Discipleship
Dear Brothers and Sisters,

In the mighty hymn of Philippians 2 God exalts Jesus. God lifts Jesus to universal triumph and acclaim, so that one day every knee might bend and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

We have heard the words so often we yawn when we hear them: Jesus is Lord. But in the first century people gasped when they heard the words. What struck them is that Jesus is Lord. Not Caesar! Jesus is Lord—the one who prayed all night before he called his disciples, and who got Judas as one of the answers, and then kept him. Jesus kept Judas on, and fed him at the Last Supper.

Jesus is Lord—one whom his disciples knew when he had caught a cold and his voice had turned to gravel. Jesus is Lord—the one who lived every day with a high-maintenance disciple like Peter, and still wanted to build his church on him.

Jesus is Lord. There is astonishment built into this claim, and remarkable trust.

The first thing a disciple needs is trust in his Lord. When we say Jesus is Lord we are saying that we trust not only Jesus himself, but also his program of dying and rising. It’s all a matter of trust. Trust his redemptive program in which self-expenditure leads to life, and not just to burnout. Trust that in his death Jesus absorbed the world’s evil into himself without passing it back, and so cut the loop of vengeance that has cycled down the ages. Trust that in his resurrection Jesus opened a locked door and then left it open for his followers. Trust that in his ascended glory Jesus Christ has given us a new address for heaven: it’s wherever Jesus is.

“Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.” It’s all a matter of trust. Take on self-denial and trust that you won’t be a fool to do it. Take on humility and trust that humility is actually a sign of strength. Take on the form of a servant and trust that real flourishing consists in causing others to flourish. Forgive those who have hurt you and trust that you will actually be better off when you give up anger you have a right to.

In this issue of Forum good colleagues explore several dimensions of discipleship. Of course discipleship is a topic as large as an arena. My colleagues at least get us in the door and show us a part of the pain and glory within.

Grace and peace.

from the president
Cornelius Plantinga, Jr.
The Mystery—and Hard Work—of Discipleship

For this issue on discipleship, Forum gathered a group of pastors with various perspectives on the subject (see cover photo). Dr. Mary Hulst, a preaching professor at CTS, is also the newly appointed chaplain at Calvin College and has particular insight into discipling today’s college students. Dr. Reggie Smith teaches “Discipleship and Teaching: Evangelism and Cross-Cultural Ministry” at CTS and is currently pastor at Roosevelt Park Community CRC, an urban congregation in southwest Grand Rapids. Rev. Heidi DeJonge was Pastor of Discernment at CTS for three years before taking her current position as Pastor of the Celebration Congregation and Diaconal Ministries at Harderwyk CRC in Holland, Michigan. She moved from mentoring younger people to serving a congregation with many older members. Dr. Darwin Glassford teaches church education at CTS and has particular interest and expertise in the faith development of young people. They all sat down with Duane Kelderman, Vice President for Administration at CTS and veteran pastor in the CRC, to discuss this vital topic.

Duane: Discipleship means different things to different people. What is “discipleship” as you use the term?

Mary: Discipleship is forming people more and more into the image of Jesus Christ. At Calvin, we want students to look more like Jesus at the end of their four years at Calvin than they did when they started. A disciple is one who imitates his or her master.

Darwin: Yes. And discipleship is holistic. That is, discipleship is not just a cognitive exercise or an emotional exercise or a behavioral exercise, but engages the whole person. We often assume that if people know the right things, they’ll do the right things. That’s just not true.

Reggie: At its core, discipleship is being a follower of Jesus, and that’s a communal thing. I’m thinking about Ben Martin, a young man who just joined our church. Ben is not a very talkative person, but he’s been hanging around for the last ten years. And he decided, “I need to deal with some things in my life, and I need to learn more about what this Jesus life looks like. From what I can see from you guys, I think I want that.” Discipleship is less about an “answer” and more about a story. Jesus did a great job of entering into people’s stories. Because of him, we invite people into a larger story, a new community.

Heidi: I think there’s a lot of mystery in this growing up into Christ. One of my favorite quotes lately is from Anne Lamott—that grace “meets me where I am but doesn’t leave me where it found me.” To be a disciple is to be growing in grace.

Duane: I think we would all agree that there are seasons in the church and in world history, and that the Holy Spirit works in different ways in different seasons. What season are we in right now? Do you see the Holy Spirit blessing particular ways of discipling?

Heidi: I think mentoring is a particular way the Spirit is discipling people today. From pastors to seminary students to youth ministry and many other kinds of ministry, we’re seeing an emphasis on mentoring, and I think God is blessing that.
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**Reggie:** As a church we came to a conclusion about three years ago that we needed to get out of the “youth program business” and get into the “formational partnership business.” We had three programs in our church that were trying to shape people into being followers of Jesus. We had a summer program, a church kids program, a neighborhood kids program—all these programs! But what were we trying to accomplish with all of this activity? So we developed “Cross Over,” and its genius was the leaders’ vision that programs are not the end, they’re the means to the end of forming people into the image of Christ. We still do activities, but we’re much clearer about the goal now. And it started with Henry and Jackie, leaders who had an overriding formation vision for everything we do with young people.

