FROM ONE GENERATION TO THE NEXT:

THE CHANGING DEMOGRAPHICS OF THE CHURCH
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*This issue was in process before the events that mark our challenging times were fully known - a global pandemic, economic recession and issues of racial injustice and inequities, but we do hope that the articles still serve us and even point toward some of the values and questions that are connected to these events.*
It was not long ago that I first heard this phrase: “OK Boomer!” I knew that it was not a compliment.

"OK Boomer" is a catchphrase that has gained popularity among young people to dismiss attitudes usually attributed to the baby boomer generation – of which I am one.

Instead of fulfilling the vision of Psalm 145:4 where “one generation commends your works to another; they tell of your mighty acts” we have seen growing generational divides and “OK Boomer!” is a glimpse of such a divide.

Another example of this divide was the viral response to a young man who was on a Florida beach during Spring Break who didn’t seem to care about the danger to himself and others of large gatherings during the COVID-19 pandemic (He later apologized for his words).

We should note that some of those divides and the resulting language are the result of frustration. For example, some younger generations feel the blame or the consequences for what they perceive as the mistakes of prior generations that has resulted in overwhelming debt, environmental problems, and the erosion of morals – to name a few.

On top of these generational divides, we still experience hurt from our failure to understand and appreciate ethnic and cultural differences.

We (the Forum Editorial Committee) hope that the articles within this issue will help us bridge those differences and result in more appreciation and connection within the Body of Christ.

One suggestion that we make is to read these articles as a part of a group that contains people from different generations and cultures.

One of the articles that we are privileged to present is an edited version of Rev. Dr. Mary Hulst’s challenging presentation at Inspire 2019. What would happen if a church council read this with a group of young people at the church and decided to invest in conversation? I think we would be closer to the vision of Psalm 145:4.

The beauty and even shalom that comes to the Church that reflects a diversity of cultures and generations is something to pursue. So, please read. Please reflect and connect with someone else to go deeper!

In His Service With You,

Jul

JUL MEBENBLIK
Calvin Theological Seminary President
MILLENNIALS WANT A CHURCH THAT TALKS ABOUT THESE THREE THINGS

REV. DR. MARY S. HULST

Adapted from an INSPIRE plenary session, August 2019.
You can listen to the full talk at https://soundcloud.com/crcona.
As a university pastor working with many young adults, I’ve heard a consistent message from rising generations in the Church: Millennials are reluctant to attach to local congregations.

Some of it is on them, and they own it. It’s easier to listen to a sermon on the drive into work than to drag yourself out of bed on a Sunday morning. It’s hard to walk into a church where you know no one.

But there are deeper things. Harder things. In this season of my life the Lord has granted me a front row seat to see what He is up to in the lives of the next generations.

They’re telling me they love Jesus, but they are skeptical when it comes to the church. And the most common reasons I hear for that skepticism fall into three categories: money, sex, and power.

Let’s talk about money.

The millennial generation is the first generation to make less than the generations before it. Adjusted for income, they will make 20% less than their parents. Those who graduate from college average $40,000 in student loans. Of all the generations, they are the most likely to live in poverty.

Because of this, they have a different view of material goods. They see their purchasing power as a way to bring good into the world. For example, 84% of millennials give to charity. Many will spend more to purchase a product or a meal that is also investing in a good cause.

When it comes to giving to the Church, millennials want to feel like they are making a difference. Money has to be connected to a story. And the money story that rising generations most often hear in church is not a story connected to the Gospel. Young people don’t know where the church budget goes, because they often haven’t been told where the funds go, or why those areas matter.
In addition, young people tend to be skeptical of preaching that never mentions the insidious sin of greed and how that could be taking us down. They wonder when a baby boomer pulls into church in a new car with a pricey bag over her shoulder, but never volunteers in the nursery, or has people over for dinner, or serves as an elder.

Our children and grandchildren actually listened when we read them the gospels. They paid attention and took it seriously. So when they are coming into their own financially and watching what we do with our money, they are disheartened.

The rising generations also hear about the pastor who gave away a year of his wages to the poor. They have friends who intentionally choose to practice rural medicine for a lower salary, or who move into a tiny house to conserve energy, or who are living on one half of the couple’s income and giving the other half away.

They are exposed to Jesus followers who are actually selling all they have and giving it away. So when a church elder talks about buying a second home on a lake, or the church is going to hire more staff because it can’t get enough volunteers, that doesn’t sit well.

Are the rising generations perfect in their financial stewardship? No. But are their financial realities causing them to ask different questions? Yes, and we need to listen.

Ready for the next challenge? Sex.

In 1968, the average age of first marriage in the US was 23 for men and 21 for women, and it was about the same in Canada. Currently those numbers are much higher, and 59% of North Americans between the ages of 22 and 35 are single.

Our young adults listened to us when we told them that sex was a big deal, that it was to be saved for marriage, that this was what God asked of us. So, they tried, but then they graduated from college or moved to a new city, and there was no place where they could talk about dating and sex as a Christian adult. When it was mentioned in worship or preaching, it was usually intended for younger people.

So, they may go ahead and have sex. And then they tell me it isn’t such a big deal. They are disappointed and feel they’ve been lied to. Our
intentions are good, but our “true love waits” storyline doesn’t hold. When it comes to sex, we need to be talking about the challenge of sex and the single Christian.

The numbers tell us that the rising generations of conservative Christians in North America are moving more and more toward the full acceptance of gay marriage. We can point fingers at cultures and governments and media, but let me tell you what I hear from young people: They don’t know why many in the Church are against it. They have no idea where the traditional, historic position of the Church comes from or why it matters, because we’ve never told them.

But they have grown up forming meaningful, positive relationships with people who identify as LGBT. And they’ve also heard from culture that people who aren’t completely affirming and accepting of all people and the choices that they make are bigots.

