each other, care for each other, and learn from each other. From the Word and sacraments we gain an understanding of God, his nature and work, and we are able to accumulate an understanding of truth. In our church community we share insights, stories, and nurture each other’s faith as we learn how to view the world and ourselves in the world before the face of God.

Parents may be wondering, “Will our children have faith?” What encouragement would you give to parents in response to that question?

JW: We can’t know what kind of faith our children may have. And we do not have the capacity on our own to engineer faith in our children. But it is altogether good to entrust our children to a sovereign and loving God. And there is much we can do with and for our children: pray for them, testify about our faith, love them, engage with them in life-giving acts of service, share hospitality, care enough about them to discipline them well, and teach them lovingly.

It is important to grieve together about children (of all ages) who reject faith, and to lament places where spiritual malaise seems commonplace. But we also need to marvel together in wonder at the persistence of the church over the centuries, the number of professions of faith in all kinds of congregations each year, the number of people who re-engage the faith after decades of resisting it, the way that renewed faith has come in so many
different generations, the explosion of Christian belief worldwide in the past century, and much more.

HV: Being a Christian parent is a rich and exciting task. But being a Christian parent today is also a risky and dangerous task. So my word to parents is, “resist fear and pessimism, yet retain a healthy realism.” The formation of faith is a delicately fragile process, and is always carried out in the face of significant competition in a culture that is not generally friendly to the formation of vital Christian faith. We live and serve in the midst of seeming opposites—these children belong to God and must be taught to love him, and these children possess a sinful nature, “corrupt from conception on.” (Heidelberg Catechism Q/A 7) When we are realistic about the difficulties of this process, we can be better motivated to commit ourselves to making the spiritual formation of our children the highest priority in our lives, and evaluate all other pursuits in the light of this one task.

So, on the negative side, we have the depravity of the human heart that cannot come to faith of itself, and a cultural context that often competes with faith. On the positive side, we have the powerful working of the Holy Spirit, the promises of God to be faithful and true to his work and word, parents who make the biggest investment of their entire lives into the spiritual formation of their children, and a church that forms itself to be a nurturing community. With all of that in place we then stand back and trust and pray and wait. But we do so with great confidence, for the success or failure of this venture does not rest entirely with us. Faith is a gift of God (Ephesians 2:8), stirred within us by the Holy Spirit, who uses even our inadequate parental efforts to accomplish his task, and who continues his work once he begins it (Philippians 1:6).

Such a venture must, of course, involve patience. Sometimes we do not see the fruit of our efforts for many years. While we may be concerned, we do not lose heart. Finally, after periods of seeming barrenness, we see new growth come, sometimes quite by surprise. I’ve spent time with many Christian parents, even in my own family, who have spent many painful years waiting and waiting to find the results they expected would come quickly.

DG: Parents are right to be deeply concerned about their children’s faith development. Children “catch” their parents understanding of the faith early on. Reading the Bible as a family and praying together are important. But there is another important element that is often overlooked. And that is talking to your child about your faith, sharing with your child appropriate parts of your spiritual journey and how God is at work in your life through the Holy Spirit. This opens the door to conversations with your child about how faith informs one’s daily life. Also, since children “catch” an understanding of the faith, it is essential for parents never to speak ill of the church and its ministries in front of their children. Such talk could lead children to become cynical about the church over time. Ultimately parents must trust God and resist assuming absolute responsibility for their children’s faith formation. Parents are called to faithfulness; it is God who makes things grow.

What about an adult who comes to faith? What does “faith formation” look like for adults who become the first generation of believers in their family?

HV: Those who come to faith in adulthood often have some special challenges to deal with. They soon realize that they have much to make up for, lost ground to regain, for there is so much that needs to be rethought and restructured. Consequently, careful, considerate, and patient mentoring and encouragement will be necessary within the church community. This will involve a reexamination of many dimensions of life and bringing all of life under the umbrella of the new-found awareness of the sovereign rule of God. So there will be learning, unlearning and relearning.