**Mary:** The college students I work with have a deep hunger to know that this faith stuff is real, that it matters. They’ve grown up with this gift—which sometimes feels like a burden—and they want to know what it means. They want to own it. Authenticity has always been important, but it’s especially important with young people today.

**Duane:** What I hear all of you saying is that at its core, discipleship happens relationally.

**Darwin:** Yes, and it begins with the most basic relationships—parents and children. But too often today we are seeing that parents are not taking an active role in discipling their own children. They figure church programs will do it, or the Christian school. Beyond the parent-child relationship, young people also need to interact with other adults in the church who are willing to share the ups and downs of their spiritual journey.

**Mary:** And many parents need help with discipling their children. Too many parents in the CRC don’t talk about why they go to church, what Jesus means to them, how the gospel shapes their life. In our tradition we have leaned toward a more private piety. We have to help parents find their spiritual voice. Encourage them to simply tell their children what God means to them. Those simple things can make such a difference in our faith becoming real to our kids.

**Darwin:** If we believe the core of discipleship is relational, we have to make a huge shift in the area of youth ministry—from hiring staff who run programs for young people to hiring staff who equip our congregation, including parents, to disciple young people. This is a very different strategy than merely conducting meetings or planning trips.

**Reggie:** On this relational thing, so much of great discipling is also being a great listener. That’s very hard for us who see ourselves as experts, and whose business is talking. Someone is talking to us and we’re already thinking of the next thing we’re going to say. Years ago Eugene Peterson said pastoring is not that hard. He said you have to “listen people’s stories out of them.” Often we don’t do a very good job of listening to people’s stories because we think we have to solve their problems, to fix them.

A while back a young man, Ali, came in my office. He had lost his 14-year-old brother to a heart attack. You don’t hear about 14-year-olds having a heart attack very often! Ali said, “I knew you would be here because you are always here.” I’ve known Ali since he was a tike. He just broke down and said, “I just need a place to cry.” This is an African American young man. Where is he going to cry? This was a safe place for him to just let it go. After we talked a little bit he said, “I always knew you’d be here.” And all I did was listen.

**Darwin:** Good disciplers also know how to ask good questions, even when people only want answers. Often we have to ask people good questions to help them understand what’s motivating them deep down. In educational speak we call this “creating disequilibrium.” We throw people off balance. In my own discipleship experiences, I grew the most when I was pushed so hard...
that it threw me off balance. It felt like I was in a wrestling match being pinned to the carpet. The trick is to push people enough to throw them off balance, but to also help them regain their footing.

**Duane:** We’ve talked about particular seasons in discipleship. But some things are universal, like personal devotions, reading Scripture, and prayer. We’ve talked about the family and holy friendships. What are other basics for all seasons?

**Heidi:** Well, we certainly don’t want to overlook Sunday worship as a discipling experience. Calvin once said we need the gospel preached to us every week and the Lord’s Supper to ratify the promise of the gospel because we are partly unbelievers until we die. We need to be continually fed with this regular pouring in of grace.

**Mary:** And people are hungry in worship. There’s a deep hunger for good preaching. Students go where there is good preaching. They want the Word, and they want to know the Word. They want to know that knowing the Word makes a difference in how you live your lives. I see that in students all the time. Worship and preaching are core discipling activities.

**Duane:** I would add that a basic discipling capacity is being able, as 1 Peter 3:15 says, “to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have,” and to do so “with gentleness and respect.” Not every believer is necessarily an evangelist, but every believer needs to be able to testify, within the fellowship of God’s people as well as with non-Christians, to what God means to you and what Christ is doing in your life.

**Darwin:** Often we view discipleship as being linear—this straight, predictable, upward line of progress. But that’s not reality, and it doesn’t account for the way suffering jumbles everything up. This linear view of discipleship comes out of early developmental psychology, which put people into various stages of moral development. The theory is that we predictably move through these stages. But suffering often brings us back to fundamentals. And we feel like we should have more resources to address our suffering than we do.

My wife and I are living right now with her recent diagnosis of cancer. I’m a Christian Reformed minister and seminary professor. Janet works in the Chaplain’s office at the college. Are we allowed to ask fundamental questions like “Where is God in all of this?” Aren’t we supposed to be beyond this?

**Duane:** What about the role of suffering in discipleship? A while back I read a fascinating book on leadership titled *Geeks and Geezers: How Era, Values, and Defining Moments Shape Leaders.* Geezers are my parents’ age, and geeks are my kids’ age. The question of the book was, Does era—the time in which someone grew up—shape leaders? In particular, did the era in which World War II veterans grew up generate different kinds of leaders? The researchers fully expected the answers to these questions to be yes. But the answer to their research was a resounding no. However—and this is why I mention this book here—the authors did make an unexpected discovery about what shapes leaders: virtually all effective leaders have been shaped by “crucible experiences”—suffering, things that shook them to the core of their being and tested who they really were. Things that made them ask, “What do I really believe? What am I willing to die for?” So now, how does that relate to discipleship? Is there a painless way to grow?