Without an explanation of their stance (beyond denominational reports most millennials don’t read), churches can also be seen as bigoted—behind the times at best and unjust at worst. If we haven’t explained the reasons why a church or denomination has taken its position, how on earth would they know? We need to be talking about the why behind our stances, as well as our deep care for LGBT church members.

We also need to be talking about pornography. Does your church talk about porn from the pulpit? Does your congregation have at least one sobriety group for porn addicts? I have learned not to ask young people if they have accessed porn. I ask them, “How has porn affected your life?” This is a problem that acutely pervades all age groups.

The Christian-pop, true love waits, “purity culture” sexual ethic is anemic. It does not help the 28-year-old single man or the 19-year-old lesbian or the 14- and 40-year-old alike, struggling with porn.

Currently those numbers are much higher, and 59% of North Americans between the ages of 22 and 35 are single.

So, what if our sexual ethic was no longer based on a potential relationship with another human, but on our present relationship with God? What if we looked not only to the doctrine of creation to understand sex, but also the doctrine of resurrection, which proves that our bodies matter to God? What if we took the shame away so that when someone said they had an affair, or someone said they were addicted to porn, the Church said, “Ok, we’re in this together.”

What if, instead of asking our LGBT friends to “stay celibate and good luck,” we had the most extensive system of care and companionship for all single people so that the
overwhelming power of loneliness did not draw any of our singles away from church and into shame? Instead, the love of the Church of Jesus Christ would draw them into the Kingdom and into leadership and into service in ways beyond their asking or imagining.

The rising generations need the Church to talk about sex, to pray about sex, and to preach about sex. The world around them is talking about it all the time and we cannot be silent. We can talk about hard things like this.

**We can also talk about power.**

On Sunday mornings in your church, who is up front? If week after week, our younger members see no one up front who looks like them—their age, their race, their marital status—they are going to assume that their voice does not matter. If they see the elders serve communion and every elder is over the age of 50, they are going to assume that their voice does not matter. If every committee is chaired by someone who has been a lifelong member of the church, they are going to assume that their voice does not matter.

And having a voice matters. Millennials have grown up in a culture where they can put their opinions about everything out into the world: from Yelp reviews, to political posts, to Instagram stories. If they have a thought, they can express it.

If the rising generations do not believe you’re going to listen to them, they will leave. If we aren’t ready to share power intentionally and creatively, letting the 20- and 30-year-olds influence the culture of the Church, we won’t have any 20- and 30-year-olds.

Young people are not only watching how we share power, they’re watching how we use our power to speak to issues of justice.

I recently asked a group of young adults, “If there is a racial incident in the news on a Wednesday night and it’s not mentioned on Sunday morning, do you notice?” Each person, no matter their race, said yes. Those who were white were aware of their privilege; the people of color knew the pain of being minorities. When we avoid speaking about race, our children notice.

The vision of the Church in Revelation is of a Church of every tongue, tribe, and nation. How did it get to be that way? Because the One who had all the power emptied Himself for our sakes. How are we emptying ourselves for the sake of anti-racism? How are we imitating our Jesus when it comes to race?

The rising generations notice when the Church says nothing about race. Or immigration. Or sexism. Or abuse.

When the least of these are invisible in our worship, our council rooms, our prayers, or our sermons—the rising generations notice. And they assume,
They are asking us if following Jesus affects how we spend money, how we engage our sexuality, and how we use our power. **They are asking us if following Jesus makes a difference.**

rightly or wrongly, that if these things are not mentioned, then the Church does not care. Here's the core of it: They are asking, “Is the Church talking about issues that are vital to me, and are they doing so in an honest way?”

**The biggest question.**

The issues that are vital to the rising generations are money, sex, and power—and what Jesus has to say about them. They are looking to us to tell them, to show them, to mentor them, to model for them lives that are not afraid of moving toward hard things.

They are not interested in casual, cultural, or polite Christianity. Why? Because we taught them not to be. We sent them to Christian schools and colleges and conventions. The Christian Reformed Church formed the first committee on Race Relations in 1968, talked about homosexuality back in 1973, and has been ordaining women for over 20 years. Millennials have been listening and they have been watching and they are asking us to find our fire again.

While issues often seem more polarized than they used to be, and certainly more than they ought to be, God is still the ruler. He absolutely has the power and intentions to restore this world, and He wants us to get to work, **together.**

The rising generations are asking us to answer the most important questions. They are asking us if following Jesus affects how we spend money, how we engage our sexuality, and how we use our power. **They are asking us if following Jesus makes a difference.**

In the sanctifying nature of the multigenerational Church, young people are calling us to account for how we talk and live around the issues of money, sex, and power because they learned it from us...and we learned it from Jesus.

We can be excited for the future of the Church, not because these young leaders want to join a church, but *because they want to follow Jesus.* They want us to call them to radical generosity, and resurrected sexuality, and surrendered power. They want us to show them what following Jesus really looks like.

What can be more exciting than that?

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**REV. DR. MARY S. HULST**
Calvin University Chaplain
CALLED TO SERVE AND LEAD WELL WITH DIFFERENT ETHNICITIES

DENISE POSIE
My father was a part-time pastor in the Baptist denomination and a bus driver full time for the Detroit Street Railways, and my mother was a nurse's aide at a nursing home. They cared about the wellbeing of the racially diverse populations they served on their jobs and the families in our blue-collar neighborhood. I did not understand why my mother's best friend and her family, one of the few white neighbors at the time, moved to the suburbs in the late 60s. Still, they remained friends by sharing and celebrating milestones in life until her friend died. The neighborhood changed quickly, there were only a few white families, but it was a nurturing place to grow up. They planted seeds of racial diversity way back then - the foundation for service and leadership.

Those seeds produced fruit after I graduated from high school. I held positions in racially diverse workplaces from the administrative offices of the Detroit Public Schools to the laboratories of chemists and physicists from all over the world at the General Motors Research Laboratories, and the halls of information technology at International Business Machines (IBM). Diversity training offered in corporate settings and on-the-job experiences were opportunities to grow in learning to work with people who were not like me. There are weavings of racial diversity throughout my background in significant ways that shaped my life.

