Hurting churches. Hurting pastors. There a lot of both out there. That reality is a result of hurting people and a hurting world. We should not be surprised about the amount of hurt and brokenness that exists, but it seems like we are still uncomfortable or even uncertain about how a church community and church leaders are to deal with hurt.

As president of Calvin Theological Seminary, I am privileged to be in a position of being a “pastor” to pastors. I am also privileged to visit many churches in a multitude of contexts in various parts of the world.

I have seen tears, frustration, concern, anxiety and even anger expressed. I have also seen wonderful examples of how God has used hurt to bring about empathy and concern as part of healing and hope. God does not waste a hurt, but that does not mean He does not call us into a deeper walk with Him and with others.

My prayer is for congregations and church leaders to be even more aware of the hurts that pastors and their families can carry.

My prayer is also for church pastors and church leaders to use Scripture, confessions and the wisdom of others to unveil the hurt that exists, so that they may move forward in ways that are redeeming and reflective of the Holy Spirit – our Comforter, Guide and Counselor.

May the articles around the topic of “hurt” be a prism for us to grow as a community of faith!
I walked into church the other day, eager and ready to join the congregation of God’s people in worship. It had been a busy week and a busy morning, and I relished the thought of immersing myself in the music and liturgy of worship, which promised to bring order and meaning to my sometimes-chaotic world. Before I got to the sanctuary, I met someone in the foyer whose world was falling apart around them. She suffered from depression, which was manifesting itself in self-destructive behaviors. As I looked at her, I could see that the upbeat, high-energy worship that beckoned me into the sanctuary was having the opposite effect on her. How could she enter the sanctuary and join the throng when she was surrounded by such darkness? Was there room for her in the sanctuary if not all was well with her spirit? What resources did her faith and her faith community have to help bring order to the chaos of her world?

Unfortunately, sometimes our worship gives the impression that feelings of grief, sadness, doubt, anger, struggle, fear, or confusion have no place in the Christian life. In fact, some Christians have come to assume that these kinds of emotions suggest a deficit of faith. If we really believe in Jesus, so the assumption goes, the joy of being in Christ and the anticipation of our future with Jesus will supersede the cares, concerns, and experiences we face in this life. Happiness, it is believed, is a mark of following Jesus. But is this true? Is it true, for instance, that suffering from depression is incompatible with having a robust faith? Or that experiencing the destabilizing effects of trauma is an indication that one doesn’t love Jesus enough? Should the grief, anger, and frustration associated with dementia be stifled and ignored because in Christ all things are being made new?

Rather strikingly, the Bible doesn’t seem to be as embarrassed or uncomfortable with our emotional responses to suffering and grief as we sometimes are. In fact, the Bible more generally – and the Psalms in particular – indicates that not only will people of faith encounter suffering and hardship in the Christian life, but that anger, doubt, grief, and lament are natural human responses to suffering. Perhaps this is why fourth-century Church Father...
Athanasius commended the book of Psalms – with its portrayal of the movements of the human spirit, its ups and downs, its failures and recoveries – as a book that has much to teach us about ourselves. Or why John Calvin referred to the book of Psalms as “an anatomy of all parts of the soul” for the way it mirrors the breadth of emotions we experience as human beings. For both Athanasius and Calvin, the presence of anger, fear, doubt, and sadness, as well as thanksgiving, happiness, and praise expressed in the Psalms validates the experience of all of these emotions for Christians, and fosters honest talk, both to God and within the Christian community, about our struggles in life. Rather than alienating those who are experiencing a season of hardship and trouble, then, the Psalms model that voicing the good, the bad, and the ugly of our earthly life all properly belong in the context and community of faith.

Without a doubt, watching and hearing about the suffering of others is hard. Our natural inclination is to want to make things better, to take away the grief and quickly restore happiness. But what the lament Psalms teach us is that the road to healing is seldom simple and straightforward. While it is true that most lament Psalms eventually end in praise, the path to getting there is rarely linear and often takes a significant amount of time, meandering back and forth between complaint and lament and trust, sometimes back to complaint and lament again.

And while most Psalms end in praise, not all do. Psalm 88, for instance, closes with the painful testimony, “darkness is my closest friend” (Ps. 88:18b), bearing witness to the fact that for some, darkness and confusion will not fully or finally be lifted in this lifetime. Even so, what is clear from the Psalm is that the experience of such darkness is not a negation of faith. The psalmist hasn’t abandoned God, a fact which is evident in his opening invocation: “Lord, you are the God who saves me; day and night I cry out to you” (Ps. 88:1). For those experiencing this kind of darkness, faith finds expression not in denying the power or reality of the darkness, but in the willingness to cry out to God, to be persistent in lament, to voice our pain, sorrow, and disappointment to a listening God. For, just as the psalmist has not abandoned God, God has not abandoned the psalmist. Reading this Psalm in the context of the whole canon of scripture, we know that God in Jesus has entered that darkness Himself, taking on the pain and sorrow of those who suffer. And rather than requiring the one who suffers to change their inward disposition and put on a happy face before approaching God, God joins the sufferer in their grief and weeps with them. Indeed, some who experience such darkness testify to finding comfort in the feeling of being held in the arms of one who Himself entered that darkness, sacrificing His life that the darkness would ultimately be overcome.