The Christian community must encourage, capture and channel the new-found enthusiasm of those who have come to faith in adulthood. Such folks are in a unique position to realize the “breadth and length and height and depth” (Ephesians 3:18) of the love that has captured them. We need such folks as an inspiration to all of the rest of us in the community. But we must acknowledge that those who come to faith in adulthood may have impatience, and perhaps even frustration, with those of us who have come to faith in early years and have lost some of the wonder and “wow” of it by now.

DG: My father came to faith late in his life and so this question strikes very close to home. As Howie mentioned, when people come to faith later in life, they come with a way of being that must be unlearned. This includes knowledge, attitude, values, morals, demeanor, etc. Such unlearning takes time. It is far more difficult to unlearn something than to learn something new—especially when we’re talking about an entire way of being. It’s easier in times of stress to revert to the old ways than to employ the new ways one is learning. Drawing on the ancient practice of catechesis, the church ought to mentor these new believers through lessons on the Lord’s Prayer, the Ten Commandments and the Apostles Creed. In this mentoring, the emphasis must be on both the content and its relevance for life. The mentor must be willing to share how these teachings have impacted and continue to shape his/her life. In addition, the new believer must be socialized into the life of the community. The church must not assume that new believers will know the terms we use or why we do things. For example, what is a narthex? What is the purpose of a benediction? Finally, we must be aware that how we relate to each other has a direct effect on the faith of a new believer. My father left the church because of how a pastor responded to a simple request regarding the annual Men’s Wild Game Barbecue. It was a silly situation, but the faith of an adult convert is often fragile.

JW: Praise God for adults who come to faith! Every journey is different. But every journey, ultimately, involves learning new knowledge (about God, salvation, the Bible), new practices (prayer, giving, service), and new relationships (God and others). Beneath that there is also learning about new ways to perceive or imagine the world and to perceive God’s beauty and glory. One fascinating thing to notice across centuries and continents is that Christian churches

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Vision for the Seminary’s Institute for Global Church Planting and Renewal (IGCPR)

In a provocative article in *The Christian Century* entitled “Making Ministry Difficult,” bishop William H. Willimon, Professor of the Practice of Ministry at Duke University, suggests that “[s]eminaries produce clergy rich in ideas but impoverished in agency, well intentioned in care-giving but deficient in leadership.” Moreover, he observes that “seminaries have changed less in the past 100 years than vibrant congregations have changed in the past two decades. Few mainline seminaries teach future pastors how to start new communities of faith.”

While Dr. Willimon’s serious indictment against seminaries may be valid in general, Calvin Theological Seminary (CTS) has in recent years made several changes in an effort to better prepare its students for ministry leadership. Most notably, in 2009 CTS adopted a new curriculum in the ardent hope that it will enable its graduates to form communities of disciples. In addition, to bridge the gap between real-life church work and theological training, CTS established the Institute for Global Church Planting and Renewal (IGCPR) in 2011.

Originally the institute was called the Institute for Global Church Planting because of the faculty’s agreement with the conviction of Dr. Tim Keller, senior pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City, that vigorous, continual planting of new congregations is the single most crucial strategy for the numerical growth of the body of Christ, the renewal of existing churches, and the overall impact of the church on the culture of any city. ... Nothing else—not crusades, outreach programs, para-church ministries, mega-churches, consulting, or church renewal processes—will have the consistent impact of dynamic and extensive church planting.3

The name included the word “global” out of recognition that missions is a multi-cultural project, especially in large urban centers, and that the traditional distinction between domestic and foreign missions is no longer helpful in our globalizing world.

However, at the urging of the seminary’s Board of Trustees, the term “renewal” was added to the name because of the urgent need for church renewal in the Western hemisphere. Church growth is not keeping up with population growth. And the CRC is not immune to this trend. According to denominational statistics, the CRCNA has lost 20 percent of its members since 1992.

The purpose of the IGCPR is to develop a network of successful church planters and church revitalizers who can offer “laboratories,” domestic and/or international, that can be used for on-the-job training and/or summer assignments. A basic assumption is that the vision and requisite skills for church planting and church renewal are “caught, not taught.” That is to say, these skills cannot be taught in the classroom the same way they can be caught while on the job with a coach who has demonstrated experience in these skills.

