Calvin Theological Seminary Forum

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Loving Your Neighbor Today
Articles

03 From the President: Loving Your Neighbor Today (and Tomorrow!) by Jul Medenblik

04 Loving Your Neighbor by Richard Mouw

06 Old Testament Insights on Loving Your Neighbor by Amanda Benckhuysen

08 Why & How Should Christians Engage Their Neighbors of Other Faiths? by Cory Willson

11 Trauma: Suffering in Silence by Danjuma Gibson

14 Loving Your Neighbor with Dementia by Mary Vandenberg

16 CEP Summer Seminars 2016 by Scott Hoezee

19 Vocational Formation — A new name, a renewed focus by Geoff Vandermolen

20 Reflections on China Today by Aaron Einfeld

22 Convocation 2016

23 Calvin Theological Journal — My Vision by Karin Maag

24 Launching Alumni Engagement

25 New faces at Calvin Seminary

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Loving Your Neighbor Today (and Tomorrow!)

Jackie and I stood outside our neighbors’ doorway getting ready to welcome the family that had just moved into the house next to our home in New Lenox, Illinois. We rang the doorbell. The new family opened the door and welcomed us. We shared some of our story and our name. They shared some of their story (moved from New Jersey) and their name – Pagan.

A new church pastor and his family had next door neighbors who had the last name – Pagan. God does have a sense of humor. (Actually, our new neighbors were Catholic in background.)

This vignette does illustrate that you never know all there is to know about your neighbors until you get to know them. What will help frame our interaction and our showing the love of God to them?

Jesus tells us, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” But what does that mean for us today? Does loving our non-Christian neighbors mean evangelizing them or engaging them in dialogue? How do we love those who are hard to love because they suffer from dementia or trauma?

Calvin Seminary was able to host a significant conference this past summer that sought to provide a variety of perspectives on the question, “What Does ‘Love Your Neighbor’ Mean Today?” The conference featured Dr. Richard Mouw, Professor of Faith and Public Life and President emeritus at Fuller Theological Seminary, as well as many of the newer faculty members at Calvin Seminary. Free recordings of these sessions are now available by going to calvinseminary.edu/neighbor-videos

We hope that the articles presented and video links provided will be helpful for your own discernment and journey as disciples who love God and love your neighbors.

Editorial Note and Invitation:

Thank you for the many expressions of appreciation that we receive for “The Forum.” We look forward to continuing our service to the Church even as we move to a twice a year format with more articles in each issue.

In 2017, we will dedicate both issues to focusing on the 500th Commemoration of the Reformation. As we prepare for these issues, do you have suggestions and comments that we can incorporate? Please write us at sempres@calvinseminary.edu with your input! Thank you!
Loving Your Neighbor

by Richard Mouw, President Emeritus, Fuller Theological Seminary

I heard someone remark recently that there is an “us versus them” pattern in the Calvinist perspective that makes it difficult for us to really love our neighbors. Loving our “elect” neighbors—yes, that fits a Calvinist theology. But that tends to be where Calvinists draw the line on the subject of neighborly love.

I could see the point the person was making. And it would not surprise me if that person had actually heard a Calvinist put the case in that way. I have had my own encounters with Reformed people who insist that it is only “the Christian poor” whom God calls us to serve. But John Calvin himself would be deeply offended by having such views blamed on his theological influence.

Here is what the Geneva Reformer says on the subject in his Institutes: Because we are by nature “all too much inclined to self-love,” we need to concentrate on loving God in a way that places the love of self in the background, thereby cultivating in our relationships with other people a pattern that “transfers to others the emotion of love that we naturally feel toward ourselves.” Furthermore, he insists, the “neighbor” whom we are commanded to love “includes even the most remote person,” extending beyond “the ties of kinship, or acquaintance, or of neighborhood.” It is a love that should “embrace the whole human race without exception in a single feeling of love,” with “no distinction between barbarian and Greek, worthy and unworthy, friend and enemy, since all should be contemplated in God, not in themselves.”

It was in the spirit of John Calvin’s call to an expansive neighbor-love that we gathered and sought guidance from each other recently at a marvelous conference at Calvin Seminary. We dealt with some important—and sometimes complex—questions. What does it mean today to genuinely love our Muslim neighbors, our neighbors who have lost the memories of their own past, our neighbors who are victims of racial injustice, our neighbors who are legally “undocumented”?

Christine Pohl has a nice way of capturing the essence of neighbor-love in her book on hospitality. Her title tells the story in a simple phrase: Making Room. To show hospitality, she says, is to create space for the needs of others. We are being hospitable when we give weary ones a place to sleep and when we make room at our tables for people to share our food.

Pohl also observes that the word “hospitality” has been robbed of its original core meaning in recent times. We talk much about the “hospitality industry,” referring thereby to “hotels and restaurants which are open to strangers as long as they have money or credit cards.” True hospitality has to go much deeper than an economic transaction. It is going beyond what is expected of us, and it carries with it an element of vulnerability. When Jesus showed hospitality to people whose lifestyles and ideas He strongly opposed, it got Him into trouble with the religious leaders of His own day: “The Pharisees and their scribes were complaining to his disciples, saying, ‘Why do you eat and drink with tax-collectors and sinners?’ ” (Luke 5:30). To be sure, those religious leaders were guilty of quite a bit of self-righteousness. But we can at least understand something of their concerns. When we show hospitality we are often taking some serious risks.

In extending hospitality to other people, the notion of making room, of creating space, is often quite a literal thing—making real beds available to them and inviting
them to sit and eat at real tables. But it is also helpful to think about the benefits of making room in a metaphorical sense. It can require us to make space in our minds for considering ideas that are quite strange to us. Or to take on burdens of sorrow, awkwardness, or confusion as we allow the deepest hopes and fears of others to enter into our own hearts. The Catholic bishops who gathered in the 1960s at the historic Second Vatican Council in Rome put it eloquently in one of their final pronouncements: “The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts.”

Of course, people can mean different things when they claim to have empathy for all that is “genuinely human.” When Ralph Waldo Emerson declared that “nothing human is alien to me,” he was celebrating what he saw as the capacity of the unfettered human will to enrich and expand its own experience of a shared humanity. Christians see it much differently. We do not look for a power within ourselves; rather, we focus on the person and work of Jesus Christ. “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin” (Hebrews 4:15).

I have personally drawn much inspiration on this subject from the Heidelberg Catechism’s explanation of the suffering that Christ endured in order to accomplish our salvation. He suffered, the Catechism says (Q&A 37), “during His whole life on earth, but especially at the end.” The special emphasis on “the end” of His life is of utmost importance, of course, because of the once-for-all sacrifice that took place at Calvary.

The divine command to love our neighbors is not issued by a distant Sovereign who simply enjoys giving us difficult assignments.