As Christians, we know how the story of this world ends, that God will indeed bring about a new creation where there will be no more tears and no more dying. But in the here and now, we still live in a broken world, a world that is full of heartache and grief and sorrow. That Christians experience these things as well suggests not a lack of faith, but an honesty about just how broken we are. In this sense, our pain and our sorrow are a testimony to how much we need Jesus, and a call to the whole community of faith to be vigilant in prayer: Come quickly Lord Jesus. Bring healing to our broken world and our broken selves. And as you promised, make all things new!

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That Jesus did this, that He entered into the darkness Himself, making our grief and sorrow His own, gives us a clue as to how we can minister to those who suffer in the community of faith. The community has a role to play, not only in sharing in each other’s joy and thanksgiving, but also in their lament. When Job had lost everything, his wealth, his children, and his health, his friends joined him on the ash heap, and they sat and wept with him for seven days and seven nights. In that moment, they wisely said nothing. Instead, they entered his pain, bearing the burden of his hardship with him.

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Occasionally, I will suggest to my students that Scripture puts forth two provocative questions that each of us are forced to struggle with at various points in our lives. The first is a question put to God by Satan in the book of Job: does Job fear God for nothing? If we recall the story, the adversary goes on to express how God has blessed Job and placed a degree of protection around him. For Satan, the challenge is simple: remove the hand of God, and Job's relationship with God will take on a more antagonistic tone (to put it mildly). In many ways, the challenge put forth by Satan represents an unresolved tension that is interwoven in the fabric of many strands of Western Christianity—no matter how it may be consciously or verbally denied. Here in the West, we tend to believe that Christian faith should yield a certain level of safety, comfort, success, and livelihood in this lifetime. The inverse (and more latent version) of this unspoken proposition is that we believe relative success (as measured by Western standards) equates to evidence of God's affirmation of us. Even if we hold to theologies, creeds, and confessions that rebuff or explicitly deny Satan's explicit (or implicit) challenge, our lived theology tends to betray our deliberative theology. Middle-class status, privilege, riches, and wealth—along with the state of temporal happiness it may bring—has in some instances become intrinsic to Western Christian identity, or in other instances is the presumed telos of Christian faith in America. Perhaps this is most vividly evidenced in the United States so often being referred to as a Christian nation—a title inextricably connected to historical narratives of manifest destiny and Western expansionism.

For the have-nots in the Western world, the prosperity gospel provides the theological currency to justify the pursuit of temporal happiness. For the haves, the entitlement gospel (i.e. the alternative of the prosperity gospel) provides the theological currency to justify the attainment of the American dream—an accomplishment that may have nothing to do with the favor of God and everything to do with happenstance, power, and privilege. So...to put it bluntly (yet therapeutically), instead of altruistically asking ourselves if we fear God for nothing (and risk the possibility of self-deceit), maybe we should instead ask of ourselves, 

“what do we actually fear God for?”

Said differently, is the return on our investment in the fear of God an (unconscious) expectation of a degree of temporal happiness, comfort, and the American dream?

The second provocative question I am referring to is what was asked of Jesus by the lawyer in the parable of the good Samaritan: who is my neighbor? In this passage, Jesus describes how a priest and Levite passed on the other side of a road in order to avoid a dejected man who was beaten and stripped of his humanity. This parable has been used by many in a plethora of sermons and teachings, as well as elaborated upon in numerous commentaries. A common interpretation is that the priorities of the priest and Levite were misaligned and that they overlooked their true call to service. Such interpretations are...
not without merit. But here I offer up a different interpretation: the priest and the Levite did not want to get too close to any person that disrupted their sense of safety and security, or the illusion that their faith would enable them to transcend the tragedies of human experience. Similar to the priest and Levite, we too do not like to surround ourselves with individuals or groups that remind us of human frailty.

Commonly, when we talk about Christian hospitality, it is limited to people we invite to join us in our faith gatherings. But such invitations tend to be limited, have cultural or social boundaries that are time-limited, and allow us to foster relationships where we remain in power. But the concept of neighbor is different. It implies a deeper level of intimacy. It implies a community where people are more vulnerable to each other. It implies a community where the boundaries of being influenced by the other are lower, and where the community inhabitants are co-creators of the spaces in which we develop as human beings (for better or worse), and where we are spiritually, culturally, and socially formed (for better or worse). Simply put, we generally don’t like neighbors that remind us that life is fragile, and that we are vulnerable. We don’t like to have neighbors that remind us that faith and hard work are not the guarantors of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

While churches and denominations are places where like-minded individuals can come and worship together, churches and denominations are also cultural enclaves where people sin in the same way and come together as neighbors and preserve certain illusions of safety, orderliness, security, innocence, and self-righteousness.

