Unity and Diversity
Dear Brothers and Sisters,

The Christian historian Justo Gonzalez writes fascinatingly on lots of topics ("an effective lie is about 80% true"), but on none more than the catholicity of the church. We confess “a holy catholic church,” he says, but typically miss part of its glory. We do understand that “the nations” need the gospel, and so we thank God for missionaries who answer God’s call to carry it to them. Brazilian, Korean, and Nigerian missionaries, for example, bring the gospel of Jesus Christ all over the world to nations who will die without it.

That’s one way to think of the catholicity of the church. Historically speaking, the church is catholic or universal because “saints from every tongue and language and people and nation” have been ransomed by the blood of the lamb (Rev. 5:9). This is a sheer geographical fact and it is part of the glory of the catholic church.

But, says Gonzalez, there’s another part of the glory we sometimes miss. Yes, the peoples and nations need the gospel. But the gospel also needs the peoples and nations! The reason is that no one people or nation can fully present the richness of the gospel. You need multiple, contextual testimonies to the “one faith, one hope, one baptism” to dig up the endless treasures God has buried in them.

The church father Irenaeus saw this as he pondered a Bible question. Why in the world did God inspire Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John to all write a gospel? Wasn’t this pretty unthrifty? A duplication of effort? No, God wanted four gospels to witness from four perspectives to the one gospel so that hearers and readers could be enriched four ways.

Christians today, if they choose, may absorb gospel witness “from every tongue and language and people and nation.” This is not just a geographical novelty in a “flat world.” It’s also a Pentecostal gift. To witness preaching, hospitality, evangelism, diaconal outreach, fellowship, and sacraments done in the ways characteristic of brothers and sisters from all people groups and cultures is to perceive the gospel “according to the whole,” as Gonzalez puts it. To experience part of this multicultural treasure is also to have an epiphany of the new heaven and earth. According to Isaiah 60 and Revelation 21, the cultural treasures of the nations will be carried into the city of God. What had been their specialties, their “glory,” will become the glory of the holy catholic church forever.

Not a bad idea—with good colleagues helping us—to taste a little of the glory now.

Grace and peace,
The coming of the nations to North America is one of the most dramatic developments of our time. From major cities to many rural communities, ethnic differences are a way of life today. With ethnic differences often come fear, misunderstanding, and prejudice. Unfortunately, Christians are often a part of the problem instead of the solution. And often, conversation among Christians reveals some important misunderstandings of the Bible’s teaching in this area.

This article identifies and responds to three common misunderstandings of the Bible’s teaching on the unity and diversity of the human family and offers a biblical perspective to help the church in this important area of discipleship.

**Misunderstanding #1: Human diversity, particularly racial and ethnic diversity, is the result of humanity’s fall into sin.**

In some ways this misunderstanding is, well, understandable! So often hatred, violence, and injustice—all clear evidences of the fall—go hand in hand with racial and ethnic differences. And many Christians grow up thinking the Bible—most notably the confusion of language at Babel and its reversal at Pentecost—actually teaches that racial, ethnic, and language differences within the human family are the result of humanity’s fall into sin.

But in fact the Bible teaches that rich diversity is one of the basic features of God’s good creation. The creation account (Gen. 1) describes an explosion of diversity with thousands of different flowers and leaves, stars and planets, mountains and meadows, fish and fowl. Variety and differences enrich God’s created world.

The crown of this varied creation is the human person, God’s imagebearer. In their maleness and femaleness, human beings model the way diversity functions in the good creation. Before the human fall into sin, the differences between male and female are a cause for unbounded celebration, deep attraction, and joy (Gen. 2:23). Extended to the rich variety of human cultures, human differences make for mutual appreciation; greater self-understanding through seeing how other people live, think, and relate; deep communion; and, above all, the glorification of God.

Even God, in the oneness and threeness of the Trinity, models the deep unity and diversity of a good creation. God is one being, but also three persons. In his oneness God holds together all created things, and in his threeness God affirms diversity and communion in his creation.

What about the tower of Babel and Pentecost? The purpose of the Babel story is not to explain the origin of various languages and cultures, but to describe the alienation that takes place whenever human beings attempt to build...
God's Deepest Purposes

community without God (Gen. 11:4). In the same way, the new community the Holy Spirit created at Pentecost was not formed by blending all human languages into one. At Pentecost, God created a new community where, in the Spirit, people understood one another even as they each spoke in their own language (Acts 2:6).

Far from the result of sin, the diversity of the human family, with its myriad of color, language, culture, and song, goes to the heart of God's own nature and creation design.

My daughter recently left a nursing job at a hub of many nation and language groups in the heart of Chicago. When I asked how her new job was going, her first words were, “Dad, it’s so white out here!” Lynn has nothing against white people. She is white. But there was something deeply enlivening and enriching about the myriad of sounds and smells and colors and faces that she left behind in the city. God made her to enjoy that diversity, and to have an ache in her heart when she no longer experienced it.

Misunderstanding #2: While important, reconciliation and healing across ethnic divisions is not as important as reconciliation with God through Christ.