But the Catechism does not ignore what took place “during His whole life on earth.” Nor should we.

It was not enough for the Son of God to show up only for three hours in order to be crucified. The redemptive mission of the One whose stretched out His arms to be nailed to the Cross had to begin with the outstretched arms of the Bethlehem Babe in the manger.

I once ended a sermon on the life-long sufferings of Christ by saying to the congregation: “There is nothing that any of you here today has experienced during the past week that the Son of God does not understand. He went through it Himself during his earthly life.” As I was greeting people afterward, one woman hung around until the others departed. She was clearly upset with me. “What you said made me angry. Jesus cannot possibly know what it has been like for me during this past week! I have had a miserable time with my teenage daughter. He knows nothing about what it is like to be the parent of my daughter!”

We had a good conversation. I agreed with her that Jesus had never been a mother. But He did experience, I said, rejection and betrayal. He knew what it was like to have people who had claimed to love Him suddenly turn against Him. After a while, the woman agreed that Jesus was no stranger to her experiences with her daughter. (I was glad that I could help her see that—but I would also have liked to tell her daughter that Jesus understood what she had gone through with her mother during the past week!)

The divine command to love our neighbors is not issued by a distant Sovereign who simply enjoys giving us difficult assignments. The God who calls us to love, to use Calvin’s phrase, even “the most remote person,” is the One who drew near to us in Jesus Christ in order to be the great High Priest who knows what it is like to be us. He chose us to be His neighbors, undeserving that we are as rebellious sinners. In so doing, He offers us a new capacity, a new kind of neighbor-love that we could not come up with on our own. That is the kind of Calvinism that is not “us versus them,” but “us reaching out to them.”

The kind of Calvinism that is not “us versus them,” but “us reaching out to them.”
“Teacher,” the expert in the law asked, “which is the greatest commandment?” “Love the Lord, your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind,” Jesus replied. “This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself (Matt 22:36-39).”

Love your neighbor as yourself. It’s a biblical exhortation so familiar and so ubiquitous we hardly give it a second thought. But what does it mean? Is it enough to be nice to others and treat them with respect? To wave to our neighbor as we leave the house or to make a casserole for someone at church who is sick? Is this what Jesus has in mind when He exhorts the expert in the law to love his neighbor as himself?

The truth is, being nice and respecting others does get us a long way. Jesus here is quoting words found in Leviticus 19, and if we look at the original context, we notice that the command to love your neighbor as yourself is nestled among a host of other commands, many of which address how we are to treat others.

These include:

- You shall not oppress or rob your neighbor (Lev. 19:13a).
- You shall not curse the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind (Lev 19:14).
- You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against your people (Lev. 19:18).

With the exception of the occasional grudge, I suspect that most of us have no trouble loving our neighbor in these ways.

Still, there are other exhortations listed in Leviticus 19 that seem to deepen and broaden the command to love our neighbor as ourselves in ways that should give us pause. While many of the laws of ancient Israel, particularly those that promote a just and orderly society, mimicked those of their neighbors, the humanitarian laws were largely unique to God’s people and set them apart from the surrounding nations.

These laws not only expected the Israelites to be nice or respectful, but also to take responsibility for the human flourishing of others, to be, as God intimated to Cain in Gen. 4:9-10, their brother and sister’s keeper.

Consider, for instance, these commands:

- When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the edge of your field and you shall not gather the gleanings of your harvest, and your vineyard you shall not strip bare and the fallen grapes of your vineyard you shall not gather. For the poor and for the foreigner (immigrant) you shall leave them (Lev. 19:10).
- You shall not do injustice in court. You shall not be partial to the poor or to the rich but in righteousness, you shall judge your people (Lev. 19:15).
- When a foreigner (immigrant) resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress him. As a native among you, the foreigner (immigrant) who resides with you shall be to you, and you shall love the foreigner (immigrant) as yourself for foreigners you were in the land of Egypt (Lev. 19:33-34).
Loving Your Neighbor

What is evident here is true of the rest of the Old Testament as well. . . that God has a special concern for the poor and the disenfranchised, those on the fringes of society. In fact, one of the metrics that the prophets used to assess the spiritual, social, economic, and political health of the community was the well-being of the poor and the foreigner. Listen to these words from Isaiah 58. The people are wondering why God isn’t more pleased with their acts of piety and worship, their fasting, and their sacrifices, to which God responds, “Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?” (Isa. 58:6-7a).

In other words, what God longs for, and ultimately what God in Jesus died for, is that the world would be set right again, which, according to the Old Testament, includes organizing the world in such a way that all have access to the resources required for human flourishing. To love our neighbor as ourselves, then, is to begin working toward the realization of this vision. It is to consider how disparity and injustice and division are perpetuated within our own communities and to advocate for change. It is to come alongside those who are suffering, to take up the cause of the powerless, to advocate for what is morally right.

To love our neighbor in this way seems especially significant at this particular time in American history when fear of “the other” is running high among the majority white population. The impulse to protect our privilege and wealth in the face of the perceived threat of “the other” has compromised our ability as a society to work toward what is just and what is morally consistent with the nation’s founding principle that all are created equal. As a result, deeply entrenched systematic injustices that perpetuate the marginalization of people of color and deprive them of basic rights and freedoms go unchecked. Undocumented immigrants live in fear every day of being torn from the bosom of their family and friends (sometimes the only family they know) and sent away from what has become their home. Muslims brace themselves for the overt and covert expressions of prejudice and hostility that chip away at their spirits and diminish their well-being.

But here is where the church, the people of God, is called to be set apart from the broader culture. For our allegiance is not to privilege and to wealth. Rather, it is to Jesus, the one whose love for us took Him to the cross that we may have life and life abundantly. Now Jesus calls us to follow Him with the explicit commission to love others as ourselves. And with love, to cast out fear and pursue the way of shalom. Like in ancient Israel, through love for the outsider, the poor, the marginalized, and the sufferer, our lives become a powerful testimony to the redeeming and transforming power of the triune God.

Come then, let us be about the business of being our brothers and sisters’ keeper.

Jesus calls us to follow Him with the explicit commission to love others as ourselves.
Why & How Should Christians Engage Their Neighbors of Other Faiths?

by Cory Willson, Jake and Betsy Tuls Assistant Professor of Missiology and Missional Ministry

Recently I have received several calls and emails asking about resources for churches that are seeking to learn about other religions and how to faithfully engage them. Consider the following story. Last fall a Muslim man approached a leader of a local church during their harvest festival and asked if the church might be interested in partnering on this event the following year with the local Muslim community. This raised questions and concerns about the change to this outreach ministry to the local community, as well as the implications of a partnership between the church and the mosque. What will the surrounding community think when they see us working together? What implications might this have for the faith of those within our church? Stories like this are increasingly common in urban as well as suburban churches around North America.