In my seminary training at Columbia International University in Columbia, SC, where there is a high population of international students, I experienced God's favor in interacting on a personal level with many of them. They invited me to gatherings for international students. I attribute this to what my parents taught us as children, to respect all God's people.

After seminary, I served in a racially diverse congregation in an urban setting. Since I felt in my heart that I would go anywhere in the world for the sake of Jesus Christ, I never thought about moving back to Michigan. I accepted a call to be a pastor at Immanuel Christian Reformed Church.
in Kalamazoo, Michigan in a different culture than my own and part of a denomination with a vision for God’s diverse and unified family. I felt a burning desire to become part of something beyond what man could orchestrate.

God used my 13-year tenure as preparation to serve in the Reformed Leadership Initiative, which is a Reformed Church and Christian Reformed Church DeVos funded collaboration. As co-director, it was my role to assist in creating congregational leadership learning networks in six different locations in Central California; Central Iowa; Hamilton, Ontario, Canada; New Jersey (Koreans); Central California (Latino/a); and New Jersey (Multiethnic). At that time, I did not realize how valuable the experiences during our visits would influence my thoughts, feelings, and behavior in serving ethnic minority leaders in my current role. Here are some of the lessons I learned directly or indirectly. I believe they will help us serve and lead with different ethnicities in affirming, supporting, and celebrating their identity, calling, and giftedness.

1. Make room for other ethnic groups.
Typically, we do not have a natural inclination to give up control, power, and space. We prefer our comfort zones. Admitting the difficulty of this work provides an excellent place to begin practicing humility and incorporating accountability checkpoints. We must allow minorities to be part of creating ways and holding the majority culture accountable for making room for other ethnic leaders.

I believe if our churches, educational institutions, workplaces, and communities would incorporate accountability checkpoints, others will take us more seriously.

2. Take a posture of mutual humility by admitting the challenge of living into God’s vision of racial diversity.
I like this point in light of Romans 12:10, "Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves." From the beginning of a working relationship with a minority ethnic leader, there must be an acknowledgment that this is hard work, and we will continue learning together. We are going to make mistakes and offend each other. Why not say this from the get-go? An approach such as this allows for honesty and builds trust, which is much needed.

3. Practice spiritual listening.
It helps individuals from the beginning to understand each other on a deeper level by being fully present. Henri Nouwen says, “Listening is much more than allowing another to talk while waiting for a chance to respond. Listening is paying full attention to others and welcoming them into our very beings. The beauty of listening is that, those who are listened to start feeling accepted, start taking their words more seriously and discovering their own true selves. Listening is a form of spiritual hospitality by which you invite strangers to become friends, to get to know their inner selves more fully, and even to dare to be silent with you.” Too often, we get in the way because we want to control the conversation. When we engage in a conversation with someone who practices spiritual listening, it is a warm, accepting feeling.

When others come into a majority environment, they are strangers. They live in two different worlds, maybe three. Spiritual listening makes a person believe they are part of a community that appreciates all people.
4. Acknowledge other learning and leadership styles.

I like when ethnic minority leaders introduce other learning styles. Maybe we need to pause sometimes to ask our minority leaders what learning style would be most helpful. Each one of our six learning networks were unique. We experienced different forms of worship, learning, and leadership. The leaders supported each other and leveraged their strengths, because they took time to get to know each other at the beginning. Open the door for ethnic minorities to create an atmosphere that is conducive to flourishing!

What I experienced was hopeful and lifegiving for these leaders, including ethnic minority leaders, and for us. As co-directors, it was essential for us to keep an open mind and a posture of humility – not a high posture as an expert! We called the entire experience a "grace gift!"

Where am I today? In 2017, I became the director of the Leadership Diversity Initiative, formerly called Leadership Development Women's and Ethnic Ministry. It has the mandate to affirm and support women and ethnic leaders in churches, ministries, and denominational offices. We help churches and ministries create a culture in which men and women thrive in pursuit of God's mission in the world together.

Two things unify Leadership Diversity's work: the denomination values biblical diversity and the variety of gifts given to the body of Christ for God's mission. In the book of Revelation, God's servant John testifies, "After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb" (Revelation 7:9). In Romans 12:5-6, the apostle Paul teaches, "So in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us."

The vision is not homogeneous. No, it is an "eschatological vision" of a great multitude of ethnically diverse people. It is an inclusive vision of men and women.

The more that this vision is embedded in our hearts and etched in our minds, the more likely we are to avail ourselves to the Holy Spirit to make God's will on Earth as it is in Heaven. May we resist the temptation to say subtly hurtful things to put others down and elevate ourselves. May we resist the temptation to keep our circles narrow and comfortable for ourselves, but instead live as God's diverse and unified family. God's reason is far greater.

Jesus expresses in the gospel of John 17:20-21, “My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.” May this also be our prayer!

DENISE POSIE
Director of Leadership Diversity, Christian Reformed Church of North America

Honor one another above yourselves.
Romans 12:10
PEW OR CANOE: THE UNEXPECTED TURN

GARY M. BURGE
In 2007, Chicago Tribune columnist Ross Werland raised a provocative rhetorical question in the title of an editorial: “A pew or a canoe: Not a tough choice.” He cited statistics from the Barna Group, a Christian research firm, indicating that fewer and fewer men are attending their local churches, and he made an argument for skipping church altogether. “My other choice,” Werland wrote: “I can hop in my canoe and paddle up the White River in southern Wisconsin and within minutes find an unspoiled spot that looks like it’s right out of the original Garden, precisely as its creator intended it. For me, the better option is to savor the peace-giving, faith-inducing wonders of nature, the official art form of the deity.”