Reconciliation of people with one another, especially people divided along racial and ethnic lines, is not merely some secondary goal that gets tacked onto the saving work of Christ. Rather, it is at the heart of Christ's work on the cross and of God's plan to create a new heaven and a new earth. Space limitations allow for listing only fragments of biblical texts, but each of the texts below comes from central, foundational texts for understanding the sweep of God's work in Christ and plan for the world:

“(God) has made known to us ... the mystery of his will ... a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.” (Eph. 1:9-10 RSV)

"This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus.” (Eph. 3:2)

“All of this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation ... ” (2 Cor. 5:18)

“For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him (Christ), and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood shed on the cross ... ” (Col. 1:19-20)

“For he is our peace, who has made the two (Gentile and Jew) one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility ... . His purpose was to create one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross by which he put to death their hostility.” (Eph. 2:14-16)

Reconciliation across natural lines of human division is not some option on the menu of sanctification that Christians can politely pass over. Such reconciliation is the inevitable fruit of new life in Christ. In fact, the absence of such reconciliation must haunt Christians as a disturbing contradiction to life in Christ (1 John 2:9-11; 4:19-21). Obviously the opportunity for church communities to minister across ethnic lines will vary from community to community. But all Christians must be on the side of reconciliation and healing across ethnic lines, whether in their local church and community, their denominational and other mission efforts through which God is building such transforming communities around the world, or their prayer and passion for peace among the nations.

The gospel's call to reconciliation and healing across ethnic lines must be clearly distinguished from the secular culture's push for multiculturalism and diversity. Thoughtful Christians rightfully have differing opinions about a host of political strategies and ideologies in the public square designed to bring about racial justice. But Christians cannot have differing opinions about the purpose of Christ's work on the cross—a work designed not only bring about reconciliation with God but create one new humanity in Christ!

Misunderstanding #3: Reconciliation and healing across ethnic lines and the creation of multiethnic communities of faith are human activities achieved by proper planning and programming.

The issue here is whether reconciliation and healing across ethnic lines and the creation of multiethnic communities of faith are our work or God's work—our accomplishment or God's gift.

This is the same issue the church faces with evangelism and conversion. It's clear that the church cannot successfully evangelize without the work of God's Spirit in human hearts and communities. The same is true with reconciliation and healing across ethnic lines and the creation of multiethnic communities of faith. Only God, through his Spirit and Christ's work on the cross, can effect Christian reconciliation.
There must be death and resurrection, and not just Christ’s, but ours. A most striking feature of Ephesians 1—perhaps the most breathtaking description in the whole Bible of God’s work of salvation—is how often God is the subject of the sentence, the one who acts, who brings about, who does it all from start to finish.

As with evangelism, acknowledging that reconciliation is first of all the work of God does not absolve Christians of responsibility for the hard work of reconciliation, including excellent planning and programming, but frames the way the church must go about the work of reconciliation and building multi-ethnic communities of faith.

First, the church’s reconciliation ministry must be carried out in such a way that it is always clear that the cross is at the center of all reconciliation. In this regard it’s exciting to highlight in this issue of Forum the new racial reconciliation curriculum designed under the direction of Rev. Esteban Lugo, Director of Race Relations of the Christian Reformed Church (CRC) (see p. 6). This curriculum hangs all of its teaching on the great biblical themes of creation, fall, and redemption, and makes clear that racial reconciliation is ultimately God’s work in Christ.

Closely related to this first point is God’s plan that the church be the strategic vehicle for uniting all things in Christ (Eph.1:22-3:10; John 17:20-23). By God’s design, the church, God’s gathered body in the world, is the means by which God intends to reveal himself, to proclaim the good news of reconciliation, and to unite all things in Christ. Members and leaders of multi-ethnic congregations would be the first to assert that indeed Christ by his Spirit is the one who builds his church (Heidelberg Catechism, Lord’s Day 21), and that “unless the Lord builds the house, its builders labor in vain” (Ps. 127:1).

Framing this reconciliation effort as God’s work hopefully helps the church avoid the deadly trap of moralism. Commanding people into righteousness doesn’t make people righteous. Commanding people to not be racist doesn’t make people less racist. That is the great flaw of moralism. As William Willimon says in his penetrating critique of moralistic preaching, “If we could be better people, we would! But we can’t! We need a Savior!”

Removing racial reconciliation and the creation of multiethnic communities from the realm of command and something Christians do, and framing it instead as first of all God’s gift to us in Christ, a gift we then live into by our own death and resurrection and by our life in the body of Christ with others who are dying and rising again—that shift from duty to gift, from human command to God’s work, is a crucial shift for unleashing the power of the gospel in this realm (and every other realm) of the Christian life.

**Where is God leading the CRC?**

Among the many gifts God has showered upon the CRC are gifts of ethnic diversity. It’s amazing to see the richness of God’s unified and diverse family represented within the CRC itself and among CRC ministry partners around the world. At the same time many CRC congregations face great ministry challenges as they seek to be Christ’s body in communities of growing ethnic diversity.

Interestingly, the people who believe that the CRC’s most exciting days are still ahead are often people who are already reveling in the gift of God’s unified and diverse family, already experiencing in the community of the church the reconciliation and love across lines of ethnic division that no human effort can achieve, but is a gift of God’s Spirit. That’s a vision to die for … in Christ.

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**Forms of Racism**

(adapted from the current CRC Anti-Racism curriculum by John Cooper)

1. **Personal racism** is individual attitudes and actions that express prejudice, superiority, and bigotry toward people because of their culture and/or ethnicity.

2. **Cultural racism** is attitudes and actions that treat the cultures of other ethnic groups as intrinsically inferior and undesirable. It tends to resent and suppress the expression of other languages and cultures and/or to exploit them for individual or collective gain.

3. **Institutional racism** occurs when an institution—a business, school, church, police force, government agency—illegitimately permits the language, standards, and cultural values of one culture to be imposed on or to disadvantage persons of other ethnic-cultural groups.

4. **Systemic racism** occurs when individuals, institutions, and shapers of culture form systems or networks—local, regional, national, or international—that give advantage to individuals and institutions of one culture/ethnicity and disadvantage others.