**Reggie and Mary:** No!

**Darwin:** Absolutely not!

**Mary:** It’s so hard for parents to let their kids suffer. A parent I was talking to recently said, “I know that in my own life, the big moments of growth have been when I have gone through suffering, and yet for my kid I will do almost anything to protect him from all of those very things. I don’t want him to suffer, but I know that’s his only way to grow.” That led to this great conversation about things that we’ve learned or are learning through suffering.

**Heidi:** The God I know is the God who rescues me. I know that God the best. My spiritual growth—my discipling—has all been about God rescuing me in times of suffering. It’s interesting that my life has been relatively safe for a few years now—no car accidents, no cancer diagnosis. I am walking beside still waters and in green pastures. Now the challenge for me is to still grow without the deep suffering I’ve known. I’m not trying to be masochistic here. I’m not advocating that we inflict pain on ourselves to grow. But yes, we do grow through pain and suffering.

**Darwin:** Well, we certainly don’t want to overlook Sunday worship as a discipling experience. Calvin once said we need the gospel preached to us every week and the Lord’s Supper to ratify the promise of the gospel because we are partly unbelievers until we die. We need to be continually fed with this regular pouring in of grace.
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How will we be viewed in our church community if we are asking such basic questions? If we have a neat, linear view of discipleship, we feel as if we shouldn’t get thrown back to basics. But suffering brings us back to some of these fundamental questions. And I think those are important questions that we have to continue to work through in our lives.

**Mary:** Suffering forces, or invites, us to take the long view. We really have no idea how suffering today will impact our lives 25 years from now, or 40 years from now. Suffering forces us to say God’s got a much bigger plan going on here. Job couldn’t possibly have known at the time why he went through what he did. A lot of times we don’t get to know why either, but we can also say that we are different people. I know I am a different person today than I was ten years ago because of what I have lived through in the last ten years. Would I go back? Would I say I would rather be more shallow and narcissistic? I know I wouldn’t be able to be who I am for the community of Calvin College if I hadn’t gone through what I’ve been through.

**Heidi:** Because my congregation at this point is made up of mostly older people, the discipleship of the elderly is very important to me. And I’m still exploring what that means in my context. I think it means helping people “age on purpose” and age well and not fight against that. Interestingly, when *Time* magazine recently listed the top ten new ideas changing the world, one of them was “the new Calvinism” and another was “amortality.” There’s this idea that we can fight against aging, which ends up being a fight against a sovereign God who holds all the times in his hands, including my time. We are determined to be in control and not get old.

Even in my congregation, there’s this kind of protest against the reality of aging. My father-in-law wrote a wonderful study that I want to use with them called *Aging on Purpose*, which suggests that there is a “monasticism of aging.” Monastics entered monasteries, and gave things up in order to focus on their relationship to God. There is something about aging where things are stripped away from us; and that giving up of health and vitality sometimes gives people an opportunity to die and rise with Christ in an affirming way. They live more in trust. I love helping people see that discipleship is definitely not over once you’ve done your profession of faith. And clearly they are open to that.

**Duane:** This conversation today shows how counter-cultural discipleship really is. We’ve said it’s not efficient. It’s not measurable. It’s not just an unfolding success story. And in a lot of ways, the excesses and deviations in the church’s ministries that we’ve noted today have at least in part been due to cultural pressures—we want it clear, we want to be able to measure it, we want to be able to have programs that say you’ve graduated, you’ve arrived. Also, it strikes me how ill-equipped an individualistic culture is to truly disciple people. Showing up at church for an hour or two isn’t enough to instill a way of life into people. The young man Reggie was talking about needs a 24/7 community of people around him. I don’t know what the answer for this is.

**Mary:** It’s the spiritual disciplines that we’re inviting people into. So yes, it’s all counter-cultural. “Hi, please do that with less money.” “Please control your sex lives.” “Every now and then you should fast from food.” “And you should gather with people who you really don’t like and worship a God you don’t understand. And do that regularly because that would be good for you.” It’s just nonsensical for most of the world. “And yet …”

**Duane:** I don’t even like the sound of most of that, and I’m supposed to be for it!

**Mary:** “… and yet, you should confess your sins. And you should be aware of them.” Yes, discipleship is counter-cultural and counter everything we want to do in our natural selves. But when you see people you admire who are in their 60s, 70s, 80s, they are the people who have done these things. They’re the people who make you think, “I want to be like that when I grow up.” But guess what, they didn’t wake up one morning like that. It’s a growing up. Discipleship is the Ephesians idea of “growing up into Christ” over a lifetime.

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*I love helping people see that discipleship is definitely not over once you’ve done your profession of faith. — Heidi DeJonge*
Soon after deciding on the theme of discipleship for this issue, Forum learned that Church of the Servant (COS), a large Christian Reformed congregation in Grand Rapids, had adopted the following mission statement: “Making Disciples—Disciples in the Making.” Forum discussed the process leading to this mission statement with Pastor Jack Roeda and Janice McWhertor, Minister of Congregational Life.

**Forum:** Tell us the story of how you came to “Making Disciples—Disciples in the Making” as COS’s mission statement.

**Jack:** Three years ago we appointed a strategic planning committee which came up with a document with over one hundred action proposals. Everyone was overwhelmed. At some point, I suggested that we needed a simple concept that everybody could remember and that would help us both evaluate and prioritize among all of these things that were being suggested. I said, “You know, Scripture has this incredible mission statement in the gospel of Matthew about making disciples.”