Werland made me think. Not long after, I was fly fishing on the Eau Claire River in central Wisconsin, and it was, well, inspiring. When I turned 60 (about Werland’s age), I noticed that my perception of what transpires at church had changed and had been evolving since I was about 50. I have a hunch that a few thousand other men and women are where I am.
This is the point where my inner editor cautions: *Don’t just whine; offer some solutions.*

**The Black Hole**

As someone who has attended church since I was born, I’ve clocked quite a few hours in the pew. If we only count Sundays since I was 18, by the time I was 55, averaging 50 Sundays per year, I’d heard at least 1,900 sermons. But I find that the church and its work have increasingly begun to miss the mark for many of us looking to the rivers of Wisconsin or Michigan.

First, the local church rarely knows what to do with us. Ministries abound for children, teens, and college students, and young married groups are a staple of congregational life. If you have children and are between, say, 25 and 35, immediately you are an active part of the kids’ program. Even parents of high school students have a place. Every youth minister knows that a well-networked parent group is an invaluable asset.

But something noticeable happens when the kids leave home and you’re an empty nester. You’re about 50 to 60, active in the peak of your career, and you have an entirely new set of questions (more on that later). But the church doesn’t find you again until you retire or spend some time in the hospital. It’s the 50-something “black hole.” You’re not young, but neither are you elderly, and the natural bridge to the church’s children and youth ministries has disappeared.

Second, I often find myself attending church simply because I always have. Sixty years make for some pretty firm habits. But on occasion I think back to the sermons I can catalog that have repeated the same themes time and again—the evangelical staples of personal piety, evangelism, raising kids, world mission, prayer, and sin. I wonder how many times I’ve heard sermons on the parables of the sower or the prodigal son.

Simply put, I yearn for something other than reruns. I yearn for depth, for ideas that will make me think harder about life and about God. I yearn for Christian speakers and writers who will think ahead of where I am and challenge me to follow. I recognize that these sermons about basic discipleship are important for the church, particularly for younger Christians. But increasingly I find myself wandering outside the fold to look for thoughtful voices.

Third, I am asking new questions now. There once was a day when I had a binary theology. I believed every question had an answer, and most answers were black and white. But today I see more of the complexities, ambiguities, and uncertainties of life. I’ve seen a fair bit of suffering by now—even a couple of church splits—and a good number of unanswered prayers. I’ve seen too many lapsed Christians, including a former student who recently told me he’s abandoning the faith altogether.
I’ve also noticed there are fewer theological hills on which I’m willing to die. This doesn’t mean that I’ve stopped believing. It simply means that I might believe less today, but I believe it more firmly. And rather than debating those who want all the t’s crossed, I simply look at them with amazement. Not long ago I was at a party where an intelligent and passionate evangelical layperson argued that support for the U.S. Constitution’s Second Amendment was a Christian spiritual duty. I remember thinking that I must be at the wrong house. Someone else recently told me that “not all Republicans are Christians, but all Christians ought to be Republican.” I’m not devoted to either party, but I’m less drawn to such formulas.

What I am looking for instead is someone to help me address deeper questions about life and its meaning—standard fare for 50-something adults. Is life simply about the accumulation of prestige, wealth, influence, or knowledge? How do I evaluate a “good life” when I see it?

How would I know if my life had any meaning? I’m no longer satisfied with the usual resources I find at Christian bookstores, especially those popular books promoted like The Prayer of Jabez once was. For the most part, I have found satisfying reflections among such non-Christian fiction writers as Wallace Stegner, Geraldine Brooks, and Barbara Kingsolver. The great voices of the church—Augustine, the medieval mystics, Luther, Barth, Bonhoeffer—have now found a new hearing too. But a long list of contemporary books are now gathering dust.

**Filling the Black Hole**

This is the point where my inner editor cautions: Don’t just whine; offer some solutions. And there it is—the reflexive thought that every problem has a solution, that we can’t simply leave the paradox or dilemma because it might create tension. But I’ve found that adults who are headed toward 60 are willing to live with fewer quick fixes.

It doesn’t take long for the 50-something, “black hole” pilgrim to hear the usual solutions. The answer the church often gives is “leadership.” We’ll put you on a committee, or elect you to the council, or have you coordinate the church’s programs. And if you now have disposable income, you can become some of the church’s most important financial supporters. In other words, this is a time to give, not take; to teach, not be taught; to lead, not follow.

To a degree, this is true. If I have heard 1,900 sermons, I’d well better be able to teach something in church school or have something to say on the church council.

Thirty-plus years of voluntary church attendance does accrue some debt to the church, some obligation to give something back.
And if I find myself with increasing wealth, instead of building a million-dollar home in a suburb, perhaps I should offset the limited ability of 20-somethings to give money to the church. The logic is flawless. But the usual solution fails to address the reason this spiritual black hole of upper middle age exists in the first place. The truth is that 37 years of sermons also included 37 years of giving. The 50-something pilgrim is looking for something more.

First, we need connection. Having children is a lot like having pets: They give you a natural bridge to your neighbors, both next door and in the next pew. Without them—without school sporting events, high school plays, or debate teams to cheer for—it might be difficult to find like-minded adults. I recently volunteered to be a character actor at vacation Bible school just to remind myself how it was to be with little kids. I ended up meeting 30-something parents. It was a good move.

Ideally this connection happens when adults age together within the same congregational cohort. They share experiences with other adults through every stage of life, and if they remain in the same church, they live in a gathering of 50-somethings who have long memories of life experiences together. But these days we see a lot of transience. Adults at age 45 or 50 often change jobs or towns, and those who don’t sometimes change churches. How can they enter such well-established cohorts? One mid-40s friend who moved with her family to a new town five years ago recently told me that entering an intimate cohort as an outsider is almost impossible.

Many churches do not have such age-based cohorts. In that case, what structures are in place to help this age group meet other people who are in the same place in life and asking the same questions? Evenings with young married couples are nice, but older adults tend to slip into a parental role. Many mature adults are lonely but embarrassed to admit it. It takes energy to meet new people—just look how younger people gush at each other when they meet or how they have so many connections (I once mentioned this need at a church and the answer came quickly: Why don’t you head up a committee to organize this? Perfect).