For example, students can learn about evangelistic preaching in the classroom, but their understanding goes much deeper when they spend time with Rev. Kevin Adams in the Sacramento cluster of church plants. Here students see first-hand the need to contextualize sermons and liturgies to the context of each community.

As a result of the work of the IGCPR, such on-site learning opportunities are continually being added to the training CTS offers. Last summer, for example, seminarian Karis Mpindi served in a five-week summer assignment at the Citadel of Faith Covenant Church, a dynamic church plant of the Evangelical Covenant Church (ECC). Located in Midtown Detroit near Wayne State University, this relatively new church plant is viewed by *Christianity Today* as one of the bright lights of Christian ministry in a city that once was hailed as the capitalist dream city of modern society but is now seen as the greatest American urban failure marking the end of modernity (Mark Binelli, *Detroit City is the Place to Be: The Afterlife of an American Metropolis*). As a result of Mpindi’s positive experience, the IGCPR has organized two trips to the Citadel and First CRC Detroit so that students can compare the dynamics of an existing church in a predominantly white

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middle-class community (Grosse Pointe Park) and a relatively new urban church plant that is predominantly African-American, in which altar calls and adult baptisms are common during worship services.

Developing a team of Ministry Partner Professors (MPP) who are experienced in church planting is another important task of the IGCPR. These pastors’ experience will be especially important for helping students to process what they encounter in their internships, as well as for developing the newly approved three-year M.Div. program with a concentration in church planting. So far Rev. Kevin Adams, Dr. Peter Kang, and Rev. Ron Vander Griend of Mission India have been appointed to this newly created position.

Along with developing partnerships with experienced pastors, the IGCPR is developing partnerships with other seminaries and institutes that train church planters. Currently, CTS and IGCPR are exploring ways to collaborate with the Ecumenical Theological Seminary located in Midtown Detroit, in close proximity to the Citadel of Faith. Hopefully contacts such as these will provide the faculty and students of CTS with on-site opportunities for understanding the challenges of doing effective, holistic ministry.

The IGCPR is also fostering the creation of learning opportunities that will prepare seminary students and pastors to revitalize churches that have plateaued or are in serious decline in membership. One notable example is a recently approved three-year pilot program for CRC and RCA churches in West Michigan called “Church Renewal Learning Laboratory”; Rev. Keith Doornbos of Providence CRC in Holland has been appointed as the program coordinator. This project will provide courses in church renewal, a peer learning environment, coaching, trained interns, team formation and development, online renewal resources, and accountability. The backbone of this three-year pilot program will be a consortium of twelve churches in western Michigan that choose to participate in the program. The program is designed for M.Div. students (who have completed at least two years of study) and/or pastors to help under-resourced congregations that seek fresh missional impact following a period of plateau or decline. For CTS students this program provides a two-year internship, during which they can complete their third year of courses online.

While much of the work of the IGCPR directly impacts the seminary and its students, the IGCPR was also created to impact the church more broadly. To this end, the IGCPR has organized conferences to stimulate church planting and church renewal. With the cooperation of CRC and RCA classes in West Michigan, the IGCPR hosted a three-day conference at Evergreen Ministries in Hudsonville. The speaker for this three-day conference was Dr. Harry Reeder III, senior pastor of Briarwood Presbyterian Church in Birmingham, Alabama, and author of the book From Embers to a Flame. This conference was attended by 7 CTS students and 83 pastors from CRC, RCA, and Presbyterian churches. Presently the IGCPR is organizing a conference on the importance of a missional reading of Scripture. This conference will be held on November 20-21, 2013, at Calvin Theological Seminary. The plenary speakers will be N. T. Wright, Christopher Wright, Darrell L. Gruder, and Michael G. Goheen.

Obviously, the goals of the IGCPR are many. To develop a common vision for this team, the IGCPR has hosted two consultations. On October 16, 2012, members of the team and other invited guests discussed Michael Goheen’s book, A Light to the Nations: The Missional Church and the Biblical Story. We were convicted that a missional reading of Scripture is essential for church planting and church renewal. A missional reading of Scripture should result in missional preaching, which, in turn, should lead to conversions and revival.