Engaging people of other religions is a much-needed focus in Christian discipleship today, especially for those of us who have lived in secular societies or religiously homogeneous cultures. In a recent Pew survey, almost half of U.S. adults said that they did not personally know a Muslim. So while the population of Muslims is growing in the U.S., personal encounters do not seem to be on the rise. Churches in the U.S. and Canada are face-to-face with the reality that although engaging people of other religions is an essential task of Christian discipleship, many Christians are not yet doing so. The challenge, therefore, is to form followers of Jesus who are equipped to live out their faith in an interreligious climate. The question is, how does the gospel of Jesus shape how Christians engage their religious neighbors?

Our Identity and Vocation is Rooted in Our Engagement With Other Religions

Christianity emerged as a religious minority in a pluralistic environment and has existed in similar contexts throughout history. While Christians in North America are just now focusing on the issue of interfaith engagement, many Christians around the world today and down through the corridors of history lived in pluralistic societies. When we look back to the origins of the people of God, it should not surprise us that this is so.

When Jesus told his disciples “You are the salt of the earth… [and] the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden” (Matt. 5:13a & 14), he was drawing on a long tradition that held together the identity and vocation of God’s people. Beginning with Abram, God chose one family—one nation—as His special people, in order that through them He would bless the nations (Gen. 12:1-3). This

theme of the intertwined identity and vocation of God’s people was repeated throughout the Old Testament (Ex. 19:5-6; Deut. 4:5-8; Isa. 42:6; 49:6), rooting the mission of Jesus and His followers in the purposes of God in this world.

Even amidst repeated failures to be faithful to these purposes, God continues to call His people to “let [their] light shine before others, so that they may see [their] good works and give glory to [our] Father in heaven” (Matt. 5:14). Whether they were in their own land or in Babylonian exile (Jer. 29:1-9), the entirety of the community’s life, words, and actions were to be laid out before the watching eyes of a foreign nation and religion. As followers of Jesus we need a fresh reminder that we are part of this ancient community, whose very identity imparts to us this vocational imperative in our pluralistic contexts today. While we may be fearful and unsure of what lies ahead in our changing world, we can be confident that the resources that have guided those who have gone before us can be used by the Spirit to help us now.

The Gospel Itself Shapes Our Witness to Other Religions

Knowing that we should engage people of other religions is important, but how do we do this in a way that is faithful to the gospel? At the center of the gospel is the truth that God does not meet us at the top of the staircase of our efforts at moral and theological perfection. Rather, he meets us at the bottom, grabbing hold of us by the power of the Spirit amidst all our sin, rebellion, and shame. Any effort to climb our way to God, whether through moral, intellectual, or religious works, takes us away from the place where He has chosen to meet us: at the foot of the cross. It is this central conviction that should give a distinct confidence and humility to Christian witness in interfaith encounters. It was another missionary theologian, J.H. Bavinck, who made this point clear:

As long as I laugh at what I regard as being foolish superstition in other religions, I look down upon the adherents of them. Then I have not yet found the key to his [the religious other’s] soul. As soon as I understand that what he does in a noticeably naïve manner, I also do and continue to do again and again in a different form; as soon as I actually stand next to him, I can in the name of Christ stand in opposition to him and convince him of sin, as Christ did with me and still does each day.

Bavinck and Newbigin call us to look at the gospel of Jesus again in light of our religiously pluralistic societies to root our Christian witness in deep conviction that produces humility, love, and civility in our love of neighbor. Our common starting point with our religious neighbors is that we are created in the image of God and have a God-shaped void deep within us. Like them, we also have sinned against God. We don’t stand over but alongside each other, pointing our fellow beggars to where we found the bread of grace.

One of the greatest needs of the church in North America today is for the gospel of Jesus to triumph over the gospel of fear that beckons at our door in the form of Islamophobia and xenophobia. Conviction and civility meet, and boldness and humility embrace each other, at the foot of the cross. The command to love God above all is inseparable from the command to love our neighbors—even our religious neighbors who sometimes scare us—as ourselves. The gospel shows us how to do this with conviction, humility, and love.

Local Churches Need Simple Practices to Begin this Work

A common response to the changing religious demographics in our towns and cities is to take a class on world religions or perhaps read a few books on apologetics. Neither of these ideas are bad, but I recommend that these be supplemented with interpersonal relationships. While we may hear about Islam or Hinduism in the news, we never meet these religions in the abstract. It is in the face of

continued on page 10

our Muslim or Hindu neighbor that we come to know these religions in their human form. And it is these face-to-face encounters that provide opportunities for us to embody a Christian witness in their midst. What is more, it is through these types of interpersonal encounters that the Spirit of God can lead us to love our neighbors. This has been my experience over the last eight years. I don’t care much about Mormonism, Judaism, or Islam as religions, but I care a lot about my Mormon friend Spencer, Elliot the rabbi, and Sam the Muslim doctor! It is these types of friendships across religious differences where churches have immense opportunities for Christian hospitality and friendship to be incorporated into our witness.

In some churches, hospitality and friendship has come through sharing a meal at a local restaurant owned by immigrants. Over the meal those present learn about the immigrants’ family, their home culture, and their journey to North America. In Rotterdam a women’s sewing group has been transformed by the presence of Muslim immigrant women. The friendships that couldn’t be forged through formal dialogues have emerged through conversations around yarn and thread.

These simple examples dispel the myth that one need be a professional theologian or pastor to build friendships across religious divides. Instead of being reactive and shackled with fear, churches should prayerfully look around for places where people from different religions and cultures gather to eat, play, work, and find community. Then, following the way modeled by Jesus with the Samaritan woman (John 4:1-27), we should reach out with vulnerability and compassion.

4 (http://cms.fuller.edu/EIFD/issues/Fall_2014/Dinner_Table_Diplomacy.aspx)
5 (http://cms.fuller.edu/EIFD/issues/Fall_2012/Sewing_in_Rotterdam.aspx)
Trauma: Suffering in Silence
A Reflection on Trauma and the Church Community

by Danjuma Gibson, Associate Professor of Pastoral Care

There were some present at that very time who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. And he answered them, “Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them: do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.” Luke 13:1-5 (ESV)

In the above passage from Luke, the community seems to be engrossed in a conversation with Jesus about several fatal tragedies. Whether responding to specific statements or the general tenor of the colloquy, Jesus challenges an age-old axiom that the evil that befalls people is somehow correlated to their lifestyle or behavior, or indicative of God’s wrath. In an almost algebraic formulation, since the time of Job and beyond humanity has demonstrated the propensity to erroneously view the evil that ravages people’s life as interpretive data regarding individual (and group) morality, spirituality, and goodness. Such hermeneutical formulations regarding the tragedies of life serve to protect our individual and group sense of safety, innocence, and cosmic orderliness. While such interpretive processes work to preserve our most basic sense of safety, at the same time they tend to anesthetize our capacity to empathize with others. Even if we do not vocalize our judgmental opinions to others, the true nature of our hearts never lies. When such biases take residence in our psyche, especially when we are oblivious to it, we are at great risk of injuring both neighbor and community.