**Janice:** In some ways “Making Disciples” is nothing new, but it helped us name what is important, and why we exist as a church. So we decided to look carefully at everything we’re doing through that lens.

**Forum:** We’re interested in the relationship between these two—“making disciples” and “disciples in the making.” Many churches try to choose between inward- and outward-focused ministries. Of course you can’t divide these two aspects of ministry and certainly can’t choose between them. So what’s the relationship between them?

**Jack:** When we say “Making Disciples” we’re not just talking about an evangelism program, but about a church where everyone is a disciple in the making. We talk about developing a culture of discipleship rather than a culture of membership. One book we read distinguished between the church as a country club where you have membership and certain

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— Jack Roeda
services are available to you, and a garden where you are tilling the soil. We are all gardeners working to raise a really good crop, and if you’re going to come on to that plot, you’re not there just to benefit from the food. You’re also expected to do some of the work. So this idea of a culture of discipleship, that too comes out of “Disciples in the Making.”

Forum: What do you actually mean by the term “discipleship”?

Jack: We see worship as central to the church, and we think worship provides a kind of template of the life of a disciple. Our worship has four facets: the coming, the listening, the abiding, and the sending. Think of the worship service as discipleship in concentrated form. Those four facets are continually present in the life of a disciple.

There’s always this coming. If our default position is to be self-absorbed, then coming means constantly putting Christ at the center, turning your face away from self to Christ. In worship we confess that we’re obsessed about ourselves. You’re reminded that it’s not about you, it’s about Christ. You come back to Christ.

Then next is listening to the word. How important it is for a disciple to sit at the Master’s feet to learn, to enter into that word. And again, the tendency is to take the word as something that can benefit me or that can inspire me. But we need to really enter into it to become part of that narrative, to be molded by it.

And then there’s the abiding, the vine and the branches, the communion, the table. There is such an intimacy in discipleship that isn’t necessarily captured in simply saying you’re a follower of Jesus. There ought to be in the disciple’s life and in the community’s life an abiding, a being present in Christ and around the table.

And then there is the sending. We are sent into the world. “Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.”

Forum: So how does this emphasis on discipleship connect to the church’s ministries? Does it make a difference in what you’re doing?

Janice: We just started a Basic English worship service as a way to build better bridges into the church for people who come here for ESL (English as Second Language) classes and would like to be invited into learning about Christ.

Jack: We have one group of people from Nepal who are really becoming active. One of them was a Christian and now three of them want to be baptized. It was nothing that we did—we just happened to be here and God gave us a gift. As we discipled them, they brought two more folks—from Sri Lanka. I don’t know if the mission statement had anything to do with it. But it is wonderful that for the first time we are going to have four or five adult baptisms from outside our own little congregation.

Forum: Most churches struggle with how to take people from their initial commitment to Christ to a stage of greater spiritual maturity—the first lap of the journey. Is that something you are thinking about in any specific, intentional way?

Jack: Yes. In the past we’ve been really happy when someone comes forward after a service and says, “I’d like to be baptized.” We say, “Hallelujah! When can we do it?” So we baptize them, assign an elder to them, and then they sort of drop away. This whole emphasis on discipleship at COS came at the same time Willow Creek made their confession that too many people there were not maturing as disciples. We said, “You know, that isn’t just Willow Creek!” And so now we assign new members a host or hosts to give them an anchor in the church and to help nurture them in their new faith. And now I am teaching a junior high class and going through the Catechism for two years. These junior high kids are just about at that point where they are starting to ask questions. So it’s a very good place for me to be in their lives.

Janice: And having the table at the center of the church reminds us that our goal isn’t just to teach people English, or give them a lot of church information, but to have them sit at the table with us. As a church we’re always resisting the culture’s desire for individuality by inviting people into a community where we can encourage them, nurture them, and help them grow in their relationship with Christ.

— Janice McWhertor
Discipleship in the Classroom

One of the foundational elements of growing into the fullness of Christ is growing in knowledge of the Scriptures. How can we grow as Christians ourselves or lead others into the fullness of life in Christ if we don’t have basic literacy in the divine revelation that testifies about him?

Some students today enter the seminary without having received this invaluable biblical instruction in their homes or congregations. Others have become Christians later in life and so enter seminary without prior grounding in the Scriptures. How can we grow together in our knowledge of Scripture and in our ability to ground our theological discussions and evangelical witness in the unchanging, powerful, living and active Word of God.

Such a course at the very beginning of one’s seminary education establishes a solid, biblical framework for the rest of the curriculum. It also stimulates all sorts of exciting questions that students will be able to bring with them into their other courses. I have been delighted and warmed by the healthy and eager curiosity of students as we progress through the biblical books. Wonderful, practical questions arise in the course of our study, such as the ones we’ve pondered for Genesis (If God chose Abraham to be the one through whom his blessing would come to the nations, then what will happen to those nations who had no contact with him or God’s people?), Joshua (Isn’t this ethnic cleansing?), Nehemiah (What kind of distinctions between God’s people and unbelievers should we insist upon today?), Job (So how are we supposed to deal with Christian suffering?), Ephesians (What does it mean for the church to be the first-fruits of God’s shalom?), Philippians (How are we supposed to understand Paul’s desire to “attain to the resurrection from the dead”?), and 1 Timothy (Can there really be a truth-attesting congregational life among believers who are contentious about so many things?).