IGCPR also hosted a two-day consultation on November 15-16, 2012, on the urgent need for the development of a missional concept of the church in systematic theology. Attending this consultation were partners from the Newbigin House of Studies in San Francisco, Fuller Theological Seminary, the Free University (VU), and the Theological University of Apeldoorn (TUA). As a result of this consultation, Dr. Gerard den Hertog, one of the participants from TUA, wrote a stimulating article on dogmatics and mission in the Dutch newspaper Reformatoriš Dagblad, in which he compared churches that evangelize to the Sea of Galilee (which shares its water) and churches that keep the gospel to themselves to the Dead Sea (which keeps its water).

In its teaching, CTS seeks to be true to Scripture and to the Reformed Confessions. That has not and will not change. However, equipping our students to reach the rapidly changing global village does require new skills and strategies. The IGCPR has received glimpses of hope that our work is already paying off—such as in the case of a student whose Sacramento experience led him to consider being a church planter, or a conference participant who left convinced that he needed to change his preaching strategy. Yet our work is just beginning, and we invite your response and prayers.
"By the grace of God, I look forward to building on the foundation others have laid in strengthening Calvin Theological Seminary’s ability to produce great preachers and great leaders who serve the Church which serves God’s mission in this world."

Jul Medenblik
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Led by Dr. Jeffrey A. D. Weima
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by Louis Mennel (1876-1902)

by Samuel Volbeda (1944-1952)


by R. B. Kuiper (1952-1956)

by A. G. H. H. van Rooyen (1956-1983)

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2013 Distinguished Alumni Award Recipients

The CTS Board of Trustees this year named three recipients for the 2013 Distinguished Alumni Award. The award is given annually to recipients who have brought unusual credit to their alma mater by their distinction in Christian ministry. For 2013, the recipients are Rev. Alvin J. VanderGriend and Dr. James C. VanderKam.

Rev. Alvin J. VanderGriend

Rev. Alvin J. VanderGriend grew up on a farm in Lynden, Washington. He remembers a day when, as a young boy sitting in a worship service at First Church in Lynden, WA, he asked himself the question: “What would I emphasize if I were a minister?” And he thought: “I would want to emphasize prayer, Bible Study and evangelism.” That thought, it turns out, was a leading from God; for those three themes have become the dominate streams of his life.

Alvin graduated from Calvin College and Calvin Seminary and received a Doctor of Ministry degree from Fuller Theological Seminary. After pastoring three Christian Reformed Churches he became Home Mission’s Minister of Evangelism Resources. Since 1996 Alvin has worked inter-denominationally, first founding HOPE Ministries (part of Mission India), then serving as National Facilitator of Lighthouse Ministries for the Mission America Coalition, and finally joining Harvest Prayer Ministries where he currently serves as Prayer Evangelism Associate.

Dr. VanderGriend is by “spiritual gifting” a strategist. Working denominationally he facilitated the development of the Bible/study evangelism strategy called Coffee Break; developed the denomination’s Discover Your Gifts strategy; masterminded the denomination’s Men’s Life ministry; and strategized the first prayer mobilization effort. Working inter-denominationally Alvin co-founded the Denominational Prayer Leaders Network with Henry Blackaby, serving as its chairman for thirteen years. He developed the Lighthouse—prayer-care-share outreach strategy; and designed an all-church 40 Days of Prayer Strategy, both of which are still being widely used in churches today.

As a teacher Alvin taught seminary courses; lead numerous seminars and retreats; and spoke frequently at conferences in the United States and around the world. As an author he wrote primarily for mainstream Christians. Seven of his ten books remain in print, including: the Praying Church Sourcebook, Discover Your Gifts, Patterns for Prayer, Love to Pray and Praying God’s Heart.

Alvin continues to be active as a speaker and writer in the national prayer movement.

Alvin is deeply grateful for his wife Carolyn’s ongoing support of his ministry and for faithfully covering the “home bases” when ministry meant being on the road. He is thankfully aware of the huge contribution of many faithful prayer partners who released God’s power and grace into his life and ministry. His advice for seminary graduates today: “Make much of Jesus Christ; stay close to him!” You can be as close to Christ as you choose to be.