Across the experiential spectrum of those who may hear about the evil that befalls people are the actual victims who in fact have experienced and survived great tragedy, have witnessed such tragedies in person, or have loved ones who have succumbed to some tragic event. Even at the time of this writing, the U.S. commemorated the fifteenth anniversary of the September 11th national tragedy. As one listens to the tearful and heartfelt testimonies of the survivors and people who lost loved ones on 9/11, the intensity of their narratives makes it seem as if the catastrophe occurred just recently: as if time had stopped on 9/11 for the survivors. In another place, I observed that victims of the Flint, MI, water crisis refused to be comforted: similar to what the second chapter of the gospel of Matthew observes of those traumatized by Herod after he slaughtered Jewish babies. Whether loving your neighbor...
we are speaking about modern day tragedies or awful events several millennia ago, the human response of those victimized by certain tragic events seems to reflect a kind of \textit{paralysis in time} around the same event.

It is within these two polarities—of both the observer of those who suffer great tragedy and the actual victims of such tragedies—that we can better understand trauma. For the victims of trauma, the sting of the ailment gains its strength between the stark memory of the tragedy and a callous community that lacks the capacity to understand the new world that the traumatized now live in, \textit{a world where the unthinkable has occurred to me}. At its root, trauma reflects the overwhelming of a person’s psychological faculties in response to a violent event. Trauma, and its next of kin—post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)—can have lasting effects on an individual or group. Caught in the balance between awful memories and a community that lacks the patience to listen and empathize, victims of trauma are forced to suffer in silence.

In some cases, the precipitating event that triggers trauma/PTSD is a natural disaster. Sometimes the precipitating event stems from a man-made disaster. More perfidiously, when the precipitating event reflects violent actions by a person or group against another person or group, we can refer to this as crimes against humanity or radical evil. Over and against these catastrophic events are the communities or human-systems in which such tragedies occur.

Sometimes the community may simply function as an observer of the traumatic event. At its best, such community may function as an \textit{experience-near empathic container} whereby the traumatized can begin the intentional work of re-narrating their life-story in the wake of the traumatizing tragedy. An example of this is the yearly commemoration of the 9/11 catastrophe. Because the actual tragedy played itself out (and continues to do so) through modern-day telecommunications and social media, the entire country more readily achieved an \textit{experience-near empathic position} in relation to those affected by this tragedy. This \textit{experience-near empathic position} is evidenced in the expectation and \textit{normativity} of annual commemorations.

At its worst, when a community is an observer of trauma, the collective emotional need of the community to \textit{move on or forget about} the tragedy may in some cases trump the needs of the victims of trauma to tell and lament their stories. A classic example of this can be seen with pastors and their families who may suffer some kind of trauma. The congregation’s need for their idealized pastor to “be well” will in many cases compromise the pastor’s actual ability to recover from trauma or loss. The reality of their pastor falling victim to a trauma and possibly displaying human weakness and spiritual ambivalence may be too disruptive to the collective psyche of the church.

In other instances, the surrounding community tends to function in a \textit{bystander-position}, thus turning a blind eye to the man-made disasters or radical evil that maim or destroys the human body and the human spirit. In other cases, the community may assume an \textit{enabler-position} that proves inept to hold accountable the perpetrators or architects of man-made disasters or radical evil. In both the \textit{bystander} and \textit{enabler} positions, the surrounding community’s need to preserve illusions of safety, security, innocence, or providential orderliness tends to insulate the collective consciousness against empathizing with the plight of traumatized victims. That is to say, when a particular \textit{people-system} cannot relate to or empathize with a person or group that has been traumatized (similar to those in Luke 13 who told Jesus about the Galileans killed by Pilate), it is far easier to imagine that such victims are somehow responsible for their trauma than it is to resign illusions safety and innocence. Such desensitization by the community may further reinforce the isolation and guilt that many survivors of trauma are faced with. Simply put, the victims of trauma and the actions...
of the surrounding community are inseparable in any traumatological discourse.

The church of God has the potential to serve as a valuable resource, and can have a tremendous impact on the well-being and recovery of trauma survivors. Engagement with the Psalms in particular has the potential to serve in a cathartic capacity since the writers display a full range of human experience, emotion, and affect in relation to traumatizing human experiences (Jones, 2009). Local churches can embody Christian hospitality through rituals of lament or worship services that commemorate those lost to tragedy, while simultaneously affirming the humanity of the victims and survivors.

This essay calls for pastor and church leaders to consider a traumatological lens in worship and liturgical designs. The classic fable that time heals all wounds is one of the most treacherous folk tales that has infiltrated the unconscious psyche of the church, especially as it pertains to trauma. It cannot be overstated that trauma and PTSD are irreducible phenomena and as such are not human experiences that can be solved or fixed. No matter how the victims of trauma remind us of how fragile life is and disrupt our illusions of innocence and righteousness, healing and recovery for the traumatized cannot be rushed. It is a process of working-through.

The victims of trauma or those who are diagnosed with PTSD are not strange or abnormal people that we have to return to normal. They are human beings fighting to recover from unthinkable experiences that the surrounding community cannot relate to. Instead, the word strangeness should be applied in relation to a society that anesthetizes its collective heart and consciousness in order to exist under illusions of innocence and security—or that has become all too comfortable with the violence and radical evil that traumatizes people. A more faithful Christian response to trauma calls for churches and communities of faith to adopt a communal praxis of experience-near empathy in its reflections on ecclesiology, liturgy, and worship.

They are human beings fighting to recover from unthinkable experiences.

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Also see other major sites of biblical, archeological, and cultural interest including Patmos, Delphi, Meteora, Vergina and the islands of Mykonos, Crete and Santorini. Most evenings feature a study session on “Paul: His Life & His Letters.”

Join host Jeff Weima, professor of New Testament at Calvin Theological Seminary and leading Pauline scholar, for this truly inspirational tour.

For more information contact
Dr. Jeffrey A. D. Weima
616-328-3110 | weimje@calvinseminary.edu
www.jeffweima.com

MARCH 30 - APRIL 11, 2017

Acropolis, Athens
Loving Your Neighbor with Dementia

by Mary Vandenberg, Associate Academic Dean & Professor of Systematic Theology

Dementia is an umbrella term for a set of symptoms. According to the Alzheimer’s Association, dementia refers specifically to “diseases and conditions characterized by a decline in memory or other thinking skills that affects a person’s ability to perform everyday activities.”¹ Alzheimer’s is the most common form of dementia, accounting for 60-80% of all cases.²

By the end of 2015 more than 5,000,000 Americans were living with dementia. More than one in three seniors will die with some form of dementia. As our population continues to live longer, it is the case that we can expect a significant number of people in our congregations to be affected in one way or another by this disease. In other words, it is imperative that the Church consider what it means to love our neighbors with dementia.