Second, many of us have likely reached the near-apex of our careers. Some may still be competing for professional positions or social leverage, but others have begun to ease off the throttle of life. We are learning descent and deceleration as new Christian virtues. To put it another way, many are looking for significance instead of success.

How, then, can the life of faith contribute to this new life quest? Here is one key: our contribution must in some manner match our capabilities. A 57-year-old executive may not find significance in organizing the coffee hour on Sunday, but she might find it when she mentors a young person going for his first interview, when she offers a business suit to a young woman who has never owned one, or when she travels to Tanzania and organizes microbusiness loans for women. She needs a way to use her tremendous abilities not just in her career, but in her giving.

Third, I hear from my fellow pilgrims a hunger and thirst for complexity—for a satisfying theological diet that targets some of our own life issues. We’ve had enough exhortations about quiet times, enough stories about witnessing on airplanes. Most 50-somethings want to explore life’s meaning, service, suffering, loss, wealth, and hope without the usual clichés.
Last, I find myself increasingly interested in social justice. When I hear others engaging in doctrinal debates—and I’m happy they do—my mind wanders to themes such as universal health care, poverty, the environment, immigration, war, and the obligation of the church to speak truth to power in a way that might flirt with politics. This makes many of my evangelical friends nervous. It sounds like a “liberal agenda,” and evangelicals tend to emphasize personal piety as the mainstay of faith. But for others like me, asking what the church has to say about global topics or how we might leverage the truth of the gospel in response to those who would corrupt or exploit our society is vital.

There is hope for the church to engage the 50-something. These pilgrims don’t have to run to the rivers of Wisconsin or Michigan. While the Eau Claire or the Au Sable are inspiring rivers, they should not become a replacement for the church and its life. But it will require thoughtful pastoral leadership and innovative strategies to keep many maturing Christians off the northern rivers.

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**Calvin Seminary is accepting nominations for the Distinguished Alumni Award**

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 Calvin Seminary.

You are invited to submit nominations, along with a brief statement of rationale, to President Jul Medenblik (sempres@calvinseminary.edu). Nominations are due November 1, 2020.

The award recipients will be chosen from the nomination pool and will be honored at the seminary’s commencement service.
We were in the church van on our way to the Christian Community Development Association (CCDA) conference in Chicago. As we discussed the blessings and challenges of our church’s growing ministry called New Americans, Sepa quoted Mahatma Gandhi: “Whatever you do for me but without me, you do against me.” Gandhi’s wisdom through Sepa is helpful as we seek a common life in Christ across cultural, linguistic, and socio-economic lines.

Our congregation partners with local resettlement agencies to welcome and support individuals and families arriving in the US as refugees. This ministry of mercy and hospitality has grown to include a Refugee Support Team (with sub-teams focused on educational support, housing assistance, transportation assistance, etc.), English as a Second Language classes, a worship service in basic English, a higher-education scholarship fund, and trauma healing Bible studies. We thank God for these opportunities to serve and empower these newest neighbors in the name of Christ.

But what began as an outreach has also become an “inreach.” As relationships deepen, we’re learning first-hand that God has sent New American sisters and brothers to Church of the Servant as bearers of God’s blessing. Scholars Jehu Hanciles and Afe Adogame remind us that every Christian migrant is a potential missionary. We believe God leads immigrants to the US for a purpose and these newest Americans are bringing new life into churches across the US. Are established American congregations open to this Spirit-led renewal?

When American churches insist on maintaining the position of benevolent host, we miss the gifts that emerge from mutual relationships across the barriers separating “us” and “them.” Throughout His ministry, Jesus assumes the roles of guest and host, receiving and offering hospitality (see Luke 24, the road to Emmaus). When those who have not lived through the immigrant experience enter into relationship with those who have, we encounter together the God of Jesus Christ who reveals Himself on the road and at the Table: We learn together the reality of our common displacement from the Garden and our common identity as pilgrims searching for home.

Church of the Servant is still learning to move beyond the language of “us” and “them” to see there is ultimately only “us” in Christ. We should never minimize difference, but neither should we label others in ways that reduce them to one aspect of their story. Maintaining a unity-in-diversity honors our rich variety of experiences, embraces the full beauty of Christ’s body, and creates space so all gifts might build up the Church.

Q&A: How to do ministry among immigrant population?
As your congregation discerns the Lord’s call to begin or continue a journey with New Americans, consider these guideposts:

**BECOME INFORMED** – Explore cultural intelligence (CQ) training and learn about the context from which people have been displaced.

**FIND PARTNERS** – Discover which organizations in your area are serving New Americans and ask how your congregation can become involved.

**DON’T REDUCE PEOPLE** – Appreciate the nuance of each person’s story. People are more than a geopolitical status.

**PRIORITIZE THE RELATIONSHIP** – Focus on building trusting relationships and not just fixing problems. Learn to receive hospitality as much as you give it. Love refugees as you love Jesus Christ who was also a refugee in Egypt (Matthew 2:16-18).

**PRACTICE HUMILITY** – Let the children lead you. They’re better at much of this than adults.

**WHO HAS A VOICE?** – Examine who gets a seat at the decision-making table. Do New Americans have agency in their own flourishing? Remember Gandhi’s quote.

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**Resources**

- *Strangers in the Kingdom: Ministering to Refugees, Migrants, and the Stateless* – Rupen Das and Brent Hamoud
One generation will call to the next, "Our God is good and his hand is strong!" All of the world sings his marvelous acts and our voice will join with theirs in the song.

"One generation will call to the next, ‘Our God is good and his hand is strong!’ All of the world sings his marvelous acts and our voice will join with theirs in the song." This new hymn by Greg Scheer, and the ancient Hebrew Psalm on which it is based, paint the picture of intergenerational shalom in the setting of worship: one generation literally calling to the next, hands outstretched, commending God's mighty and marvelous work. This commending and calling is so needed in our churches today. How can the Church better call and enfold millennials into its life and leadership?