To my great joy, this course has been met with enthusiasm and active participation from the students. Just imagine a multi-ethnic, multi-generational class of almost fifty students at various levels of Christian maturity memorizing Scripture and biblical themes together, discussing how God’s redemptive mercy manifested in Christ gives coherence to his entire self-revelation, and wrestling with the implications and applications of biblical truths, and you have some idea of the beauty and richness of this class! It is a testimony to their desire for growth in Christ-likeness that fully half of the students who were able to opt out of this course by passing an advanced placement test decided to audit the course anyway.

Moreover, technology enables us to capture each class so that students can review it online if desired—a true help for international students, who might not catch everything the first time around, or for students who are forced to miss a class due to illness or emergency. One might fear that such a feature would tempt students to skip class and simply watch it online, especially since the classroom is always filled to capacity. But each class remains bursting at the seams. I am truly excited about the future of the church when I see so many students doing their best to present themselves to God as those approved—workers who do not need to be ashamed and who correctly handle the word of truth (2 Tim. 2:15). This class has re-energized my own Christian life and reinvigorated my love for teaching. Progress on the path of fullness of life in Christ for both professor and students, taking place in a classroom—how beautiful is that!
The Joy of Age- and Ability-Appropriate Obedience

Reflections on Faith Formation and Children at the Lord’s Supper

A key way the church discipless believers is through worship. Reformed Christians have an especially high view of preaching and the sacraments, and on the way God disciplines us through them. In this article, John Witvliet, chair of the Faith Formation Committee of the Christian Reformed Church, explores the committee’s latest thinking on discipleship and how it relates to participating in the Lord’s Supper.

Commands as Gifts

Ministries of faith formation and discipleship rest, at least in part, on a profoundly countercultural conviction: the notion that God’s commands are gifts.

Psalm 119 offers an epic account of gratitude for God’s law, with memorable phrases of astonishing enthusiasm: “I delight in the way of your decrees” (v. 14), “your statutes have been my songs” (v. 54), “how I love your law” (v. 97).

While that language can sound exaggerated, there are common experiences that hint at this joy. Think of parents who are grateful for strictly enforced safety practices at a community swimming pool or summer camp. Or patients who see their dentist washing her hands before filling a cavity during flu season. Or jazz musicians who discover that their fellow improvisers really do know the chord patterns that hold the music together. Or drivers who see a new stop sign on a dangerous intersection. Well-formed laws, habits, and practices contribute to human flourishing and enable rather than restrict true freedom.

For this reason, wise parents and teachers insist on both giving and enforcing commands. They also insist on explaining why. They help children see why it is good for parents to remind them to sleep enough, to wear warm clothes in wintertime, and to refrain from playground gossip. Wise parents and teachers also know that when it comes to commands, one’s tone of voice means everything. Failing to be firm robs children of a sense of the importance of obedience. Failing to be kind robs children of any awareness that commands are good.

As important as human laws are, God’s laws are the surest, most life-giving commands of all, sweeter than honey and more precious than gold (Ps. 19:10). They are expressions of grace that lead us to true freedom.

Yet too often destructive practices set in around biblical commands. We treat them as onerous burdens. We bark them out in a harsh tone of voice. We imagine that true freedom is found in setting them aside, not realizing that this worldly kind of freedom leads us to be fettered to all kinds of addictions, vices, and miseries.

When these tendencies are expressed in a culture that finds laws and obedience to be utterly repugnant, we wind up with a culture of volunteer service. Twenty-five years ago, one member of the congregation decided to volunteer for a three-month disaster relief project. Since then there has been a constant stream of volunteers from the congregation. No wonder, then, that the church youth group scheduled an all-Saturday mid-August service project to help a family in a nearby town.

For while the grace of divine forgiveness is astonishing, that is only the beginning of the story. God adds to the gift of forgiveness the gifts of biblical instruction and the Spirit-given motivation to follow that instruction. This means that law-giving and law-minding are Pentecostal experiences. They are not opposed to the work of the Holy Spirit. Rather, they are a trademark of how the Holy Spirit works. In this Spirit-led way of life, “a long obedience in the same direction” is not a threat, but a promise.

Intergenerational Practices, Age-Appropriate Participation

Commands by themselves are not complete. They need to be willingly and joyfully obeyed—and not just occasionally, but as a regular part of community life. That is why a sermon or book about hospitality is no match for a community with habitual practices of gossip and inhospitality. Conversely, a straying cynical comment about a community’s lack of generosity is not likely to resonate in a place where generosity abounds. While words are necessary, practices always speak louder.