Dementia and its accompanying symptoms come with unique cultural and societal challenges. Western society in general values characteristics like intelligence, self-sufficiency, productivity, and autonomy. Dementia impairs these characteristics. Christian physician and ethicist Dr. Lauris Kaldjian even suggests that these impairments stand as a “cultural insult” to our Western values.

Dementia entails loss. The person is in some ways still with us, and in some ways not. Some years back in an episode of the television show Grey’s Anatomy, one of the doctors is coming to terms with her mother’s dementia. This doctor says to a colleague, “My mother isn’t my mother anymore.” That’s a telling statement. Clearly something has been lost. The mother she knew is gone—or so it seems. But the loss that accompanies dementia is an incremental and ambiguous loss, both for the person suffering from dementia and for the persons caring for them.

The ambiguity of the loss raises a number of questions about how we treat persons with dementia. For example, if my mother isn’t my mother anymore, what are my obligations to her? Who is she in relation to me, to herself, and to others? What is her value to me and to society? And if I am not here, does she have any value at all? These are the sorts of questions that bubble to the surface in discussions about dementia.

Along with loss, dementia raises certain theological concerns for loved ones, particularly when the person’s behavior is affected by the disease. Perhaps the person with dementia is no longer able to talk. Perhaps she has become violent or uses language she would never have used prior to being diagnosed.

² http://www.alz.org/what-is-dementia.asp, accessed 5-31-16
to having dementia. How can we understand the spiritual condition of this person, a person who is no longer capable of the basic Christian rhythm of confession and repentance? How do we think about those who cannot remember in a tradition that leans heavily on remembering and knowing?

One thing we all need to remember is that Christianity is not only about individuals, but about the community of believers. I am not the body of Christ. We are the body of Christ. The Christian with dementia is someone who has accepted the promises of God, been crucified with Christ, and raised with Him to new life. She may not remember that truth at some point, but just as the Body prays as one, even when not all can pray, so the Body holds this saint in its life of confession and repentance, remembering and believing, even when she can no longer do so for herself. Ultimately, this person’s relationship with God is not about what she can or cannot do but what God has done and continues to do in her—even though we may not see it. Much of our faith and hope is grounded in things not seen.

While holding the person with dementia in the life of the body of believers is important, it is equally important that we tend to this person in more immediate ways. The tendency in Western culture is to focus our attention on those with power and ability. But in 2 Corinthians 12:9, Paul tells us that God’s power is made perfect in weakness. Indeed, the ultimate sign of weakness—the cross—turns out to be also the ultimate sign of God’s glory and power. When we remove or ignore the weak person, we remove evidence of glory.

It is hard to image anyone in Western society, other than perhaps the unborn, with less power than those who suffer from dementia.

As Christians, our response to a culture that wants to dispose of sufferers must be grounded in our understanding of humans as images of God, valuable simply because of this scientifically untestable fact. Thus, we should treat our members with dementia not as burdens to be disposed of or warehoused out of sight, but as treasures to value, even when Western culture suggests they have no value at all. The care of the weak and powerless is in fact at the core of God’s commands throughout Scripture.

It is hard to image anyone in Western society, other than perhaps the unborn, with less power than those who suffer from dementia.

The story Western culture tells about human persons is one of radical independence and self-creation. It is a story that demands people have gifts, a story where the powerful triumph. In contrast to this, the Christian story recognizes human persons as radically dependent. As the Heidelberg Catechism says, we are not our own but belong to Christ. The cultural story of independence and self-creation is a myth. We do not create our lives. We receive them as a gift. We do not write our own stories. We participate in the one true story written by the Creator of all that is seen and unseen. We need to recognize that persons with dementia not only have gifts but are gifts given to us by God. This recognition will both ground and guide our love for our neighbor with dementia.
Center for Excellence in Preaching
Summer Seminars

by Scott Hoezee, Director of the Center for Excellence in Preaching

While much of the Seminary becomes a quiet place in the summer months, the office of The Center for Excellence in Preaching becomes a hive of activity during the summer, since summer is the ideal time to host pastors for continuing education seminars. In 2016 a week-long seminar was held in each of the three summer months of June, July, and August.

In June, Director Scott Hoezee, Program Administrator Mary Bardolph, and CTS President-emeritus Neal Plantinga welcomed twenty-one pastors and their families to Snow Mountain Ranch in Colorado for the “Imaginative Reading for Creative Preaching” seminar. The setting at Snow Mountain is perfect for the whole family, and this year the entire group numbered close to one hundred people, including almost fifty children, many under the age of ten! The pastors spent the mornings discussing the literature they had read ahead of time. Calvin College English professors Gary Schmidt and Susan Felch led sessions on children’s literature and poetry respectively. Afternoons and evenings were free time for the families to explore the Ranch or visit the nearby Rocky Mountain National Park. This year’s group included pastors from all over the U.S. and Canada—including one pastor from Singapore—and was highly ecumenical, with pastors from ten different denominations in attendance.

In July the Seminary welcomed Dr. David Lose to lead a week-long seminar entitled “Preaching in a Postmodern, Post-Christian Age.” Dr. Lose is a past professor of preaching at Luther Seminary in Minneapolis and has recently been serving as president of the Lutheran Seminary in Philadelphia. He has also written the book Preaching at the Crossroads. In the July seminar sixteen pastors—again from around North America and from a variety of denominations—pondered the new challenges that face preachers in a world that has lost all sense of a larger narrative structure to life and that tends to be wary of any ultimate truth claims. In addition to pondering the contours of our current cultural climate, each day in the seminar focused on a particular preaching text as participants pondered how best to present such texts given the changed acoustics of a postmodern, digital world.

Finally, in August the Seminary welcomed Rev. Ron van der Spoel, a pastor from The Netherlands and an accomplished teacher of preaching. Van der Spoel presented on the theme of “Fresh Sermons for Fresh Expressions,” helping the participating pastors think of new ways to interactively and dynamically engage the congregation in the weekly sermon so that the sermon can move from monologue...
to dialogue. This seminar was attended by fifteen CRC pastors, all of whom have been participating in the Church Renewal Lab program of Calvin Seminary’s Institute of Global Church Planting and Renewal. Rev. Keith Doornbos, director of the Renewal Lab, also participated in the seminar. The first part of the week the pastors pondered why people today expect greater participation in the preaching moment than previous generations. The second part of the week focused on techniques to accomplish this desired participation, and the week concluded with pastors presenting in-process sermons that they had started to write during the course of the seminar.