The answers to both of these questions—do we fear God for nothing and who is my neighbor—present significant challenges for those who have been traumatized, are suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and are on the long and difficult road to trauma recovery. Individuals who have been traumatized (such as military veterans, survivors of rape, or refugees fleeing terror and violence) will generally say that there are two types of people in the world: those who have been traumatized, and those who have not been traumatized. In the Church, traumatized individuals typically discover that they have a narrative that is antithetical to the non-traumatized narratives of Christian triumphalism (i.e. the stories with good endings that we like to hear on Sunday morning). Whereas the traumatized Army veteran is living in a world where she has first-hand experience of people being shot or even blown up, her narrative runs counter to uninterrogated narratives and platitudes in a faith community that argue God protects those that God loves.

To make matters worse, I have often encountered people in the Church who ask questions that reflect impatience and ignorance: at what point do we tell traumatized victims that God loves them? Questions or religious platitudes like this assume that traumatized people don’t already know that God loves them, and that mental awareness of faith tenants—alone—will heal trauma. Often, victims of trauma will hear questions like “do you want to be a victim forever?” or “do you want to be a conqueror?” However, if the community of faith actually knew what it was like to suffer from PTSD, they would know that victims of trauma were doing their best to recover. Religious platitudes and loaded questions aimed in the direction of trauma victims suggests that in many ways, the Church does indeed fear God for something—and that something (albeit an illusion) is the expectation of safety and orderliness.

Moreover, these actions taken by an uninformed faith community imply that for those who have been traumatized (like victims of sexual assault in the Church) can no longer be neighbors, but simply visitors entertained by cursory expressions of hospitality. The reality and lived experiences of the traumatized represents a frightening narrative that destabilizes the drama of Christian triumphalism. And the hallucinogenic power that triumphalism has over a church can make it an unsafe place for those suffering from trauma.

I am often asked about what churches can do to help victims of trauma and PTSD. With this question, the focus is often on the traumatized person or group. However, I suggest that we first focus on ourselves—individually and collectively—and unearth the many ways that Christian triumphalism has undermined our understanding of Christian faith, and how this in turn has weakened our understanding of what it is to be a neighbor. Christian faith is not meant to provide us with a competitive advantage toward attaining the American dream. Evidence of faith is not superficial happiness. True faith should bring us closer to God and set the stage for a robust love of our neighbor. Love of God and love of neighbor are inseparable. Dismantling narratives of Christian triumphalism can help the Church become a community for trauma recovery.
Dementia. Few diagnoses carry the level of fear and dread that this little word does, both for the one diagnosed and for that person’s loved ones. Although Alzheimer’s is perhaps the most well-known form, dementia covers a wide range of conditions characterized by brain changes. These conditions include a loss of cognitive ability that eventually impairs one’s ability to function.

The diagnosis of dementia brings with it not only fear and dread, but a steady stream of mixed emotions. Initially, the person diagnosed and the loved ones may be in denial, refusing to recognize the tell-tale signs that something is seriously amiss. Instead, they may make excuses for the person’s behavior – she’s always been a little forgetful; he’s always been a bit grumpy; he’s just getting old.

Eventually, however, denial is no longer possible. Maybe it’s a phone call from the police that Dad is at the grocery store but does not know how to get home. Maybe Mom walks out of her apartment with very little clothing on because she is looking for her closet. Maybe a parent who was quiet and unassuming has become violent, hitting and kicking those around her for no apparent reason. Incidents like these become wake-up calls, especially for loved ones.

As incidents pile up, loved ones begin to move from denial to a sort of in-between state. They are not fully accepting of what is happening to the person they love, but they can no longer deny it. This move toward acceptance becomes even more difficult when the person they love remains in denial about the reality of their condition. The loved ones experience loss, but that loss is ambiguous. They cannot precisely lay a finger on the loss nor describe it. Their loved one is still there, right in front of them, and yet in a way she is not there too.

With time, the loved ones will likely come to recognize a new normal. Their loved one has changed in profound ways, but they still see glimpses of the person they knew before dementia. As they begin to define the loss, they come to terms with the loss and adapt to the current circumstances of their loved one’s life. The problem is that this “new normal” is temporary. In many cases, just as family members are getting used to dealing with their loved one under new circumstances, the conditions change and the cycle of denial, ambiguity, and accepting the new normal begins again.
One constant companion throughout this process is grief. As with losses, grief is ambiguous. Grief itself can include feelings of anger, sadness, anxiety, and regret as well as guilt over those feelings and questions about how to grieve the loss of a person who is not physically gone. The cyclical nature of the losses in dementia is soul crushing. It can feel like one has entered a barren place or wilderness with no oasis in sight.