First, we need to look at who these millennials are. Millennials were born roughly between 1981 and 1996, now ages 24 to 39. They grew up with home internet. They witnessed the September 11 tragedy before becoming adults. They entered the job market after the Great Recession. They are older than you think. The two of us are millennial pastors. Per the stereotype, we do have friends and millennial peers looking for work and living with their parents, but we also have friends with professional jobs, a family, and a mortgage. Millennials are the original users of Facebook, and to get some ideas for this piece, we turned to a few CRC pastor Facebook groups for answers.
“Commit to authentically mentoring them. Recognize their gifts and name them, encourage them, make space for them,” comments one user. Mentoring and discipleship was perhaps the strongest theme in online discussions. Another continues, “Disciple gifted young people 1 on 1, teach them to teach others, challenge them to take next steps… celebrate their wins.” With this will come challenges, one mentions: “The problem is that you have to convince Xers and Boomers that these relationships work, and to get millennials past their cynicism in this area.”

Discipleship along with encouraging leadership is a powerful, life-changing combination. A millennial pastor speaks of both receiving and offering this kind of encouragement: “It is because a church took time to encourage me and put me in leadership positions at age 22 that I began to feel a previously unfelt call to ministry.” Nowadays, this pastor’s congregation tries to “target” 20-somethings for leadership by pairing them up with older leaders. For instance, I am a Cadet Cadre co-counselor with a 23-year-old man in the congregation… This becomes one entryway into further church leadership.” Many users online comment that millennials serve faithfully in many different leadership roles, from VBS to the worship committee.

One pastor offers an interesting stepping stone towards more responsibility: “Ask a young adult to serve as an advisor to council, similar to advisors to Synod.” Another pastor notes that her church is inviting young adults to “dinner with council.” Others advocate a direct approach when a young person is ready: nominate them, “voting and all!”

Beyond encouraging millennials in volunteer leadership positions, another point emerged, sharpened by one pastor: “Hire them!” (Her response received the most Facebook likes.) Indeed, millennials called to ordained ministry are eager to serve the church and are entering their prime. If Jesus’ earthly ministry occurred, as we assume, in His early thirties, this is the age of present-day millennials. However, many millennial pastors note difficulty finding their first positions. “I was told 6 times,” a pastor writes, “that they were looking for someone with more experience. I had to advocate for myself in my current charge.”

There may be conflict as generations come together to form one body. One millennial pastor writes of awkwardly being roped into a conversation complaining about “the young people.” In the other direction, a self-described baby boomer pastor voices longing: “The church is in good hands for the future. However, I think those of us who have gone before still have much to teach, which if millennials were open would keep them from making the same mistakes we made.”

How does a church move towards intergenerational shalom? Allow us to add our own suggestion to the good words already shared here. Let’s put away anxiety about changing times and put on faith in a God who does not change, who pours out His Spirit on the old to dream dreams, and on the young to see visions. The reality is this: The Church needs millennials to disciple younger generations. The youngest graduating students at Calvin Seminary are no longer millennials, they are Generation Z. The church must call to millennials so that millennials can pass on that call, so that even the next generations can join in the song, “Our God is good and his hand is strong!” Some of that might happen on Instagram. See you online!

Special thanks to all the ministry leaders who shared their ideas with us on Facebook.
SARAH SCHREIBER CONNECTS WITH ALUMNI THROUGH LISTENING TOUR

In April 2019, professor Sarah Schreiber hosted a conversation with alumni, as part of a listening tour funded through the Center for Excellence in Preaching. During her visit to Houston, Schreiber (second from the right) along with her husband Ryan (second from the left), connected with John Eigege (far left) community chaplain Square Inch Houston, Andy Sytsma, pastor at New Life Christian Reformed Church (third from the left), Greg Brady, Hope CRC (third from right), and Danny Skelton (entering Doctor of Ministry Student), workplace chaplain and commissioned pastor out of Hope CRC (far right). These listening tour events connect Calvin Seminary faculty with alumni and other ministry leaders throughout North America. In 2019 and 2020, Schreiber has hosted listening tours in Houston and in Racine, Wisconsin.

CALVIN SEMINARY FACULTY TEACH IN CAIRO, EGYPT

In January 2020, professors Jeff Weima and Mary VandenBerg visited the Cairo Evangelical Theological Seminary to teach and connect with Calvin Seminary alumni and other partners. Their schedule allowed them to connect with school and other local ministry leaders: Professor Weima gave a lecture entitled, "How To Read a Pauline Letter," while Professor VandenBerg co-hosted an event for local pastors, along with Calvin Seminary alum Anne Zaki.
In March of 2020, Calvin Seminary hosted a conversation with the Morehouse College glee club. In partnership with the Calvin Institute for Christian Worship, Calvin Seminary professor John Witvliet interviewed Dr. David Morrow, director of the Morehouse College Glee Club, Dr. Uzee Brown, Chair of the Division of Creative and Performing Arts at Morehouse College, as well as Calvin Seminary professor and Morehouse Glee Club alum, Dr. Danjuma Gibson. This conversation, titled “Music at Morehouse: Cultural Healing and Prophetic Witness” concluded with gifts and recognition of Dr. Gibson.

Dr. Danjuma Gibson is recognized by members of the Morehouse College Glee Club.
Kurtis Ritsema, a full-time Calvin Seminary student, shows up for class every day. Sometimes with his baby by his side.

Though Ritsema lives in West Michigan, you won’t find him on campus, but completing courses remotely from his home.

A father of four, Ritsema spends his days caring for his youngest child, an 11-month old daughter, and working as a youth pastor at his church in Holland, Michigan. Thanks to the seminary’s distance education program, he is also able to maintain his course load in pursuit of a Master of Divinity (MDiv) degree.

Even while living relatively close to campus, Ritsema has found that completing courses online—with just one weeklong on-campus session per semester—allows him to best balance his role as a seminary student with his commitments as a husband, father, and youth pastor.