Through such summer seminars, as well as through the new resources it provides every week on its website (cep.calvinseminary.edu), the Center for Excellence in Preaching remains committed to helping busy pastors with their enormously vital weekly task of preaching vibrant messages based on God’s Holy Word.

The Ministry Theorem

Some years ago as a result of a grant from The John Templeton Foundation, the Seminary’s Center for Excellence in Preaching built a new website to help pastors, youth leaders, Sunday school teachers, and others in the church locate good quality resources related to the field of science and its intersection with faith. This year the website underwent a re-design overhaul thanks primarily to the work of CEP Program Administrator Mary Bardolph and with the help of Tom VanKeulen of the Seminary’s I.T. Department. The overhaul came about partly in response to the CRC Synod’s request for the College and Seminary to provide resources related to science and ministry. The new site is available for anyone looking for sermon ideas, Sunday school curricula, slideware, or literature in the overall area of science and theology. All these resources can be found at http://ministrytheorem.calvinseminary.edu/. The website also features the essays the Seminary commissioned from a number of scientists that were included in the book Delight in Creation: Scientists Share Their Work with the Church. These informative essays highlight recent discoveries in astronomy, mathematics, string theory, ecology, geology, and more.
If your church is interested in hosting an intern in pastoral ministry next year, please contact Rev. Geoff Vandermolen (gav016@calvinseminary.edu) in the Vocational Formation office.
Joshua was called upon by God to lead Israel into the Promised Land. At the onset of this divinely given task, God spoke to Joshua saying,

“Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go” (Joshua 1:9 NIV).

Reading these words one might be tempted to wonder: How will Joshua do it? Will he simply conjure up the requisite courage from some heretofore-untapped well of internal strength? Is Joshua actually able by some sheer force of internal will to obey God, be courageous in the face of unknown risks, and lead God’s people into an unknown land?

If you have ever read Joshua 1 in a season of personal challenge, you know these questions come easily to mind. However, careful readers of the biblical text will remember that when Joshua stood on the edge of the Promised Land, he had already undergone decades of leadership formation through his relationship with Moses.

Consider the fact that Joshua was there with Moses in the battle against the Amalekites (Ex.17). Joshua went with Moses to meet with God on Mt. Sinai (Ex. 24). Joshua the emerging leader witnessed Moses dealing with the sins of Israel on more than one occasion, including their idolatry with the golden calf. These leadership partners had even battled one another at times over character issues and jealousy (Num. 11). Yet Moses and Joshua were still able to trust one another when the reports from the spies were brought back and required faith and courage.

In short, Moses and Joshua had traveled a long leadership road together. This road formed their leadership, their hearts, and their faith. And this leadership relationship was a reservoir from which Joshua would draw all that he would need for the moments when God spoke the words, “Be strong and courageous!”

Good pastors and leaders possess important knowledge gained from reading and study. However, it is arguably the case that the best leaders to fill CRC pulpits and pastoral roles are those leaders that have tested their learning in the crucible of reflective experience. Many of us have borne witness to the painful spiritual carnage of pastors or leaders who have taken up leadership roles while lacking the wisdom, experience, or simple ability to manage their hearts, emotions, and choices.

The Vocational Formation office of Calvin Seminary is aimed precisely at the deliberate formation of the heart—the character and the leadership of emerging Kingdom leaders. We are resolved to marry top shelf academic learning with the intentional and internal formation of Kingdom leaders. Through the use of tools including contextual learning (internships), peer reflection, vocational mentors, psychological testing and assessment, and structured conversation through Formation Groups, we hope to better equip leaders for the task that is ahead.

Here at the Vocational Formation office we welcome your input, your partnership in this work, and also your encouragement. Together we share a passion for flourishing leadership in local churches that are participating in the exciting work of the mission of God in our world.

If your church is interested in hosting an intern in pastoral ministry next year, please contact Rev. Geoff Vandermolen (gav016@calvinseminary.edu) in the Vocational Formation office.
In recent years, Calvin Seminary has found itself increasingly at the intersection of global Christianity. Over one third of our students come from outside of North America, representing well over twenty nations. North American faculty, staff, and students at Calvin Seminary are reminded on a daily basis that the rise of so called “post-Christian” societies in the West is only part of the story of the Church at the dawn of the twenty-first century. In places like China, Christianity is growing quickly. Sociologist and Director of Purdue University’s Center on Religion and Chinese Society, Fenggang Yang, predicts that some year soon China will be the country with the most Christians in the world, surpassing the United States.

This past summer, I had the privilege of traveling to China with President Medenblik, where we saw this first hand. Our main goal was to listen and to learn about the people of China and what it is like to be a Christian there. As we visited churches, schools, and historical sites, we quickly learned that the religious landscape in China is more complex and varied than the stories that filter back to the West. The ministry context for churches in different cities in China can be quite different. Because of this, it is hard to make generalizations about Christianity in China. Still, some things became clear to us as we travelled the country. One person we met described the state of Christianity in China by saying, “China is not a forbidden city and it is not an amusement park.” In other words, things are neither as bad nor as good for Christians in China as some caricatures suggest.

To be sure, there is a staggering growth of Christianity in China. However, this brings distinct challenges. For example, churches burgeoning with new believers are sorting through how to develop lay leadership without thrusting new Christians into leadership positions before they are ready. The demand for leadership is strong, but there is a shortage of theologically mature leaders to draw from. It appears that a key task for many churches in the coming years will be to establish structures that efficiently and effectively deliver leadership development and discipleship to large numbers of new Christians. Not surprisingly, burnout is an issue for church leaders. Growing churches bring more demands for pastoral care from pastors who are often not paid, and who are often not formally trained. Demands for pastoral care are also high due to the country experiencing the effects of rapid globalization. There is a palpable desire for theological training, yet most of the resources from over 2,000 years of Christian writing and theological reflection are not yet available in Chinese. Therefore,
translation work and book publishing is a critical aspect of the developing infrastructure of the Church in China.

Leadership development, discipleship training, and theological translation are critical tasks facing Christians in China. However, many Christians told us that materialism and consumerism are the principal challenges facing Christians in China. As Dr. Yang has pointed out, there are many similarities between the early Christian church in Rome and the twenty-first century church in China. Both periods are characterized by encouraging growth alongside sobering challenges. However, we take comfort in the knowledge of God’s sovereignty throughout the ages as He works through the day-to-day faithfulness of His people from every tribe, tongue, and nation.

RELIGION IN CHINA
(CGSS’s average 2012)[444]
81.1% Chinese religion
6.3% Atheism
6.2% Buddhism
2.3% Christianity
2.2% Salvationist religions
1.7% Islam
0.2% Other faiths

FOLLOWING IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF JESUS:
Israel & Jordan

Follow in the footsteps of Jesus during the day and learn more about Jesus during study sessions at night!