This past summer, I had the privilege of visiting a congregation in which there is a culture of volunteer service. Twenty-five years ago, one member of the congregation decided to volunteer for a three-month disaster relief project. Since then there has been a constant stream of volunteers from the congregation. No wonder, then, that the church youth group scheduled an all-Saturday mid-August service project to help a family in a nearby town.
Participation in obedient practices best begins at a young age. Parents of toddlers are not well-advised to wait to teach their children not to steal or not to tell lies or to honor their parents in the Lord. These commands need to be practiced at the earliest possible age. Violinists and basketball players who learn bad hand position early on could spend years unlearning their habits. The same is true for truth-tellers and worshipers: age-appropriate obedience early on makes all the difference!

Our practices of obedient participation grow with us throughout our life. We never graduate from the school of divine obedience, nor would we ever want to. For with God’s commands, we never exhaust all the possibilities for becoming more truthful, respectful, and generous.

Further, this joyful journey of obedience is open to persons with a wide range of capacities. God’s commands come to each of us with the invitation to obey them with our full selves. Those whom society labels as “persons with disabilities” may face some limitations in obeying some commands, but they may also have profound capacities to obey other commands more deeply than others.

This spectrum of possibilities for obedience might be summed up in the phrase “age- and ability-appropriate practice.” All of us are called to “age- and ability-appropriate obedience” in the context of Christian communities.

A Different Approach to Children at the Lord’s Supper

Over the past two years, the Faith Formation Committee of the CRC has been listening to many parents, pastors, church school teachers, scholars, and other voices on the topic of children’s participation at the Lord’s Supper. One recurring theme in these discussions is the tensions that set in around the Bible’s commands for participation at the table.

Past discussions about the Lord’s Supper in many denominations have rightly emphasized both that children become members of the church at baptism and that participation in the Lord’s Supper is a matter of active obedience. The first insight leads many to want to invite very young children to the table, the second leads many to insist on requiring a public profession of faith prior to participation. The resulting discussion often leads to a stalemate. Church assemblies vote 60-40 for one perspective or the other, with delegates experiencing a bit of pastoral topsy-turvey as rhetorically compelling arguments are offered on both sides.

Yet could it be that behind these split votes is a lurking sensibility that God’s commands are really more like an onerous burden than a joyful opportunity, and that they need to be saved for older children? Could this lead some of us to underemphasize these commands and others of us to treat them more like a burden than a privilege?

The key text here is 1 Corinthians 11:17-34. Paul is writing to protest the disharmony and inhospitality the Corinthians are showing in their Lord’s Supper celebrations (vv. 18, 22). Paul’s antidote to this inhospitality is a set of commands: “examine yourselves,” “discern the body,” “wait for one another.”

These commands are surely as precious as gold and as sweet as honey. “Come, examine yourself—the result will be new dependence on God and gratitude for the sheer gift of grace. Come, discern the body, and wait for each other. There is nothing more freeing than getting rid of inhospitality and putting an end to divisions within the community.” When received gratefully and obeyed, these commands protect us from inhospitality, dissension, arrogance, racism, gossip, and all kinds of cancers in the body of Christ.

Yet these commands often call to mind dour faces and furrowed brows. Several delegates to the 2008 CRC synod told the Faith Formation Committee that they had never thought about these commands as opportunities for joyful obedience, nor had they ever been invited to.

This is not to say that self-examination and discerning the body are easy, or that they shouldn’t be obeyed soberly (a sober, serious kind of joy may be the best kind of all!). There is a lot of injustice in church life and in our own hearts to discern and root out. But the invitation and the strength to do this are gifts of grace.

When we put some of the delight of Psalm 119 around these commands, then we can hardly wait to invite our children and new believers to start obeying them. We can hardly wait to challenge life-long Christians to get out of spiritual autopilot and grow in knowledge and understanding. We can hardly wait to invite persons with disabilities to participate in an ability-appropriate way. We can hardly wait to invite seekers to claim Jesus as Lord.

The Faith Formation Committee of the CRC is presenting a report on this topic for discussion at Synod 2010. A key part of its recommendation is worded this way: “All baptized members are welcome to the Lord’s Supper for age- and ability-appropriate obedience to biblical commands about participation, under the supervision of the elders. The elders have the responsibility to nurture grateful and obedient participation by providing encouragement, instruction, and accountability in the congregation.”

This approach is different from both the standard case for and the standard case against welcoming young children to the table. It will take some thinking through. My prayer is that many congregations will give time for this discussion (see helpful materials at www.crcna.org/pages/ffc_front.cfm). However these conversations are structured, I hope many of them begin with portions of Psalm 119, and lead to new appreciation for the gift of every imperative in Scripture.
CTS Receives Grant Renewal for Facing Your Future Program

For 11 years the Facing Your Future (FYF) program at Calvin Theological Seminary has identified and engaged young people of great spiritual, intellectual, and personal promise for theological education and eventual ministry in the Christian Reformed Church (CRC). CTS gratefully announces that it has received a $350,000 Bridge Grant from the Lilly Endowment’s Theological Programs for High School Youth Supplemental Grants Initiative to supplement the generous gifts of CRC congregations and individual donors to this program.

FYF is a 22-day summer experience incorporating time spent at CTS, an off-campus excursion to expose participants to different types of ministry, and a brief wrap-up time back on campus. FYF encourages young people to consider lives of full-time ministry, shows young people the connection between real-life ministry and theological reflection, and cooperates with other CRC-related agencies in encouraging the spiritual growth of young people.