So how does one survive in the wilderness of dementia? Scripture and the Christian tradition offer some insights. One interesting depiction of wilderness life is given to us in the story of God’s deliverance of Israel from Egypt. The first thing to notice in this story is that Israel is not passive in their relationship with God. Israel complains… loudly. They complain about the loss of the supposed comforts of Egypt. They complain about the lack of food and water. This seems entirely understandable. In this sea of humanity heading into Sinai, I can imagine parents with small children as well as hungry teenagers. I imagine pregnant women, some on the verge of giving birth or having just given birth. I imagine elderly women and men bent over with age. This is a group much like the folks in your local church, people of various ages and stations in life. After the excitement and adrenaline of the exodus is over, they begin to realize that they are heading out into a place of uncertainty where their only hope is a promise.

For the ancient Israelites, the wilderness was a place of fear and death. It was characterized by deficiency and lack. One would not expect to survive for long, let alone flourish, in this place. In the wilderness the Israelites’ faith in God’s promise will be tried. But in and through those trials there is potential for growth.

Wilderness spirituality is a spirituality that turns one’s focus away from what is known and expected away from what can be controlled. The wilderness opens God’s people to experiences of radical dependence and vulnerability. The desert monks knew that when we are stripped of everything, of all the distractions of life, we gain an opportunity to become more keenly aware of God’s presence, a presence that at times one may want to escape and at other times one will earnestly seek (Ps. 139).

The wilderness of dementia is also a place of fear and deficiency. It leaves its inhabitants raw and vulnerable. It elicits cries for what we have lost; cries for the relationship, the person, and even the quotidian (or ordinariness) of daily life. The wilderness of dementia pushes us to experience our relationship with our loved one in new ways. We are forced to let go of our control of the relationship and experience the relationship as it evolves on a nearly daily basis.

Dementia will also drive us to experience our relationship with God in new ways. In the desert one begins to understand what it means to lament. We do not just speak the words of the psalmist. In the core of our being we feel the cry, “how long O Lord!” These inspired words give poetic expression to the multiplicity of confusing and disconcerting emotions. How long must my loved one suffer? How long must I endure this tortuous journey? How long before you do something about this? In his book Rejoicing in Lament, Todd Billings writes that at the heart of lament “is hope in a God who is both good and almighty—the Lord who is faithful to his promises” (61). Indeed through the protest and complaint of lament, one simultaneously confesses that her only and ultimate hope is in God. The cry of lament is a cry of faith.

Faith as well as solace can also be found in the surprises of the wilderness. In her book Dakota: a Spiritual Geography, Kathleen Norris compares the wilderness experience of the monastics to life in the Dakotas. She writes that the deprivations of the wilderness life tend to “turn small gifts into treasures” (18).

For those living in the wilderness of dementia, these treasures are often surprising. Maybe your loved one begins to sing silly songs that are completely out of character for her. Maybe after many visits with little evidence of recognition, one day your loved one looks up and says your name. Another time you see a smile that looks just exactly like the smile your loved one always had, providing a vision of the past. Just as the Psalms of lament most often mix praise with grieving, so also the lament for ongoing loss can be mixed with rejoicing and gratitude for these small treasures.

Perhaps one of the biggest surprises of Israel’s wilderness journey was that in the place of death and privation, they were accompanied by the presence of the Source of Life – YHWH. What could be more surprising than that in this dry and barren land, they experience God. This is a hard truth. Consider the cross. It seems that it is in suffering that God makes himself most known. Paul writes to the Romans that we rejoice in our suffering because “suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us” (Rom. 5:3-5). This character-forming process is not a self-help project, however. It is always done in the company and power of the Holy Spirit. The wilderness of dementia is a place of lament and surprises. It is a place to practice perseverance and build Christ-like character through the power of the Spirit. Most importantly, the dry and barren desert of dementia is a place to walk the difficult road of, in the words of St. Francis, dying to ourselves while being born to eternal life, our ultimate hope.
Those words were spoken by Wilma, a member of the church where I was serving as interim pastor. Her husband had recently passed away from pancreatic cancer and on one of my visits to this new widow she stated those memorable words: “God must be disappointed with me.” At first I was puzzled by Wilma’s comment, since she was a fine Christian woman who always exhibited the virtues of a Spirit-filled life. The situation became clearer when she went on to say: “I know that Bill is in a better place now. I know that I should be happy that his suffering is over. But I just miss him so, so much.” Not only was Wilma grieving the death of her husband which was traumatic enough, even worse, she was feeling guilty about grieving the death of her husband.

This situation raises an important pastoral question: Are Christians allowed to grieve the death of a loved one? Or are such expressions of grief evidence of a weak faith that somehow disappoints God?

One key text relevant for this question is Paul’s exhortation to the Thessalonian Church: “Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope” (1 Thess. 4:13). This verse has been wrongly understood in a way that prohibits grief in the context of death—that the apostle is exhorting the believers in Thessalonica not to be like their pagan neighbors who mourn the death of their dead friend Lazarus. And when the crowd saw the tears of Jesus for his deceased friend, they did not respond by saying, “See what little faith he has!” or “God must be disappointed in him!” They instead rightly interpreted the grief of Jesus as a powerful expression of his love for Lazarus. As John 11:35-36 states, “Jesus wept. So the Jews said, ‘See how he loved him!’”