Dr. James C. VanderKam

Dr. James C. VanderKam is a 1971 graduate of Calvin Theological Seminary. Professor VanderKam taught for fifteen years at North Carolina State University before joining the Notre Dame faculty in 1991. He currently is the John A. O’Brien Professor of Hebrew Scriptures at the University of Notre Dame.

Professor VanderKam’s areas of scholarly interest are the history and literature of Early Judaism and the Hebrew Scriptures. His research in the last 20 years has focused on the Dead Sea Scrolls and related literature, and he is a member of the editorial committee that prepared the scrolls for publication. He has edited thirteen volumes in the official series Discoveries in the Judaean Desert. He is one of the two editors-in-chief of the Encyclopedia of the Dead Sea Scrolls (2000). His prize-winning book, The Dead Sea Scrolls Today (1994), has been translated into six languages and came out in a second edition in 2010.

His more recent books are a collection of his essays entitled From Revelation to Canon: Studies in the Hebrew Bible and Second Temple Literature (2000), An Introduction to Early Judaism (2001), The Meaning of the Dead Sea Scrolls (2002), From Joshua to Caiaphas: High Priests after the Exile (2004), 1 Enoch 2 (2012), and The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Bible (2012). He has also published numerous essays in journals and books. He served for six years as the editor of The Journal of Biblical Literature and sits on the editorial boards of Dead Sea Discoveries and several scholarly series.

VanderKam has delivered papers at many national and international conferences and has been invited to lecture in a wide variety of places.

Dr. VanderKam’s words of wisdom to the graduating class:

Graduation is a time for large thoughts, plans, aspirations, and sighs of relief. It is a time for celebrating a super academic accomplishment with family and friends, a time for looking back over a job well done, a time for reflection. You have all met a demanding challenge and should feel good about having done that. You should be pleased to have a degree from a highly respected seminary that is dedicated to its theological heritage and convinced it has deep relevance for today.

Commencement is also a time for looking ahead. A lot may be swirling around in your heads as you stand at a point of transition: you have taken
Welcome, David Bardolph!

David Bardolph joined Calvin Theological Seminary on February 25 as the Controller in the Financial Services Office.

David brings a breadth and depth of experience from his 31 years of service in the Grand Rapids Public School system. He obtained his B.A. from Calvin College and his M.B.A. in Finance from Western Michigan University. He holds extensive knowledge of accounting, financial markets, investment portfolio review and other areas of finance.

We appreciate David’s gifts in the finance and budgeting field but also his musical gifts! He sings with the Calvin College Alumni Choir, and also joined the Seminary Choir for the last few months of this academic year (and we hope for many more years). Further, he serves as Treasurer and sits on the Board of Trustees for the Christian Schools International Pension and Insurance Fund.

David and his wife have two daughters and one son-in-law, and are active at their church—Forest Hills Presbyterian—here in Grand Rapids.

We are grateful to have David serving with us at Calvin Theological Seminary!

Roundtable Discussion (continued from p. 10)

often give new believers quite a different picture of what growing in the life of faith looks like. Everyone emphasizes certain practices, rules, and mores—but while some emphasize prayer and giving, others emphasize learning and service. Some emphasize service, some doctrine. Some emphasize personal piety, some congregational worship. Some are quite casual, others quite rigorous. Throughout church history, the most enduring forms of faith include a balanced diet of these concerns, but the one thing they never short-change is helping people grow in their perception of and wonder for God’s triune glory and beauty, crystallized in the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus.

Can you recommend a book or resource on how the church passes on the faith?

\textbf{DG and HV:} We recommend the recent book by Holly Catterton Allen and Christine Lawton Ross, \textit{Intergenerational Christian Formation: Bringing the Whole Church Together in Ministry, Community and Worship} (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press Academic, 2012). Allen and Ross make a compelling and thoughtful case for a Christian community to intentionally bring the generations together in learning, serving, and sharing for the sake of developing maturation in all ages.

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