Since the program began in 1999, 383 high school students have participated in FYF. Although approximately half of that total are still in college (or even high school), 37 have gone on to seminary (26 of those have enrolled at CTS). On average, about 20 percent of participants from a given year (7-8 students) will pursue seminary training.

FYF has had a big impact on students in many ways. Virtually all participants report growth in their appreciation of the breadth and depth of God’s kingdom, as well as in their understanding of Christian ministry. Because of their experience in FYF, many seriously consider pursuing some form of Christian ministry.

Also, the FYF program has raised the awareness of pastors to the subject of discernment and calling to ministry, and to their role in that process with the youth in their congregations. Many pastors indicate that FYF participants return from the program with heightened spiritual awareness and a greater capacity and desire to lead. Some musically gifted students have become more active in using those gifts within their congregations, as well as outside of church. Others have become more involved in spiritual leadership within their schools and churches.

Students spend the first ten days of the program at CTS exploring and reflecting on ministry and some of life’s biggest challenges. They are introduced to the Creation-Fall-Redemption-Recreation theme of the Bible and of Reformed theology. CTS faculty and other invited guests guide the students in searching the Bible for what it has to say about significant contemporary issues. The schedule is full and fast-paced. It includes lectures, readings, book discussions, worship events, films, field trips, and other learning activities.

The second phase of the program is a ten-day excursion experience in which participants see firsthand the connection between theology and ministry. Students learn about urban and cross-cultural ministry in Paterson, New Jersey, or in Toronto, Ontario; or about church planting in a predominantly post-Christian environment in Portland, Oregon. These sites have been selected and developed in partnership with Youth Unlimited.

The third and final phase of the program is a two-day wrap-up back on the CTS campus where students begin processing their experiences before heading home. After leaving, they enjoy a mentoring relationship that helps them continue reflecting on their FYF experience.

FYF comes into students’ lives at a critical time in both their spiritual development and vocational discernment. Many participants identify FYF as a watershed experience for them. One student reflected, “FYF helped me to tune in to what God was trying to tell me. With three weeks away from all the regular distractions, I had the opportunity to question, learn, and believe.” The relationships and decisions students make during the program endure well beyond the program itself. Another alum summarized the impact this way: “(FYF) is a part of my life I will never forget. I made lifelong friends, developed my relationship with God, and learned how to more deeply interact with others.”

Program Director Greg Janke says, “FYF has been a significant program at CTS because of its impact on students who will be leaders in the church. It also has increased an emphasis on discernment throughout seminary training. The energy of the high school students makes for lively discussions with CTS faculty, who are encouraged about the future of the church and its ministry leaders. It also provides ministry experience for seminarians who serve as live-in group leaders during FYF.”

The FYF program would not be possible without the ongoing support of local congregations. In addition to the three congregations who host excursion groups, other Grand Rapids-area congregations host participants for worship, provide meals, and assist in other ways. Over the 11 years of FYF, student participants have come from more than 185 congregations across the US and Canada, representing about 20 percent of all CRC congregations. Additionally, the FYF program depends upon, and receives, generous financial support from many congregations in the CRCNA. CTS is deeply grateful for the tremendous support received over the years from so many local congregations. The ongoing support of local congregations, combined with this latest gift from the Lilly Endowment, is a tremendous cause for thanksgiving.

See www.calvinseminary.edu/fyf/ for more information.
Global Consultation Brings Technology and Bible Study Together
Four continents, five languages, twenty people, one purpose—to spread the word about the Word

In November 2009 CTS hosted a consultation on using Bible software effectively in the classroom and in the pastorate. The ultimate goal of those who attended was that seminary students would continue to use their Bible software in the church for their personal study and sermon writing, as well as for preaching, teaching, and discipling their congregations.

Participants came from Europe, South Africa, South America, and North America—a gathering of data producers, software designers, professors, pastors, and students. One attendee, Dr. Christo van de Merwe of the University of Stellenbosch in South Africa, reported from his research that with the use of Libronix Bible software, pastors retain their use of the original languages at a greater percentage than with traditional language study. Pastors who were on campus at the time of the consult confirmed that reality. Scott Greenway of Caledonia, Michigan, Jack Gray of Wright, Iowa, and Joseph Kim of Anaheim, California, spoke enthusiastically about their use of Libronix, their excitement for using its new “Version 4,” and the great benefits it has for ministry.

Attendees at the consultation included representatives of the Libronix software system produced by Logos Research Systems and the German Bible Society. Professors came from the University of Stellenbosch in South Africa; Mackenzie University in Brazil; Protestant Reformed and Puritan Reformed Seminaries; Calvin, Dordt, and Hope Colleges; Moody Bible Institute; and Lancaster Bible College and Graduate School. Pastors from Grand Rapids and Fremont, Michigan, and Vancouver, British Columbia, joined the discussion.

The consultation also filled a growing need for conversations between professors at college and seminary levels who use Bible software in the classroom. Attendees were encouraged to rethink their teaching of biblical languages, using dialogue and community as well as technology in the process. But the group did not just talk about the ancient languages of the Bible. They considered pedagogical questions for using Bible software in the entire seminary curriculum.