5. **Racism and power:** All humans are capable and may be guilty of some form of racism. But racism is most evil and destructive when joined with the power to express and enforce it. Although members of minority groups sometimes have and use this power, the most pervasive and entrenched forms of racism are those of majority ethnic-cultural groups toward minorities.
Interview with Esteban Lugo
Director of Race Relations for the Christian Reformed Church

Forum: Why did you take this job?
Lugo: Initially I turned down several solicitations to candidate for the appointment. I was pastoring Orangewood Christian Reformed Church in Phoenix, and some really great things were happening there. When I accepted a call there, my family and I were the only people of color in the whole church. The congregation was Anglo and yet we were in an ethnically diverse community. When I left after two and a half years, there were six Hispanic families, not including ours, and three African American families and a Native American family. I have been involved in multiethnic ministry since 1977—in planting multiethnic churches in Chicago and in Philadelphia, and in serving churches in Shiprock, New Mexico, and Phoenix, Arizona. The third time I was approached about this job, my wife said to me, “Could this be of the Lord?” I spoke with several people who know me well, and they were unanimous in saying, “God has shaped you for this ministry throughout the years.” The way it all came together showed me it was the clear calling of God.

What are the major challenges or obstacles to racial reconciliation in the CRC?
One of the major obstacles is that we want to have diversity without paying the cost of reconciliation. Reconciliation costs something. It cost the life of our Savior. It’s going to cost us as well. If we are going to be a reconciled people, if we are going to taste the flavorings (and I say “flavorings” because we won’t experience the fullness of unity in the midst of diversity until we get to heaven), we must realize that we need other people. We can’t just think that we are complete within our own circles; our completeness comes as we embrace people from different cultures. We have to remember that we have one Lord, one Savior, one faith; but in the midst of that there is a diversity of gifts and backgrounds that we can celebrate—the flavorings of Revelation 5 and 7 in the people of God.

Our integrity, our witness, and our identity are at stake here. Our integrity is at stake because we have made these bold synodical pronouncements that racism is sin and that we need to do something about it as a church, but we haven’t followed through. Our witness is at stake too, because our most powerful witness can be showing the world that in Christ people can be reconciled to each other—people who under almost any other circumstances are alienated. The witness of the church is ultimately the witness of reconciliation through the cross. Finally, our identity is at stake. The 1996 report on The Racially and Ethnically Diverse and Unified Family of God talks about unity and diversity, and they are totally tied together. The one and the many; God is one and God is three; the church is one and it is diverse. Unity and diversity aren’t just human ideas; they’re God’s design for the church. If we are going to experience our identity as God’s people we must embrace this kingdom value of biblical diversity. If we don’t, we are going to miss out on the richness of who we are.

So, we have this Synodical report and all of these instructions, yet they often seem to fall on deaf ears. Often there doesn’t seem to be a felt need to do the work of racial reconciliation the way there is to work on our marriages, finances, self esteem, and weight loss. How do we move people to be about the business of diversity and racial reconciliation?
First, we need to remind ourselves that diversity is a biblical kingdom value. God values diversity. We see it clearly from the beginning to the end of the Scriptures. We must value God’s people as God values them. We are the children of God; we have God’s DNA in us. Our Father in heaven is a reconciler, so we must be reconcilers as well. According to 2 Corinthians 5, God has given us the message of reconciliation and the ministry of reconciliation. The message is that Christ has broken down the wall of separation between people and God. If that’s true, then we are not only to be reconciled with God as a church but also to reconcile people with one another. That is the ministry of reconciliation. And while
we embrace our identity as reconcilers in the church, we are also to be reconcilers in the community that God has placed us in. Reconciliation isn't just a one-time thing. It's an ongoing process in the everyday life of each congregation. And think how that would play out in the denomination that is called to be a reconciler! The bottom line is that if we say we're Christians, we don't have a choice about being involved in biblical diversity and reconciliation.

**Is there a difference between the way the secular culture uses the word diversity and the way the church uses the word diversity?**

Today diversity is the “in” thing, but there is secular diversity and biblical diversity. Secular diversity focuses on tolerance, but biblical diversity focuses on unity. The key to biblical diversity is reconciliation in Christ. Diversity before sin is beautiful, but with sin in the world there's the need for reconciliation. Biblical diversity has one faith, one Lord, one baptism, one Spirit—bringing all of the different cultures and ethnicities together in Christ. The world doesn't have Christ. Christ breaks down walls the world never can.

**Tell us about the themes of the new curriculum developed by the Office of Race Relations.**

The new curriculum is exciting. We call it the Dance of Racial Reconciliation (DORR). If you are going to have effective dancing, you’ve got to have people coming together. In addition, dancing is a coordinated movement. That means it has to be intentional.

There are three phases or sessions in this training. The first is embracing the kingdom value of biblical diversity. Honestly, a lot of people see diversity as something optional. But it’s part of the way God created us. And if God values it, then you and I as followers of Jesus Christ must value it as well. And so we help people connect with that kingdom value.

The second phase deals with the idea of our fall into sin. The question begs to be asked and answered: Why haven’t we been able to experience this biblical diversity? Racism has happened as a result of the fall. It is a spiritual problem. Therefore we must use spiritual means to deal with it and to dismantle it. Much of the second phase deals with identifying and understanding systemic racism. We need to understand that racism is not only individual, but also institutional, cultural, and systemic. So we try to give people a working knowledge of what systemic racism is about.

The third phase is the biblical remedy for dismantling racism of all kinds—reconciliation in Christ. According to Ephesians 2, Christ’s work of reconciliation is what brings down the wall of separation. Jesus reconciled us to God. That’s at the core of all reconciliation. And so we focus on our identity as reconciled children, and on our calling, our ministry, and our message of reconciliation. This third phase involves teaching specific interpersonal skills and ways of relating to each other that flow out of this new life in Christ. The average person sitting in the pew does not necessarily have the skill set needed in reconciliation. We need to equip God's people with those skills. I believe those skills are confession, effective listening, conflict resolution, problem solving, advocacy, just to name a few. We have the identity of reconcilers, but now we must practice reconciliation. We have to train our church leaders and pastors to equip God's people with those reconciliation skills so they can effectively build relationships within the church and in the community.