There is no justification anywhere in Scripture for Christians to gloss over the pain of death and glibly utter pious phrases about the deceased “being in a better place.” Tears and other expressions of grief by believers in these situations are not evidence of a weak faith but only of a great love. The difference, then, is not between the way that Christ-followers versus non-Christians respond to the death of a loved one but how many tears are shed. The difference is that Christ-followers grieve with hope—a confident expectation that our deceased loved one is not only now with the Lord which is “gain” (Phil. 1:21) and “far better” (Phil. 1:23) but also will be resurrected and reunited with us on the great and glorious day of Christ’s return (1 Thess. 4:14-18).
Jenna and Mike were married for eight years – eight long years as Jenna described them to her pastor. She couldn’t do it anymore, she told Pastor Logan. She loved Mike, but his constant demeaning and belittling of her had made her anxious, depressed, and overwhelmed with life. As she sat across from Pastor Logan, he could see that she was looking for his blessing, for him to say that it was okay to get a divorce. But Pastor Logan could not bring himself to say that divorce did not grieve the heart of God. He told her that he could see that she was hurting, but he could not condone divorce. Jenna left in tears, deflated by his words, and Pastor Logan was left to decide whether he did the right thing.

While this is a fictional situation, the story rings all too familiar in many churches. As ministers of the Word of God, pastors have ethical demands upon them to steward the Word of God faithfully. As ministers of the Word, they have a profound privilege to speak Christ into the lives of others. It is a privilege we cannot take lightly. With God’s help and the help of trained professionals, we can live fully into our roles and contribute to the flourishing of our church communities.

As pastors, we have a profound privilege to speak Christ into the lives of others. It is a privilege we cannot take lightly. As soon as a mental health issue that requires counseling is needed beyond three meetings, or wise pastoral leaders advise referring to a mental health professional either when pastoral counseling is needed beyond three meetings, or as soon as a mental health issue that requires counseling is needed. It is wise to refer whenever we suspect that someone might be experiencing mental illness, abuse, or an addiction. Once you develop a referral list, a professional that you trust can probably provide you with some key indicators for when it is time to refer. As pastors, if we have gotten the help they need and how they are doing. It is also helpful to know which mental health assistance programs are available in your area. Many congregations participate in programs that offer a limited number of sessions at no cost to people in their congregation.

Referring to a counselor does not mean that Jesus is not sufficient to meet someone’s needs or that prayer doesn’t work to change hearts and minds and lives. It simply means that we, as pastors, cannot meet all their needs. There are a myriad of ways that God meets our needs and mental health care is one of them. But just as I, a pastor, would not attempt to diagnose and treat someone’s cancer, I would not feign to imagine that I can effectively diagnose and treat an addiction.

Getting back to Jenna and Mike. How should Pastor Logan have handled the situation? Even as Pastor Logan was having trouble identifying the situation as abusive, it was clear to him that Jenna was significantly struggling. And Jenna did not need a moral prescription for her situation. I remember hearing from a professor in seminary that divorce is the murder of a marriage. To an extent, I would agree. The end of a marriage is murder. But as I tell the people I counsel, sometimes the marriage has already been stabbed to death by one partner, and filing for divorce is simply the act of pulling the knife out of the wound so that it can heal.

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Nobody warned me that ministry could be lonely. If they had, I probably wouldn’t have believed them anyway. 40 years later, I believe that loneliness is part and parcel of the experience of being ordained into ministry. It’s not advertised that way: seminaries and churches don’t encourage folks to discern a call into ministry because it’s a great opportunity to experience loneliness! Hardly. Often, when pastors are asked about their call into ministry, they speak of their love of people, and their desire to make a difference in people’s lives. My former colleague, Norm Thomasma, frequently noted that pastoral ministry is a place of relational congestion, but elusive intimacy.

Loneliness is not unique to ministry. All kinds of people are lonely. There are people who have limited family and small social circles. There are many who have moved into new communities and experience the reality of being disconnected outsiders. It’s not as though pastors are the only ones who experience loneliness. Loneliness is an equal opportunity sadness that finds its way into countless hearts and lives. Those in ministry must respect the truth of that.

But there is a loneliness in ministry which is utterly unique. Beyond factors such as moving into different communities and starting from scratch, being geographically distant from family and friends, and even being separated by long distances from the next church of one’s denomination, there is an isolation produced by ordination which is real. It is lifelong.

Ordination means that a person has been set apart. There is something “other” about those who are ordained into ministry. Oh, we pastors are still human. We are still flawed and frail. We are still part of the Church. We are members. But we are and never will be members in the same way that everyone else is a member. Ordination marks us with a specialness, and that specialness is both wonderfully uplifting and a weight to carry. For example, we are called to live in communities as if we are permanent residents. But being set apart in ordination, includes the reality of impermanence. Our belonging to a community will always be a peculiar kind of belonging. Right or wrong, it is what it is.