“The Master of Divinity program is currently teaching and equipping me for pastoral and preaching ministry,” Ritsema says. “The distance program allows for me to continue my education without having to travel to campus to attend classes.”

The seminary’s hybrid distance education program, launched in 2012, has been filling a gap for busy seminarians, like Ritsema, for a decade.

Setting the table

Around the time the seminary first expanded its offerings through distance education, Educational Technologist Nathan Bierma came on staff, designing online courses and teaching strategies for successful online learning methods. Today, Bierma is also the seminary’s Associate Director of Distance Education.

“Online learning is ideally more participative and interactive for students than traditional classroom learning, as learners engage in discussions and applied tasks in collaboration with the professor and other students,” Bierma explains. “It takes intentional and imaginative pedagogical thinking to make that happen well.”

For Bierma’s colleague, Director of Distance Education Robert Keeley, it’s all about “setting the table” for teaching and learning to fit the needs of a variety of learners.

“It is a thrill to be a part of a program that allows people from all over the world to take advantage of a Calvin Seminary education,” Keeley says.

Where there once was a sense of wariness at the seminary about adopting this particular form of course delivery, Keeley notes, there is now a sense of enthusiasm. In its ten years of existence, the Distance Education program has proven its impact.
One thing Bierma and Keeley hear often from students is: “If it weren’t for distance learning, I wouldn’t be at Calvin Seminary.”

And, with this accessibility to new populations, new connections can form.

**Forming one community, from many**

“A major goal [of distance education] is to learn from the communities and contexts where our students are rooted,” Bierma says. “They bring values, experiences, and wisdom from all different walks of life to their learning, enriching and deepening that learning for everyone.”

Aleah Marsden, a California-based student halfway through the five-year MDiv program, is one such student who brings her own ideas and experience, while learning from the perspective of others in the program who are joining her from across the country and around the world.

“The interactions between students and professors regarding the coursework, especially during our intensive week on campus, showcase the depth and formation gained through bringing together a community of students who already have a wealth of life and ministry experience,” Marsden says. “It makes for a powerful learning and relationship-building experience.”

Marsden, a church staff member and freelance writer for several different Christian publications, says her desire to begin seminary was fueled by a love for her church family and to be better equipped to serve them.

“I can already see how this education is equipping me to better serve others through my work,” she says. “I see the MDiv as the next small, faithful step on this journey; being open to receive whatever God would give.”

**More to come**

Besides the MDiv program, the seminary’s Distance Education offerings have already expanded to include the Master of Theological Studies, Master of Arts, the Certificate in Bible Instruction programs, and Certificate in Ministry Leadership—and there may be additional degrees and certificates to come.

“For the next ten years,” Bierma says, “we are asking, what will it look like for hybrid teaching and learning to become more mainstream for us and for seminaries everywhere? How do we harvest the fruits of all these contexts where our students live and serve?”

“Where is God leading us next?”

For more on Distance Education at Calvin Seminary, visit: calvinseminary.edu/academics/distance-learning-options
I opened my email one Friday morning and read that a student from Kenya finally received his student visa since being admitted to Calvin Seminary over a year and a half ago. In the brief email, he writes “Have received the visa today. Thanks a lot for your prayers. I will be booking my traveling. I will update. I hereby confirm my coming!”

In the next few days, the housing director, the registrar, and others prepared for his arrival. With the help of two current international students who rented a car to pick up the new student at O’Hare International Airport in Chicago, he miraculously arrived at Calvin Seminary just six days after sending that original email to me.

A few months later, I visited a student and his wife, both of whom are from South Korea. The purpose of the visit was to see how they were doing after the recent birth of fraternal twins. Upon entering the apartment, it is clear the couple is understandably exhausted from caring for their newborns. Out of concern for their well-being as they navigate parenthood, I ask them how everyone is adjusting to the growth in their family. They share that aside from lack of sleep, everyone is doing fine, especially since meals are being prepared and delivered to them for the next month. Not only this couple, but for anyone who has a baby or other medical needs, the Korean Student Association has what is called “Love Ministry” in which students sign up to prepare meals for those in need.

These are two examples in which the international community at Calvin Seminary are doing life together and are nurturing a community of hospitality in serving one another. Other ways that international students significantly impact the community more broadly are through events such as the annual Christmas Around the World event where we celebrate unique cultures through food, song, stories, and fellowship and the Chinese New Year celebration organized by the Chinese students.

It is a blessing to be a part of this community where different languages are heard in the hallways, delicious aromas fill the Student Center, and exchange of different cultures is shared among us. When I began my work at Calvin Seminary in 2012, international students made up a third of the total student population. Since then, there has been an increase of international students which now make up more than 40% of the community. The growth of the number of Chinese-speaking students and the online programs have greatly contributed to the increase. In addition, the Visiting Scholar Program, which invites scholars from around the world for a time of focused scholarship and learning, has also grown immensely in the last few years.

The influx of international students has led to a few new initiatives, including weekly conversation groups where students have an opportunity to speak English in a small group setting led by a facilitator and discuss interesting cultural and theological topics. In addition, Calvin Seminary launched the International Student Advisory Board with the purpose of providing leadership opportunities for international students, addressing the various needs of this student group, and promoting fellowship among the community. The presence of international students and scholars at Calvin Seminary greatly enhances the community as a whole as we experience the “globalness” of God’s Kingdom here on earth.
ANNE HARRISON INTEGRATES MINISTRY AND LIBRARY BACKGROUNDS AS NEW THEOLOGICAL LIBRARIAN

NATHAN BIERMA

As a seminary graduate working in a library, Anne Harrison wondered if she’d ever be able to truly integrate her two callings: libraries and ministry.

Earlier this year she found an ideal opportunity when she was appointed as theological librarian at Hekman Library, serving Calvin University and Calvin Theological Seminary.