**Tell us more about the format of the curriculum.**

We use a two-day (fourteen-hour) format that we have found to be very successful. Working with a group of 20-25 people and three facilitators, we take a dialogue approach. People learn in a group setting, through different visual aids and through dialogue with each other and between the facilitators. We are really excited about this approach. We try to find a balance between encouragement and confrontation. We cover a lot of content through videos and also printed materials. It can be quite convicting.

We can imagine a congregation that still isn't in an area where there is no ethnic diversity. Is it important to say that this issue of Forum is still for them even if right now there isn't the opportunity for the dance of racial reconciliation?

Absolutely. All Christians are called to the dance, but the dance may be a dance of cross-generational reconciliation, or socio-economic reconciliation. There are all kinds of ways that we are alienated, and when we do the dance in other areas it tunes us up for when the opportunity arises for the dance of racial reconciliation. Furthermore, when we talk about reconciliation we should keep in mind that all kinds of reconciliation are needed. Husbands and wives, children and parents, neighbors—we all have to do reconciliation work in order to experience the unity that God wants us to experience. Yes, this work of reconciliation isn't just in dealing with ethnic minorities.

Having said that, churches that think they’re in monocultural communities are often surprised at the diversity around them. Often churches partner with others that are multiethnic or multicultural, so that they can embrace this kingdom value of biblical diversity. We try to prepare churches to deal with change in the community so that they get a handle on how to deal with multicultural challenges early on.

There is tremendous value in embracing the ministry of reconciliation. If the larger church got serious about the ministry of reconciliation generally, the church would explode. Our key mission is to transform, to overcome barriers, to get beyond the boundaries of ethnocentrism and traditions that have nothing to do with the faith. It’s exciting to be part of God's kingdom as it is in heaven being played out here on earth!
The Hispanic Accent in the Christian Reformed Church

A Profile of Our Churches

The Hispanic congregations of the CRC in the United States are made up of people who come from different parts of the American continent and the Caribbean. This reality enables each congregation to experience the great cultural wealth of our nations.

At the start of the twenty-first century, we find that our churches are made up primarily of first generation immigrants, recent arrivals to the United States, forced to migrate north by growing poverty, violence, lack of opportunities, and recurring political and social crises.

We are not different from any European ethnic group that migrated to this country in past times looking for better opportunities for their families; nor from any other ethnicities that were forced to migrate to the United States; nor from the people that were brought to the U.S. as slaves.

We come loaded with pain and hope. We are the bearers of a faith that has been tough to live and to spread in the midst of cultures that are unsympathetic to it. We still count the many martyrs who suffered and died simply because they strived to live and preach the gospel in our native countries. Still now, in many parts of the dark-skinned Americas people suffer many forms of religious intolerance and social marginalization just for belonging to a faith that is not that of the majority. We have hope against all hope. This historic experience has molded and continues to mold our theological reflection and the expression of our faith.

Usually, Hispanic churches are very expressive and joyful. We celebrate the salvation we have received from God with profound joy and gratitude. Yet it is not easy to leave our land and our families to come to a country that looks on us with mistrust and hostility, a reality that has increased especially during the last year. Ministering under often unjust and discriminatory work conditions, many times imposed by our own compatriots, makes our life in this country even harder. Nevertheless, we strive to gain the respect and dignified treatment that every human being deserves, within and outside of our Christian communities.

The development of the Spanish-speaking CRC has had different origins. One of them was the West Michigan ministry with agricultural migrant workers. Others came to the United States thanks to the efforts of CRC churches that took in Cuban exiles, who formed several churches in Florida, New Jersey, and Michigan. Many of us, from different countries and for different reasons, have come to this country and have joined the CRC for reasons of theological affinity, having met the Lord here, or having been invited to serve as evangelists, pastors, and teachers in the different churches and agencies of the denomination. A good number of our leaders do not have a Reformed theological background by Dr. Mariano Avila
Professor of New Testament

REFLECTIONS ON UNITY AND DIVERSITY

Three years ago a few of us, Hispanics in the CRC, were asked to revise a translation of the identity statement What It Means to Be Reformed. When we considered it, the reaction of all of us was that we did not feel represented by the document, especially when it narrates the CRC “family tree.” Challenged by CRC Publications to write our own Identity Statement, I decided to write our own “family tree” and describe our own Hispanic accent, underlining the challenges of being part of the CRCNA. I sent a questionnaire to all the Hispanic leaders in the CRC. I got a good response from many of them and incorporated their views in the redaction of a supplement of the Identity Statement. Following are some highlights of the document, translated from the Spanish version by Mariano Avila III. Here you will hear voices that otherwise have no opportunity to express themselves. Of course, I am responsible for its final form and redaction.

My prayer is that it will be a bridge to improve communication among us in the larger family of the CRCNA.
but have learned to appreciate this tradition. Now, together we make up the Spanish-speaking CRCs, which, far from being monocultural, are a showcase of rich cultural diversity.

Our experiences have given us an understanding of the Reformed faith that we value highly. For most of us, our introduction to the heart of the church happened through a conversion experience. We have been rescued from a life of sin and have received the abundant grace of God. We are transformed and live the faith that the church was given with passion and devotion. We follow Jesus, taking up our cross every day; we worship our God with fervor; we value our families’ well-being highly and educate our children in the biblical and Reformed faith; we preach our faith with enthusiasm and conviction to those who surround us; and we rejoice in the glorious hope in the redemption of the people of God, and of creation itself, when our Lord returns in glory.