How do pastors navigate the dynamics of friendship within a church community? “Beware of those who meet you with gifts at the train,” was the warning we received years ago. Folks sometimes want to be friends with you because of your position, not because of who you are as a person. The role pastors fill includes the need to be mindful of boundaries, of conflicts of interest, and of the challenges that arise when parishioners or community members need you to be their pastor, not their social friend.

Loneliness is simply part of the reality of being ordained into ministry. Living with the wonder of ordination, as well as the challenge, requires humility, patience, fortitude and humor. In other words, dealing with our own peculiar situation as pastors requires precisely the kinds of qualities which are needed to navigate pastoral ministry in general. Humility, patience, fortitude and humor go a long way in ministering to loneliness. So do good peers. They’re all necessary, and they’re all good gifts from God.

It’s a loneliness that impacts social relationships. It’s a loneliness that is compounded by a schedule which runs counter to the schedule of everyone else.

CECIL VAN NIEJENHUIS
Pastor/Congregational Consultant for Pastor-Church Relations Office (CRCNA)
Shawn sat down with Calvin Seminary to answer some questions about himself, his ministry, and his vision for this new role.

**DESCRIBE YOUR CALL TO MINISTRY. HOW OLD WERE YOU? WAS IT A SPECIFIC MOMENT OR MORE OF A DISCOVERY PROCESS?**

The Lord impressed a call to vocational ministry on my heart at a very young age. Throughout my teen years especially, my pastor gave me a lot of latitude to test my gifts in ministry. One opportunity in particular seemed to shape me, and my call. For a number of years, I read the pastor's biblical text in worship each week just before he preached. That not only allowed me to develop a love for reading the scriptures publicly, it also connected me to the pastor's sermon in a meaningful way at an impressionable time in my life.

I struggled, however, with how to respond to the call that I sensed. I had a lot of evangelical influences in my life and, already as a teen, I knew that the mainstream denomination my family was part of was not my theological home. As part of my geography degree, I studied international development in university and, soon after marriage, explored missions work, but in the end, I still couldn’t see the way forward.

**WHAT WAS SEMINARY LIKE FOR YOU? HOW DID YOU VIEW SEMINARY DURING YOUR TIME AS A STUDENT? HOW DO YOU VIEW THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION NOW?**

My years at Calvin Seminary were a time of genuine spiritual growth. We committed ourselves to a local congregation that loved us, supported us, and gave me opportunities to further explore and test my gifts. Without any source of significant income for four years, we also learned to trust in God’s providence and care in a way we had never experienced before. We learned humility through the use of food banks and community health clinics, and we discovered the incredible generosity of God’s people who silently loved us with gifts that no one else ever knew about.

Theologically, too, I grew in leaps and bounds. Because the denomination I grew up in was so theologically eclectic, my understanding of the scriptures was not well formed. Although I knew lots of biblical stories and teaching, I had no overall framework in which to place them. Calvin Seminary gave me the ability to see the biblical narrative as a story of God’s covenant dealings with His people. Through the lens of creation, fall, and redemption, I was able to see for the first time that Christ was at the center of the entire story. Those new discoveries excited me and laid a foundation for ministry that has served me well.

**WHAT HAS YOUR LIFE IN MINISTRY LOOKED LIKE? WHERE HAVE YOU SERVED? WHAT IS YOUR FAVORITE PART?**

My year-long student internship was in a rural farming community. Our first congregation after ordination was in a small town. Since then, we’ve served a congregation in a suburban, professional community, and a congregation in a small city in one of southern Ontario’s prime recreational areas. Although all the congregations have been in Ontario, they’ve each been in a very different stage of their life cycle.

I’ve loved serving the local church in ministry. Without a doubt, preaching has been (and remains) my first love. Especially in the last number of years, the freedom I’ve been given has allowed me to stretch and grow in my ability to communicate the Gospel.

While preaching has allowed me to serve the congregation at the “macro” level, I’ve always been grateful to serve God’s people at the “micro” level of pastoral care as well. Learning what resides in the hearts of those I serve has helped shape my preaching to address the hopes and challenges of where people really live.

In Canada, where the immigration experience is still only one or two generations removed, a significant part of my ministry has also been challenging and leading God’s people to engage with their community. Few things have brought more joy in ministry than watching congregations grow in their desire to love and serve the neighbors God has given them.

**TALK ABOUT YOUR VISION FOR YOUR NEW ROLE WITH CALVIN SEMINARY AS THE CANADIAN CHURCH RELATIONS LIAISON. WHAT CAME TO YOU? WHAT ARE YOUR HOPES FOR THIS NEW OPPORTUNITY?**

In 25 years of serving the local church, I’ve watched Calvin Seminary grow and change in a number of exciting ways. Heart formation is now considered as critical as head formation. The curriculum has become increasingly shaped by God’s missional calling upon the Church. Context has become an important consideration in how leaders are encouraged to share the Gospel. These and other changes have placed Calvin Seminary in an excellent position to continue to serve the Church well!