CTS is a leader in the use of Bible software in the seminary curriculum. Consultation organizer and Old Testament Professor Carl J. Bosma has developed a detailed seminar-like course that teaches students how to use the Libronix program step by step; students take this course at the beginning of their first term. As a result, the I.T. department and the professors all work together with students on the same program, and students are allowed to collaborate and share resources they develop. By the time they graduate, seminarians have a personal library of notes and sermons all linked in their Libronix program to help them prepare Bible studies and sermons utilizing all their Logos resources.

A second meeting is already in the works for next November to continue the learning and the relationships that are developing. An overwhelming majority of the participants reported the consultation to be “very valuable.” Seeing a variety of views and approaches to teaching and learning was beneficial to all. Practical training gained along the way in Libronix itself was also very useful. More than that, the personal relationships that developed over the hospitality of lunches and a Brazilian barbecue renewed appreciation for God’s gifting and calling of a variety of individuals and for dialogue between them—for the purpose of encouraging the preaching and teaching of God’s Word.
Chaplains in Chapel

On U.S. Veterans Day, November 11, 2009, CTS encouraged veterans on the faculty and in the student body to attend chapel in uniform. Morning worship that day was led by chaplains, some of whom are CTS alumni.

Korean Alumni Welcome President Plantinga

In November 2009 CTS President Neal Plantinga spent a week in Seoul, South Korea where he lectured on Calvin and a Reformed worldview at Hanyoung Theological University and Seminary—an institution in transition from being Pentecostal to being Presbyterian. He was accompanied by Pastor Christian Oh, Plantinga’s former student and a former trustee of the seminary, who served as his translator. At Sarang (“Love”) Community Church he met with the group of Korean CTS alumni pictured here. Sarang Community Church, a congregation of four thousand worshipers, was founded in 1978 by Calvin alumnus John Oak, and is currently led by another CTS graduate, Senior Pastor Jung-Hyun Oh. Plantinga also preached in two Presbyterian churches and in the Yoido Full Gospel Church—which, with its 500,000 members, is the biggest congregation in the world.
Ph.D. Program has Global Impact in 2009

CTS has offered a Ph.D. degree for the past 17 years, and the 33 graduates of that program have made strategic contributions to teaching and scholarship throughout the world. 2009 was a banner year for Ph.D. students making substantive contributions in scholarship during their program at CTS.

No American seminary or Ph.D. program had as much representation as CTS at the international congress held at the University of Geneva this past May in honor of John Calvin’s 500th birthday. Professor Richard Muller gave a plenary address, and alumni Randy Blacketer and Yudha Thianto and current Ph.D. students Ted VanRaalte and Heber Campos delivered papers.

Campos stayed in Geneva where he and CTS student Dariusz Brycko both delivered papers at the Sixteenth Century Studies Conference in early June. Brycko went on to offer a paper in Poland, a result of which was the visit of a Polish scholar to CTS in November to give a paper at the Meeter Center and begin organizing an international colloquium on the Polish Reformation.

Also in May, CTS students Jordan Ballor and Nathan Jacobs delivered papers at a conference in Bretten, Germany, on “Reformierte Philosophie in der frühen Neuzeit”, where most of the other participants were European professors. The CTS contingent was very well received and the papers will be published. Ballor and Todd Rester are planning to participate in a conference in Venice on electronic Internet research and present on the new Post-Reformation Digital Library resource they developed. Jacobs has also published several articles and co-authored a book on Immanuel Kant.

In June, Muller presented at a Calvin conference in Dordrecht, the Netherlands, at which student Albert Gootjes also offered a paper which will be published. In addition to working on his dissertation, Gootjes has published an article in a French scholarly journal and has translated two scholarly books from Dutch into English. Also that month, recent graduate Keith Stanglin gave an outstanding presentation at an international Arminius conference in the Netherlands, and was interviewed for Dutch TV.

How does CTS’s Ph.D. program accomplish all of this? Financial support is available from the Dodds Fund to send students to conferences, and students are prepared through unique courses specifically designed to teach them how to produce a convincingly argued, professional-level essay, and ultimately a monograph. The result has been very good preparation for academic conferences.

Also, CTS’s Ph.D. program has cultivated a high level of professionalism in research, as evidenced by the research guide project developed in the program, which focuses on rare texts available in online libraries. Check out the Post-Reformation Digital Library at http://libguides.calvin.edu/prdl.

Each December, students, staff and faculty at CTS celebrate Christmas together with a gathering of food and songs from around the world—brought by our international students! Poetry readings and Christmas carols were led by Korean, Indonesian, Hispanic, and African choirs, after which all sang together with joy that Christ our Savior is born.
At Calvin Theological Seminary we are deeply invested in the personal and spiritual formation of every student. Rooted in Reformed theology, our program is designed for developing pastors and nurtures the individual growth and development essential to this important calling.

We like to think of the Master of Divinity program as the thread that brings all the pieces of a biblical, authentic, contextual, and life-changing ministry together. Our new M.Div. curriculum integrates these dimensions through innovative learning and teaching methods and can be customized to ensure a formative and meaningful experience.