The Hispanic accent has developed thanks to what men and women of the Reformed family have taught us in the past. We are indebted to the many men and women of other cultures who served God as missionaries in our countries and to the pastors and leaders who planted our churches here in North America. At the same time, we believe that our particular accent also has much to contribute and to enrich the other accents that today make up the Christian Reformed Church.

Our Family Tree

We, the Reformed Hispanics, did not arrive in North America on the Mayflower (1620). More than a century before, in 1492, other ships, the Niña, the Pinta, and the Santa María, had arrived on the isles of the Caribbean, sailing from Spain. The fruit of that arrival was the painful birth of the people of mixed blood, culture, and religion that today are the predominant makeup of our Latin American nations.

The “Christian” faith came to our lands under the sign of the sword and the cross, in that order. The Spanish culture and religion were imposed on the indigenous cultures through the use of many forms of violence. For three more centuries the culture and religion of the Spaniards remained vibrant thanks to the efficient dealings of a monarchical and religious system that knew how to exploit every level of colonial society. The counterreformation of the Council of Trent (1545-63) and its “holy inquisition” was what defined the religious and cultural profile of Latin America until the beginning of the nineteenth century.

During the nineteenth century most Latin American and Caribbean nations achieved their independence from Spain and Portugal. In their desire to break with their colonial past and join the “modern” era, these young Latin American nations adopted the sociopolitical and economic ideologies of industrialized nations: the United States, France, and England.

Protestantism came to Latin America in that context, largely from the United States, bringing with it the great truths of the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century. In the beginning it was a religion with a foreign character, but it slowly acquired its own identity in Latin American countries, and today makes up the form of faith and life of religious minorities which, like yeast, are influencing Spanish-speaking peoples and nations in many significant ways. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, those evangelical churches are one of the most vibrant and fastest-growing groups of the Christian faith in the world. Pentecostalism encompasses nearly 80 percent of evangelicals in Latin America, and during the last decades even historical churches have been influenced by Pentecostalism—especially in their liturgy but also in their conservative attitudes regarding all areas of life.

Our Daily Challenges

As immigrants and workers in the United States and as members of the CRCNA we experience several challenges. Structural realities make our lives very difficult: social discrimination, subtle racism, injustice at the workplace, poverty, and legal obstacles to access to basic services like healthcare and education. At a personal level, because we speak with an accent we are treated as people who think with an accent. At best, we receive condescending and paternalistic treatment from our Anglo brothers and sisters. Although this is the general attitude, we thank God that it is changing. Today many people in the CRC make us feel as equal members of the CRC family in the way they relate to us.

We need to transform those structures and attitudes to give a powerful testimony of what the Church of Christ is meant to be. And, as Hispanics, we need to start within our own Hispanic congregations. Racism is not the domain of one ethnic group. We have a lot of it among ourselves: one country toward another, people of fair skin toward those who look like Indians, well-to-do persons toward the poor, the well educated toward the illiterate. We also discriminate, and we have to repent and learn to treat each other with dignity and respect.

We need to build together, in our growing multicultural and multiethnic CRC, the kind of church that Jesus our Lord desires—a church in which there is room for everyone, in which each person is treated with high respect and honor, and in which we all work together and serve each other as one body to give testimony of the multifaceted grace of God.
The Blessings and Challenges of Korean Christian Reformed Churches

More than 110 churches—one-tenth of the denomination—consist of hard-working and fully dedicated congregations who represent an immigrant church struggling to find her home in American culture. During their history of almost 25 years in the denomination, Korean churches have been experiencing some successes and many challenges, all within the abundant blessings of the Lord.

The influx of Korean churches into the denomination in the 1970s and ’80s still continues today on a smaller scale. Korean churches are still young, lively, and growing, trying to create an internal unity, while seeking an external harmony by being a meaningful part of the denomination. Internally, Korean churches have the Korean Council, a group of local leaders that meets at a different place each year and deals with church matters such as orientation and education. The Korean Council publishes the Voice of the Reformed (the “Korean Banner”) bi-monthly. Providing devotions, news, and information, the journal functions as a means for unity and a bridge to the denomination.

Throughout the Korean church, certain characteristics of modern Korean Christians are evident. Their lively spirituality, persistent prayer, dedication to ministry, tendency toward the evangelical Reformed theology, and hard work mentality are inevitably products of the harsh history of Korea. Though such a difficult past left a theological tendency toward a more dualistic understanding of salvation, it has also brought about positive outcomes in America. Koreans’ high respect for education leads their ministers to be educated, at the very least, in the Master of Divinity program. A positive work ethic helped Koreans to adapt well to the new land. These aspects have proven to be valuable assets for positive adjustment to the American culture.

Such adjustments include the blessing of a growing younger generation, yet a great challenge is also posed by this blessing. Following their tradition, most Korean churches have separate ministries for the Korean-speaking adults and English-speaking youngsters. These separate ministries, which include using different worship styles and hymns, have not only accelerated the generation gap but also hindered the timely development of leadership in the younger generation. While English-speaking younger generation churches are emerging, the first generation churches are not yet well equipped with strategic plans for establishing and supporting such leadership.

Looking to the future, Korean churches are faced with a challenge to develop and expand ministry to diversified (first and younger generations) congregations with looming differences of language and culture. As immigration continues alongside of younger generation growth, cultural and language differences will escalate in the Korean community, making it a multi-cultural society. Developing a diversified ministry leadership is a challenging yet necessary task.

Interestingly, most Korean CRC ministers joined the denomination after ordination in other, mostly Presbyterian, denominations. As a consequence, they do not have educational background in the denomination and thus experience somewhat of a distance from the denominational ethos. The different views with which they were educated include the Presbyterian understanding of the lifetime term of elder, as well as their more independent mode of operation (which does not afford opportunity to emphasize contributing ministry shares).