I’m looking forward to taking the rich resources at the seminary’s disposal and drawing alongside local congregations and ministry leaders to say, “How can we serve you? How can we partner with you to help you further flourish in your ministry?” Equally exciting for me will be meeting emerging leaders who are sensing a call to vocational ministry but are wondering about what that might look like for them. Lastly, the role is also going to give me the opportunity to listen to leaders about the issues they face and how the seminary might continue to grow and change to respond to the challenges of ministry in the 21st century. I’m thrilled to be a small part of what God has in store for Calvin Seminary and the CRC in Canada!
In mid-July, Calvin Seminary introduced a newly designed website at calvinseminary.edu. This project, which took about a year to complete, focused mainly on improving the user experience. The hope is that visitors to the site will find that the menus are easy to navigate, allowing prospective students and others interested in theological education to more quickly find the information they are looking for.

Another advantage of the new site is that a variety of content created by Calvin Seminary can more easily be shared. Visitors will be able to find resources like videos of a lecture series or a podcast featuring your favorite professor directly on the site, and sharing these items through email or Facebook will be as easy as copying and pasting a link. You will even be able to find a digital version of The Forum, with individual webpages for each article.

Check out the new site for yourself! Wondering where to start? We recommend the three areas below, redesigned with our churches and other stakeholders in mind:

The Table: Part of the redesign includes a section of the website where original Calvin Seminary content can be shared. The Table is a place where we invite ideas, conversation, and dialogue. This section is currently being filled with content Calvin Seminary was already producing: items such as the Resound Podcast, the Medenblog Newsletter, and even The Forum. Stay tuned for original projects coming soon.

[www.calvinseminary.edu/the-table]

Degree Focused Pages: Compared to the prior website, the new version outlines each of our available programs in depth. Want more information on the Master of Divinity program curriculum? Curious to see if the Master of Arts is available fully online? Heard about the new Certificate in Bible Instruction? Each program page provides the information you need to begin exploring and discerning if it is a right fit with your call to ministry.

[Go to main site page to see list of all program options.]

The Church Resource Page: Calvin Seminary supports and equips churches and their members in a variety of ways, and the Church Resource page captures this extensive and ever-growing list. You can find information on everything from courses for visiting students - perfect for a congregant interested in growing in their biblical and theological knowledge - to information on requesting a current student for pulpit supply.

[www.calvinseminary.edu/church-resources]
Calvin Seminary has announced the launch of a new Doctor of Ministry (DMin) program, with an expected launch date of May 2020. This doctoral degree program will be designed for the current pastor or ministry leader interested in asking big questions and going deeper with a diverse cohort of peers.

As a place that equips leaders for the Church, Calvin Seminary’s DMin program will find a natural fit in the curriculum. That being said, the DMin will be unique in a variety of ways: As the first practical doctoral degree, the DMin is intended for the ministry practitioner, as opposed to the more academically focused PhD program. Danjuma Gibson, professor of pastoral care and co-director of the Doctor of Ministry program, sees the uniqueness as a strength to the program. “The students will all be daily practitioners who are drawn to the work of the seminary as a whole, but predicts it will be attractive to prospective students: “There are many strengths to our PhD program and we are eager for prospective students to explore the details. Perhaps the most salient feature for potential applicants, however, is that our program includes a full tuition scholarship and a generous living stipend for four years.”

The addition of the New Testament concentration enhances an already robust PhD program with several distinctive strengths including scholarships and stipend funds, a long list of academic resources, and a rich learning community shaped by confessional Reformed scholarship. Applications for this program are now being accepted. For more information and to apply, visit www.calvinseminary.edu/phd.

This fall, Calvin Theological Seminary announced the expansion of its PhD program into New Testament studies, beginning in fall 2020.

Calvin Seminary has offered a PhD program for over 25 years, with concentrations available in systematic, moral, and philosophical theology, as well as the history of Christianity. The New Testament concentration will be the first option available in biblical studies.

Professor Jeff Weima – serving as an advisor in developing the new concentration – not only sees this additional option as important to the work of the seminary as a whole, but predicts it will be attractive to prospective students: “There are many strengths to applications can take many months. At the time of print, this application is still pending.

“An application has been made which, if accepted, will allow Calvin Seminary to offer student visas for students admitted to the program. While we have no reason to believe this application won’t be accepted, review and action on this application can take many months. At the time of print, this application is still pending.
Christians have been reading and studying Scripture for centuries, but in her new book *The Gospel According to Eve* (InterVarsity Press, 2019), Professor Amanda Benckhuysen contends that along the way there have been missing pieces and missing voices.

For much of Church history, interpreting the Bible has been done by men. Benckhuysen’s book recovers several significant female writers from relative obscurity to celebrate their contributions and hear their perspectives, especially on the stories in Genesis of creation and original sin.