“To be able to combine theology and librarianship, the two things I’m passionate about, is a rare opportunity,” Harrison says. “It’s a combination that fits together really beautifully.”

After growing up in West Michigan, Harrison attended Northwestern College in Orange City, Iowa, earning a degree in history. A summer internship as an archivist at the Center of the West (a five-museum complex in Cody, Wyoming) deepened her love of libraries and learning. She worked in the library at Western Theological Seminary in Holland, Michigan while earning her Master of Divinity degree.

After seminary, Harrison worked for five years at Herrick District Library in Holland, Michigan specializing in genealogy and local history, while earning a master’s degree in library and information science online from Wayne State University, before coming to Calvin.

Though her degrees and areas of experience came in two distinct fields, Harrison says what connects them is the importance of forming relationships with people and showing the love of Christ. As a seminary student, Harrison was initially interested in chaplaincy, and being present for others in the midst of suffering. At Herrick, Harrison said the library brought a diverse local community together and allowed her to serve people from a variety of backgrounds.

“As I look back, the common theme for me has been people,” she says. “It goes back to my faith, loving my neighbor as Christ calls us. It drives everything I do.”

As unexpected as becoming a theological librarian was for Harrison, the circumstances surrounding her start were even more of a shock. In March, just five days into her new job, Calvin University and Calvin Seminary shifted to online learning in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and did not reopen the rest of the semester. Harrison began working from home and receiving video training sessions from colleagues as the library was suddenly serving students entirely remotely.

“It’s harder when we’re all separated from each other,” Harrison says. “But we have an incredible staff, and everybody’s been reaching out to me to check in and talk things through. It’s been a huge blessing for me.”

In her free time, Harrison enjoys spending time with her horse Savannah. With her lifelong love of horses, she notes, “Horseback riding is really life-giving for me. It’s not easy to go through a global trauma and not have that outlet, but I’m grateful she’s being taken care of.”

We welcome Anne Harrison to Calvin Seminary!
This past January, I had the privilege of being a part of a group of Calvin Seminary students who traveled to Israel for two weeks. I myself am not a seminarian; I am a staff member working in the development office at Calvin Seminary. That meant that I was the only person on the trip who was neither a professor nor a student preparing for ministry. This meant I was the ultimate layperson and fly on the wall for observing not only the Holy Land itself, but also how it affected the hearts and minds of the students in real time.
It’s unusual for me to visit a place that I have read about for 25 years of my life, perhaps because it is a real place, and not something in a fantastic adventure story or a magical creation of an author. Every one of us paints pictures in our heads about the stories we read in the New and Old Testaments. Some of those painted pictures line up with what the land looks and feels like, but many are surprisingly different from reality.

Some call the land “The Fifth Gospel” because the landscape itself is telling you a story. Some things like the Sea of Galilee remain resiliently the same as they were from the first century and even before. Other things require some excavation and archeology to uncover. Both of these types of sites can be categorized as “dead stones” or “stones of history” as they are rooted in the past and tell us what was. We visited countless sites where we were able to step back into a first-century world and open our Bibles to begin reading with a whole new way of understanding.

One of the unique elements of the Calvin Seminary trip to the Holy Land was that we not only spent time with the “dead stones,” but we made a real point of interacting with the “living stones” of the land. The people and the stories that are alive today.

Israel is a complicated country. Many argue it always has been, but that’s exactly why the modern conflicts and tensions are important for us to understand and wrestle with. The past 72 years of conflict between the Arabs and Israelis have left two very traumatized and deeply conflicted groups of people. These people and their stories are worth listening to, and listen we did. Hearing from support groups of parents who have lost children on both Arab and Israeli sides, hearing from Israelis who have spent 70+ years living in the country, and visiting farms owned by Arabs who are completely encircled by Israeli settlements were just a few of the ways we were able to open our ears and minds to the conflict that shapes the land today.

My perspective as a layperson observing those being formed and shaped for their ministry was unique. Witnessing the change in our students as they wrapped their hearts and minds around the “living” and the “dead stones” of the Holy Land was amazing. I could physically see the changes on their faces as they made connections to first-century locations and how it changed the way they look at the Gospel. I could also see how they reacted to conflict, injustice, cultural differences, and discrimination; all things that leaders of the church will absolutely deal with in their ministry!

In this way, the trip is an incredibly holistic experience for the students. They are flexing their ministry minds and muscles as they begin to contemplate the texts of old and the contexts of today in order to better prepare themselves for their own ministry. I am thankful that I was able to be a part of this trip in so many different ways, but most of all I am blessed to be a witness to the next generation of ministry leaders as they were being formed in this place. It is inspiring and uplifting to contemplate how their experiences here will affect the way they bring the Gospel to individuals, congregations, and communities in the future.
Whether you choose Master of Divinity, Master of Arts in Ministry Leadership, or another program, Calvin Seminary will prepare you for a rich career in ministry, cultivating communities of disciples of Jesus Christ.

Students in all our degree programs are eligible for scholarships. Learn more at: calvinseminary.edu/admissions

Master of Divinity

- Explore this comprehensive program that most fully prepares students for ministry. Often required for ordination, students who graduate with this degree are equipped not only for pastoral ministry, but for a variety of ministry callings including chaplaincy, missions, and non-profit leadership.

- Students graduating with a Master of Divinity will take the full offerings of theological, biblical, and pastoral courses.

- The Master of Divinity can be completed in three or four years studying in residence, or in five years through our distance-learning program.

Master of Arts in Ministry Leadership

- Discover a powerful degree program for church ministry. Perfect for the current or future ministry leader, this master’s program offers theologically rich coursework and practical, applied learning in your area of interest.

- Your learning will focus on one of five ministry spheres: Education, Youth, and Family; Missional Leadership; Pastoral Care; Pastoral Leadership; or Worship.

- This program has been recently redesigned for student success and streamlined for student efficiency. The Master of Arts in Ministry Leadership can be completed in two years studying in residence, or in two to three years through our distance-learning or fully-online programs.