Competent leadership is a key focus, yet there have been only a few Korean students in Calvin Theological Seminary’s M.Div. program. At this point, there are about ten CTS-trained Korean ministers in the denomination, about half of whom are serving in the Anglo churches. Only a few Calvin graduates are presently serving in the Korean-speaking congregations.

A new opportunity for serving the Korean American churches and the denomination has arisen through the Korean Institute for Ministry. Established by the Synodical Ministerial Candidacy Committee in cooperation with the Korean Council, it will provide long-awaited theological and ministerial orientation to the Korean ministers and churches. The orientation will include the denomination’s history, Reformed theology, church polity, and ministry, with the ultimate goal being to assist the Korean American ministry. The Korean Council...
Since the younger generation does not share the above-mentioned Korean cultural characteristics, the Institute will also play a role in promoting internal unity between the generations. Developing lay leaders within the denomination’s ministries is another area of urgency. The Korean church has been proud of its history of using lay leaders in evangelism and mission works. The holistic understanding of the redeemed life and calling in the kingdom of God will surely heighten their already energetic dedication. Another key to a more effective ministry for the future will be a new structure, both within the local churches and in the denomination, to unify the growing Korean churches and maximize her potential for diversified ministries.

Reflections of an African American CRC Pastor

Did the CRC find me or did I find the CRC? The answer, if you are a Calvinist, is neither. God has a funny way of getting his way. He finds us and places us on journeys we would not have picked for ourselves. After fourteen years of urban pastoral ministry in the CRC, there are still surprises. I never would have thought I’d be an African American pastor of a predominantly Anglo church, ministering within a mostly Hispanic neighborhood. God has a funny way of getting his way. What are some of the challenges, blessings, and opportunities of being an African American pastor in the CRC? Here’s a sampling from my experience.

In the fall of 1989 I packed up my things and headed to Grand Rapids. Why? I was told by God in a dream that I was to become a pastor. The door God opened was Calvin Theological Seminary. I was not happy about it, but I had to walk through the door God opened for me. One of the blessings was to meet my wonderful wife Sharon. An additional blessing (for Sharon and me) was the diverse community of believers at Madison Square CRC. Madison Square provided the kind of community we needed as an interracial couple. Because of Madison’s commitment to urban ministry and its caring leaders who welcomed us into their lives, we were able to approach our first pastoral call with hope and confidence. By serving with (now retired) Rev. Stan VanderKlay, I learned the power of taking a vow of stability. VanderKlay spent thirty-six years at Northside Chapel; I think his influence upon the people of Paterson, New Jersey, is still felt today. It was a blessing to minister with Stan. I am also thankful for people like Rev. James Wolff, who taught me pastoral ministry through his personal transparency and who purposely dragged me along on pastoral visits.

I am, presently, the longest-serving African American CRC pastor in active ministry in Grand Rapids. I can’t believe I am the old guy! For my first eleven years in Classis Grand Rapids South, I was the only African American pastor in my classis. I am disappointed that there are fewer than one thousand African American members in the CRC. I am frustrated by the single-digit total of African American graduates from Calvin Seminary, and the small number of African American church plants since 1970. I am saddened that African American pastoral leaders continue to leave my denomination. These challenges must not be met with resignation or hand-wringing, but with renewed commitment and fortitude to reverse the tide. Culture, polity, and diminishing numbers are partial factors against bringing more African Americans to the CRC. These challenges are worth solving, aren’t they?

I was honored to serve Calvin Theological Seminary by teaching a course in preaching. I was pleased to listen and reflect with other urban pastors about future courses on urban ministry at CTS. Opportunities are always knocking at our doors. We must accept the gifts God presents to us in African American people who can provide perspectives that enrich the whole CRC community. Roosevelt Park Community CRC called and accepted a different kind of leader. They, and I, took a risk. Thanks be to God, we found each other. Opportunities are only made good by taking risks. God takes risks every day. Shall we join the Master and take a risk to grow God’s diverse community?
Human Sameness: Cross-Cultural Summer Internships 2006
by Kristy Manion, CTS student

"By the honest recognition and confession of our human sameness we can participate in the care of God who came, not to the powerful but powerless, not to be different but the same, not to take our pain away but to share it." (Henri Nouwen, Out of Solitude)

If what we mean by “ministry” is to participate in nothing less than the care of God for human beings, then finding commonality with the “unlike-me other” is a high and sometimes harrowing calling. Jesus came “not to be different but the same, not to take our pain away but to share it.”

In other words, incarnational ministry costs something. To find points of shared humanness sometimes costs us in terms of surrendering our preconceptions. At other times it costs us our pride: we thought we were there to minister and find that we are the ones being ministered to. And sometimes it costs us personally, simply because of the broken systems and fallen people with whom we work.

We never stop learning when it comes to identifying points of shared humanity with others, and last summer about forty M.Div. and M.A. students at CTS had a front-row seat in this experiential education. They were placed in cross-cultural internships from Grand Rapids to Moscow, from urban ministry to ministry in the National Parks. Though the content of their particular assignments differed, the opportunity to ask crucial questions did not: Who am I in this context? Who are you? What is ministry, in every arena?

M.Div. student Sam DeJong was placed in a seven-week cross-cultural internship in Russia. She was assigned to work projects and summer camps with two other CTS students and three undergraduate women under the direction of a Christian Reformed World Missions missionary. Her team worked in several locations: in St. Petersburg, just outside Moscow, and in Tambov.