Benckhuysen researched over 60 women from the 4th through 20th centuries, such as Eudocia, wife of a Byzantine emperor in the 5th century, 13th-century French author Christine de Pizan, and 18th-century U.S. abolitionist Sarah Grimke. Most were educated and published, but almost all experienced resistance to their work due to social values about the roles of women.

Their interpretation of Scripture started with their understanding of Eve. “One of the exciting things about writing the book was to discover that women were pushing back against a dominant interpretation of the story of Eve, one that cast her quite negatively, from very early on in Christian history,” Benckhuysen says. “These women saw different things, and to listen to them is to hear the text afresh through other people’s ears and eyes.”

Many women, she says, emphasized that Eve’s story begins in Genesis 1, when both men and women are given a privileged place in creation over the animals, and males and females receive the same call from God. This led them to scrutinize the notion that Eve’s status as a “helper” in Genesis 2 is inferior, since the same Hebrew word for “helper” is elsewhere used for God.

“For women in the 14th and 15th centuries to be noting these things that I had never read in my seminary career was just fascinating,” Benckhuysen says.

In the story of the fall into sin in Genesis 3, many women questioned the common assumption that Eve bore more responsibility than Adam, and contended that the resulting pronouncement of conflict between males and females should be heard not as God’s wish but rather God’s warning about disorder brought about by sin.

Benckhuysen’s book arrives in the midst of larger cultural conversations about the marginalization of women. She says that while the book does not advocate any particular political or cultural agenda, it does enrich Christians’ reading of Scripture and how men and women hear God’s call today.

“One of the things I’m doing in the book is just asking the question, ‘What can we learn from this alternative reading throughout history?’” she says. “It’s inviting us to listen to how other people in history heard this text.”

BY NATHAN BIERMA
CALVIN SEMINARY WELCOMES ITS NEW SCHOLAR-IN-RESIDENCE, GIL SUH.

Gil Suh grew up in a Buddhist family in Korea and immigrated to the United States as a teenager. He was baptized at the age of 19 in a Korean-American Presbyterian church. Gil attended Calvin Seminary where he met his wife Joyce (Scholten) from Canada. They moved to Nigeria and taught at a rural Bible school for six years, during which time their three children were born.

Gil’s family had to leave Nigeria unexpectedly in 2004 due to tribal violence. He then served at a church in California for four years until his family moved to Cambodia in 2008. Gil’s mission focus is mentoring, training and networking emerging leaders in Cambodia. He is especially passionate about spiritual formation for lifelong development of leaders.

In 2017, Gil received his doctorate in intercultural studies. He is a founding member of Cambodia Research & Resource Center and a coordinating member of Mission Kampuchea 2021, a national mission movement in Cambodia. He formerly taught at Phnom Penh Bible School and is currently an associate professor at Cambodia Presbyterian Theological Institute.

Both ordained ministers in the Christian Reformed Church of North America, Gil serves as the Cambodia field leader of Resonate Global Mission, and Joyce is the South & Southeast Asia regional leader. Their two sons David and Isaac are currently in college, and their daughter Mary is a senior in high school. Gil loves playing and watching basketball and table tennis in his spare time.

Katrina Schaafsma has joined Calvin Seminary as the Lecturer in Residence in Old Testament. Schaafsma, a 2012 Calvin Seminary graduate, is also in the process of finishing her dissertation for her ThD from Duke Divinity School, studying Old Testament and homiletics (preaching). In reflecting on what drew her to this area of study, Schaafsma speaks to the richness of the biblical texts: “I am passionate about biblical interpretation for the life of the church, and I could have happily studied either testament. I think I was particularly drawn to the narrative and poetic artistry of the Old Testament, so I find it an absolute delight to study. I hope to spend my life helping people and congregations know God better through these sometimes surprising or troubling texts.”

Originally from Ridgetown, ON, Schaafsma received her BA from the University of Guelph in international development and continued her studies there, earning her MA in political science.

In her free time, Schaafsma enjoys musical activities. She shares, “Music is an important part of my life. I play piano and violin and always try to find a choir or orchestra to join wherever I live. This year, I’m singing with the Grand Rapids Women’s Chorus.”

We welcome Katrina Schaafsma back to Calvin Seminary!

NEW DEANS ANNOUNCED.

In addition to welcoming new folks to campus, Calvin Seminary announced several significant role transitions over the summer. Here is an overview of the changes:

The work and leadership of the academic office is being redistributed. Dr. Gary Burge, visiting professor of New Testament, will now also be serving as dean of the faculty. In addition, the seminary’s registrar, Joan Beelen, will now serve as associate dean for academic services and registrar.

This change means Professor Ronald Feenstra has concluded his eight years of service in academic administration. He is now moving back into full-time teaching and research. Calvin Seminary is grateful for his good and faithful work over the years and we celebrate with him as he is able to spend more time in the classroom.

Sarah Chun was named the new dean of international student and scholar services. Chun, having just completed her seventh year in the dean of students office, received this revised and expanded job title to better reflect her knowledge and expertise.
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.