Travel to New Testament sites connected with Jesus’ life: Bethlehem, Nazareth, Herod the Great’s harbor in Caesarea, Capernaum, Bethsaida, Caesarea Philippi, and the major biblical sites in Jerusalem. Other exciting activities include a boat ride on the Sea of Galilee, floating in the Dead Sea, and visits to Masada, Qumran, and the Herodium. This tour also uniquely involves key sites in Jordan: Bethany, Machaerus, Mount Nebo, Jerash, Amman, and the amazing city of Petra. Most days conclude with an evening study session that involves an inspirational lesson about Jesus’ life and ministry or the background of the NT.

Join host, Jeff Weima, professor of New Testament at Calvin Theological Seminary and leading biblical scholar, for this life-impacting tour!

For more information, contact
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www.jeffweima.com

MAY 11 - 23, 2017
Just weeks before his official retirement, Rev. Lugene Schemper, theological librarian and member of the faculty, gave the 2016 Convocation address to the gathering of students, faculty, and staff. His challenge to the Calvin Seminary community was to become both informed and well-formed through the educational project of Calvin Theological Seminary. His texts were Proverbs 19:2 and Romans 12:1-2. Here are some excerpts from his address.

As present and potential leaders in the church of Jesus Christ, our project at Calvin Seminary is not just to become informed, but to take this renewal project very seriously and become well-formed, as Paul outlines here in Romans 12:1-2.

What’s the relationship between personal spiritual growth and formation for ministry? I would encourage you to see them as quite related, and much more of one piece. Spiritual formation is not just another “something” that we add on to the curriculum; not simply another set of skills for students to work on.

It’s got to somehow be seen as part of the whole package, integrated with all of theological education.

The minute you begin to see learning skills for ministry and the teaching and learning of theology as divorced from your personal spiritual growth – you run a great risk. You are at risk of becoming a "religious professional", performing the duties of ministry without the heart commitment and the mind renewal in Christ that Paul talks about here.

All in all—enjoy your years at Calvin Seminary. Know that you are working on a magnificent project together: not simply becoming informed (as important at that may be), but through the grace of God becoming well-formed.
In 1966, Seminary president John Kromminga described the mission of the *Calvin Theological Journal* in its inaugural issue: “to serve the community of Reformed theological scholarship, and through it, the ministers and members of the Reformed churches.”

As I begin my editorship of the journal, I have been reflecting on this mission and on the very real challenges this publication faces. The seminary currently underwrites the costs of producing and distributing the journal. The current readership largely comprises graduates of the seminary. Some read the journal cover to cover, while others at most glance at the title page and then put the journal aside. The articles in the journal are scholarly. Getting enough high-caliber submissions is an ongoing challenge. Finally, the journal is little-known in the wider Reformed world.

I would like the journal to be a publication the seminary, the denomination, and the wider Reformed community find compelling and engaging. I envision a greater fit between the interests of our readership and the content of the journal.

So where do we go from here? We will begin by surveying the readership to get their input on the journal and its contents. One of my aims is to make the journal more helpful to its primary readership by including one or more shorter articles in each issue focusing on aspects of ministry. We will boost the journal’s profile by soliciting contributions for the upcoming 500th anniversary of the Reformation and the 400th anniversary of the Synod of Dordt. At the same time these articles will help church leaders commemorate these anniversaries. I also plan to work with the Center for Excellence in Preaching to have a regular feature offering a sermon or two provided by pastors in the denomination. With the disbanding of the Sermons for Reading Services committee in 2015, pastors and lay people in the denomination have had a harder time getting access to complete sermons for devotional use and seeing how others have approached a specific text. Together, these steps should help ensure that the *Calvin Theological Journal* continues to serve both Reformed scholarship and the members and ministers of the Reformed churches, both in North America and worldwide.
**Why is alumni engagement critical at this time in Calvin Seminary history?**

We’re in the midst of many shifts—within the church, culture, and society, as well as within the Christian Reformed denomination. What it takes to be a leader, in and out of the church, is much different now than it was twenty years ago, and will be much different twenty years out. Theological education needs to be responsive (and even anticipatory!) of these changes, so it is crucial for our graduates on the “front lines” to continue to inform the seminary experience with their critical reflections, stories, and ideas. It’s equally important that our graduates be better connected with fellow alumni, who share many of the same goals and struggles and can stoke each other’s passions and prayers. In sum, there has never been a better time for our alumni to be more connected and supported than the present.

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**Why did the Seminary turn to you when it decided to dedicate a position to alumni engagement?**

In my role as the Director of Financial Aid, I’ve walked alongside many students as they financed their education, and this has proven fertile ground for many long-lasting friendships. I enjoy getting to know our amazing students and keeping up with them and am excited and proud as I watch them grow in their vocations.

Given the strong relationships I have with many alumni, I was presented the opportunity to add the role of Director of Alumni Engagement to my current position last spring. I eagerly said yes; I was already thinking through ways we could support alumni and facilitate connection between them, so this was a natural fit.

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**What are you hoping to achieve in your first year?**

My main goals for my work are to:

1. Foster more connections between alumni,
2. Offer resources to better support alumni in their work, and
3. Glean the experiences and ideas of former students to inform our interactions with current and future students.

At this point, the possibilities are almost endless, but my hope is that all of our activity will be guided by alumni input. The first year will be all about listening: to ideas, stories, reflections, and needs. What do alumni need from us? That will be main focus this year.

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**What’s next?**

We are asking alumni to send their ideas—none are too big or too small—to alumni@calvinseminary.edu. Alumni should also watch their inboxes and mailboxes for additional information about registering for alumni newsletters and receiving their Calvin Seminary Alumni welcome packet. Finally, I am always up for a visit—to all alumni everywhere, please stop by and tell me about yourself in person!
Matthew Tuininga
Assistant Professor of Moral Theology

“I can’t imagine anything I’d rather be doing,” reflects Prof. Matthew Tuininga, who was appointed last summer as Assistant Professor of Moral Theology. Indeed, it seems plain that God’s hand has, throughout Tuininga’s life, prepared and equipped him for his current vocation.

Growing up the son of a pastor in the Reformed tradition, Tuininga is grateful for “all the wealth of the Reformed tradition” that was formative in his early years, and speaks of a “lifelong desire to subject even our own loyalties and communities to the demands of following Christ.” After graduating with a B.A. in history from Covenant College, Tuininga completed an M.Div. degree at Westminster Seminary in California and went on to complete a PhD in Religion, Ethics, and Society from Emory University. Completing his PhD at Emory, he says, allowed him to “wrestle with the meaning of the gospel and of the Reformed tradition in the context of a major research university.” Tuininga further has hands-on experience working in fields where ethical questions are particularly pressing, including a year working as a congressional aide in Washington, D.C., and another year serving as a counterterrorism intelligence analyst for the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI).