Sam is still making sense of some of the observations she made while in Russia. Reflecting on some difficult physical and interpersonal circumstances during her internship, Sam said that she learned a lot about people. “I’ve taken away so many lessons about leadership and communication,” she said. She was also challenged to confront human sameness and difference while interning as a woman in ministry in a culture that has not historically affirmed women in this role. While working with one of the Russian churches, Sam observed that the female lay leadership very capably ran the church in the male pastor’s absence. But upon the pastor’s return, the women abdicated responsibility and deferred to him as the leader. Sam has thought a lot about her experience of Russian culture, her commonality with these women and with the pastor, and her difference from them as she struggled to find her way in ministry to Russian youth—a leadership role she was uniquely gifted to assume but was not welcomed to accept. In confronting these and other obstacles, Sam recognized two important realities about her call and her identity: In ministry, she said, “My confidence will be constantly attacked by people around me. I have to find my worth in Christ alone.”

Joel Van Soelen, another M.Div. student, also had opportunity to reflect on his interaction with others in a new context. Joel spent five weeks this summer at New City Kids Church in Jersey City, New Jersey, where he taught the Ten Commandments over the course of the summer, Joel wrestled with how to make the principles relevant to kids who had experienced significant violence and struggle in their lives. He decided to call on teenage church employees, who shared the kids’ life context, to help teach. “I would teach content, and they would teach application,” he said. In this way they linked together a chain of familiarity: Joel connected to the teens through the content, and the teens connected to the kids through their shared life experience.

Joel was entrusted with a high degree of leadership as he worked with the college interns, teens, and kids. His ministry mentor, Pastor Trevor Rubingh, gave the camp to him and said, “Make it your own.” In addition to gaining leadership skills, Joel learned firsthand about the pain in people’s lives. “I became more aware of the deep needs of people, and I struggled with how to address those issues,” he said. Because of his experience, Joel is more convinced than ever of the need to think about the lives of the congregation members every time he prepares to preach. “In teaching and preaching you really need to think about the people you are addressing … to step in their shoes.”

Maybe human sameness is found through some of the very things Sam and Joel mentioned as they reflected on their internships: learning how to find our own—and others”—“worth in Christ alone,” and having a willingness “to step in their shoes.”
Discerning Your Calling Workshop held at Dordt College

by Fiona Baker, Administrative Assistant for the Making Connections Initiative

Is there one right career for each of us? Can I make a wrong choice about my vocation? Can my calling to a profession change?

These were the questions posed to participants at the Discerning Your Calling Workshop at Dordt College in Sioux Center, Iowa, in November 2006. Many of us wrestle with these questions at different times in our lives, but the college years are particularly intense when it comes to issues of calling and discernment. Deciding on a major can be even more stressful than normal if these questions have not been addressed. This is one of the reasons Calvin Theological Seminary offers Discerning Your Calling workshops.

Three people from CTS led the workshop: David Rylaarsdam, Associate Professor of Historical Theology; Greg Janke, Director of Admissions; and Fiona Baker, Administrative Assistant for the Making Connections Initiative. The workshop opened with morning prayers led by Greg, and a song of worship led by a Dordt student. Greg introduced David’s talk with a clip from the first movie of the Lord of the Rings trilogy, in which Gandalf talks to Frodo about how we must use the times we have been given. This is essentially what we are talking about in the discernment conversation: What are we to do with the time we have been given on earth? How does God want us to use our gifts? David began his talk about “Calling” by reminding workshop participants that we are first and foremost called to follow Jesus Christ. It is from this relationship that the whole of our life should flow. Therefore, when considering the issue of calling, we must first go back to the fact that we are called to be disciples of Jesus Christ. David also shared his own story of calling, and discussed the calling to ministry versus other professions.

After a coffee break and time to chat with workshop participants, Greg Janke opened with a clip from The Simpsons. The clip showed Springfield’s Rev. Lovejoy conducting a marriage ceremony in which he personifies the stereotypical image of a pastor whose sermon bears little relevance to the people sitting in the pews—let alone the bride and groom! This led to a discussion of our many stereotypical images of ministers. One participant recalled a time when she was a child and spotted her pastor in a restaurant. Her response was one of surprise because her pastor had never before seemed like a “real” person. Greg talked about the reality of what it means to be a minister, reminding participants that there are many other vocational ministries to consider, such as chaplaincy, youth ministry, and campus ministry. Although some can be ordained positions, many are designed for or more suited to non-ordained people. Weaving in examples of his life of ministry, Greg then walked the group through five gifts and desires to think about when considering vocational ministry. He also pointed out that it is important to gain experiences in various ministry settings when considering which ministry to enter. Opportunities such as short-term missions, summer camps, and youth ministry can help with vocational decision-making.

Fiona Baker ended the day with thoughts on the actual spiritual discipline of discernment, including ideas for spending time with God. She shared her story of discernment and the spiritual formation tools she has learned from others. The workshop concluded with a time of guided prayer.

Over lunch the workshop leaders had time to hear the stories of the participants. Some were in their first year of college and sensing a call to ministry, but not sure what that would look like. A few had been out of college for many years, and even had vocational ministry experience, but sensed God calling them to something new. It was a privilege to hear how God is moving in each of their lives. As Dordt College Professor of Theology Tom Wolthuis mentioned during the workshop, discernment is never a one-time deal. Rarely, if ever, does a person receive a one-time “lightning bolt” answer to the questions of discernment. Rather, it is a lifelong journey during which God reveals his desires for us in his own time. In the meantime, we work on being faithful disciples of Christ, and as we discover who we are in Christ, our calling and sense of vocation will become clear. We do hope and pray that our time with the “discerners” at the workshop was a helpful piece of their journey.
Wealth and Poverty in Light of the Gospel: How Can Christians Work Together if We Disagree?
by Kristy Manion, CTS student

When Jesus says, “Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me,” Christians have a sense that he means for us to alleviate suffering and to care for others in tangible ways. What is less clear is how exactly he means for us to do that.

To examine Christian responses to widespread poverty, Calvin Theological Seminary cosponsored with Western Theological Seminary an event on October 2, 2006, at which Dr. Ronald Sider of Palmer Theological Seminary and Father Robert Sirico of the Acton Institute addressed a large audience of students, faculty, and community members.

Sider and Sirico share a common concern for the poor. Neither thinks that a Christian response to poverty is optional. They also agree that a market economy is the best starting place to address issues of poverty around the world. However, their commonalities end there.

Sider supports a vigorous involvement of the state in the promotion of justice within the market economy. “Left to itself, the market-driven economy will simply supply what people can pay for, even if millions of people starve,” he said.

Sirico contends that the state and the market exert different types of influence, and that there is danger in creating a normative joint power structure between the two. “If we … interfere … in human choice and human actions … I am afraid that the political apparatus that we will create in an attempt to do good will end up defeating the very end toward which we all agree.” Sirico believes that a global economy and limited governmental involvement will create economic conditions that produce better possibilities for the poor to rise from poverty.

CTS student Tom Buursma spent the last four and a half years as a missionary in the Philippines. He regularly faced poverty in his work there and attended the presentation with great interest. Buursma wished that both Sider and Sirico would have addressed how New Testament principles fit into their paradigms. “I would have liked to see both sides talk more from a New Testament perspective, particularly about how the life of Christ fits into what they’re promoting,” he said. Overall, however, attendees seemed pleased with both speakers’ attempts to clearly root their approaches to poverty in Christian principles.

Sider and Sirico were aware that those who planned and attended the event were at least as interested in how they disagreed with one another as in what each had to say. As Sider stated, such disagreements must be conducted “in a way that draws non-Christians toward Christ rather than pushing them away.” In large part, their conversation modeled civil, Christian discourse and a way for Christians to disagree, even strongly, in the public square.

Prayer: Does It Make Any Difference?

That was Philip Yancey’s topic when he spoke at Calvin College on October 20, 2006, and is the title of his most recent book. Yancey said, “I’ve been on a journey for a couple of years now trying to understand prayer” and discovered that it all “boils down to two things—understanding who God is and being honest about who I am.” He noted that God encouraged people like Abraham, Jacob, Moses, and Job to struggle with him in prayer and challenge him. Yancey said, “I challenge you to find a single argument against God that isn’t already included in the Bible.” He concluded that “maybe what God wants most of all from us is engagement—not letting go.”

To the question of whether prayer makes any difference, Yancey concluded that it does. “God has designed the planet in a way that prayer triggers our partnership with God. When God can do it himself or use humans, he always chooses to do it through that partnership rather than on his own.” That reality convinced Yancey to stop focusing on himself so much in prayer, and begin focusing on God. His daily morning prayer is now “God, what are you already doing in Chicago and how can I be a part of that?” Yancey’s talk and the guided prayer time that followed it certainly made a difference for the 1,200 people who gathered in the college chapel that night.
**Care and Kindness Cross Cultures and Boundaries**

In a world that sometimes seems cold and uncaring, 225 people gathered to focus on “Care and Kindness” at a two-day conference held at Oakdale Park Christian Reformed Church in Grand Rapids. The event featured Rev. James Kok, Pastor of Care Ministries at the Crystal Cathedral in California, who encouraged attendees to “go into the hard places” to show care and kindness to the people around them. “Every time you walk across the street you are giving them a taste of God,” he declared. He noted that the rise of Christianity and the demise of paganism was due to the care and kindness of Christians in history, and called conferees to continue that pattern.

Breakout sessions showed how to extend that care to a variety of persons—from the elderly, the sick, and the grieving to those in prison, those with special needs, and those struggling with marital difficulties. Attendees also learned how to extend care and kindness across cultures and to those who are homosexual. Workshop leaders included CTS professors Ron Nydam, Mel Hugen, and Bob De Vries, with his wife Susan Zonnebelt-Smeenge; Angela Taylor Perry of the Church of the Servant; Scott Halstead of Pine Rest Christian Mental Health Services; David Schuringa of Crossroad Bible Institute; Beth Gordon of Calvin College; and Barb Newman of the Christian Learning Center (CLC).

**Christmas at CTS from Around the World**

Every year the CTS community celebrates Christmas with a multicultural evening of food, costumes, singing, and fun. Faculty, staff, students and families filled the seminary’s student center on December 15, 2006, and enjoyed the tastes and sounds of the various countries represented while praising God for the love shown at Christmas.

A touching moment in the conference came when special needs students from the CLC offered a worship drama depicting salvation through the blood of Christ, and then invited conferees to come forward for a hug from the actor who played the role of Jesus. The care and kindness of Christ himself was extended through his embrace.

**Fall Conference Inspires Preachers**

“Thinking Deeply/Preaching Winsomely: A Conversation for Scholars and Preachers” was the theme of the 2006 Fall Preaching Conference, featuring Biblical scholar Frederick Dale Bruner and Western Theological Seminary preaching professor Timothy Brown. The conversation was indeed deep and winsome as Bruner led conferees through a study of John 1 and Luke 15, while Brown reflected on his experiences in preaching such key texts. One of the 200 attendees commented that it “revitalized my thinking, reaffirmed my role as preacher, and gave me fresh insights into two vital texts.” Another appreciated the “humility and energy” of the speakers, and still another was inspired by seeing “God’s word come alive.” Videos of the conference sessions are available on the website of the Center for Excellence in Preaching at [http://cep.calvinseminary.edu](http://cep.calvinseminary.edu).
A Center of Learning. At Calvin Theological Seminary, formation for ministry is our focus. We will help equip you with a deep knowledge of God, Scripture, the church, the world, and ourselves. As you integrate this learning with ministry practices, Christ will form you into his likeness so your ministry will do the same for others.