Prof. Tuininga is eager to apply this wealth of experience to the weighty ethical questions facing the church today, as Christians seek to be faithful to Christ amidst the pressures of an “increasingly post-Christian and pluralistic age.” Tuininga acknowledges the church today is facing a unique crisis in its witness: “Western society has rested on traditional Christian teachings, especially in areas of ethics and morality, for so long, that we haven’t had to think very much about why Christians believe what they do, and why it matters for human life. For too long we’ve simply relied on knowing the right answers from the Bible, as if the Bible was a mere ethics manual. And now that our culture is abandoning Christianity, we don’t know how to communicate the gospel vision in compelling, understandable ways anymore.”

A second challenge facing the church’s witness, Tuininga continued, is the church’s own increasing apathy towards supporting particular denominations. He is excited to push against that challenge by serving in the CRC and feels his gifts for building relationships are ideally suited for fundraising. In his spare time, Mitchell loves swimming, a sport that was deeply important to him in both high school and college, and serves as varsity coach of Grand Rapids Christian High’s female swim team. Mitchell and his wife Janel worship at LaGrave Avenue CRC.
compromising relationship to power: “The church has gotten so comfortable, so used to being in power, that we don’t really see the Christian life as a life of suffering, of cross-bearing anymore. We are very influenced by the American dream, by the pursuit of happiness and fulfillment. And so when the gospel demands hard things of us—with our possessions, with our sexuality, with our comfort, with our use of power—we are not really prepared to fulfill those demands. We aren’t really prepared to take up our cross, deny ourselves, and follow Christ.”

Within this cultural context, Tuininga feels that the CRC and Calvin Seminary in particular, with their rich roots in the Reformed tradition, are ideally suited to shape Christian leaders who are faithful witnesses to Christ. In the classroom, Tuininga strives to “get students engaged in the drama of any particular question”—that is, why the issue matters and the core issues at stake. As students enter the questions opened up by ethical dilemmas, Tuininga focuses on approaching any issue from a Christocentric paradigm: “It’s not enough just to have the right answers. We need to understand the gospel and what it means to be conformed to the image of Christ.” Tuininga also challenges students to reflect, “How is the gospel good news in this area?” Approaching ethical questions using such overarching paradigms allows Christians to demonstrate unity even on matters where faithful Christians differ in opinion by “seeking to transcend our divisions and the narrow perspectives that arise from them, by discerning how it is that different groups of Christians have properly understood the meaning of the gospel in different ways.”

When asked about his ultimate goal for students, Tuininga replied, “I want them to grasp how important it is to focus on following Christ, on being conformed to His image, and on being knit together as His body—in short, to seek first His kingdom and its righteousness—as the centerpiece of our mission in life and ministry.” Only with such a focus, Tuininga emphasizes, can the church be a compelling witness to Christ “in a world that desperately needs to hear and experience good news.”

Elizabeth Lopez

Administrative Assistant to the Certificate in Hispanic Ministry Program

Elizabeth Lopez joined Calvin Seminary this May. Elizabeth has a B.A. in Education and Business Administration from Great Lakes Christian College, as well as over fifteen years of administrative experience and five years of experience teaching in private Christian schools. Her primary job duties include developing a library with Spanish language resources and supporting the Hispanic Ministry Program in a variety of other tasks. She is excited to use her gifts and experience in this position because of her love for encouraging others’ spiritual growth and development. Elizabeth enjoys reading, gardening, fishing with her husband, and serving at her church. She has one son and two grandsons. She and her husband worship at Iglesia Nueva Vida in Grand Rapids.
Dr. Geoffrey Vandermolen

Director of Vocational Formation

Dr. Geoffrey Vandermolen was appointed to serve at the seminary last summer in a new role as the Director of Vocational Formation. This position, Vandermolen notes, aligns with Calvin Seminary’s strong desire to “place at the core of the curriculum a focus on the intersection of students’ academic learning and their formation as leaders and people.”

Vandermolen brings a variety of ministry experience to his role—including twenty years of ministry in the CRC in a number of settings, including serving as an associate pastor in London, Ontario for four years and following a calling to church planting in Calgary. Most recently, he has served at ClearView, a church in Oakville, Ontario. Throughout his vocational journey, Vandermolen has had a keen interest in leadership development, an interest he pursued by completing a Doctorate in Ministry at Acadia University in the area of leader formation and succession. His vision for his role at the seminary, he says, is to “serve students by helping them be more aware of themselves, better equipped for leadership, and with a greater sense of clarity about what God has made them to do for the sake of His Kingdom.”

When asked which influences shaped his own calling, Vandermolen cites the influence of many people, including mentors, staff teams, and people who “rubbed off some of the hard edges of myself.” Vandermolen says his calling has also been influenced “by the hard, gut-shot moments of powerlessness, inability, and hardship.” These experiences are the reason Vandermolen especially credits the profound shaping brought about by time in prayer—a discipline that “was never something I was passionate about early on, but I became passionate about it by necessity.”

Reflecting on the unique challenges seminary students face today, Vandermolen notes that some vocational challenges are the same as they have always been, including discerning one’s calling and in what area a person is especially suited to serve. But other challenges seem uniquely pronounced today, including “declining churches, rising costs of education, the pluralization of belief, and the complexity of cultural issues in relationship to the gospel of Jesus Christ.” Making wise vocational decisions in the midst of all of these factors can be difficult, so Vandermolen says his philosophy on vocation keeps a central focus on the calling of every Christ follower, namely, “loving obedience to Jesus as His followers.” The result? Vocation is “not a one-size-fits-all pursuit. We are simply called to love Jesus and follow Him. If that means bivocationality, so be it. If that means seminary—get in there. If that means a lead pastor job, working away at ministry in Cambodia, or plowing through life in the suburbs, I think the call of Jesus is to work it out by praying, testing your calling, asking others for input and direction, and even giving yourself the grace to fail now and then.”

Vandermolen says he looks forward to the challenges that come with his new job including teaching leadership courses, working with other faculty to influence and shape emerging leaders, and dreaming of new and effective ways in which Calvin Seminary can better train and equip Kingdom leaders for God’s good work in this world.

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I think the call of Jesus is to work it out by praying, testing your calling, asking others for input and direction, and even giving yourself the grace to fail now and then.
Distinguished Alumni Awards

Each year Calvin Theological Seminary is pleased to honor two alumni who have made significant ministry contributions in the Kingdom of God and have reflected positively upon the values and mission of CTS.

You are invited to submit nominations (with brief statement of rationale) by December 16, 2016 to: Rev. Jul Medenblik, President, Calvin Theological Seminary (email: sempres@calvinseminary.edu).

The recipients will be honored at the Seminary’s Commencement on Saturday, May 20, 2016.