Testimonies of Conversion and Calling
Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Even the most saintly of us needs revival because, outside Jesus Christ, we are “dead in our trespasses and sins.” Raising the dead, even gradually, is a miracle, and that means revival is the proper work of God. We don’t revive ourselves because we can’t; we don’t revive the church either, or the world. Revival is heavy-duty, industrial-strength work, divine work, and only God has an arm strong enough to crank up a dead human heart, to break down trespasses and sins, and to embrace a whole body of regenerated human beings.

Only God can raise the dead.

This fact is a stumbling block, an offense—that we can’t save ourselves. And, frankly, we do people a lot of damage by saying that if we just tried harder, or prayed more, or used Jesus’ name more often, we would rise up on eagles’ wings; we would run and not be weary, like the muscular Christian wannabes that we have always wanted to be. The Christian church has long been troubled by do-it-yourself gospels, and the problem with them is that they are cruel. It’s cruel to tell people lies of this kind because, of course, they trap people. Every alcoholic knows about this trap. Try to save yourself, and you will fail, and then you will drown your sorrow.

Thinking not just of addiction, but of sin in general, John Calvin spent a lifetime exposing the cruelty and futility of self-help gospels. One of his central insights is that until we understand that God alone can accept us while we are still sinners, and raise us up with Christ in repentance and renewal of life—until we have this truth in our marrow—we will spend our lives trapped in a deadly oscillation between pride and despair. Some of the time we’ll think we’ve made it, and we’ll puff up with a kind of pious arrogance; and some of the time we’ll know, “I’ll never make it,” and we’ll sink into despair. Pride and despair and pride and despair. Only the knowledge of grace, said Calvin, can liberate us from this trap and give us repose. Cling to Christ, he said. Focus your faith on Christ alone, or on Christ clothed with the gospel. Then go ahead and take delight in doing all kinds of good as a free person.

In this issue of the Forum some fine faculty and student colleagues tell the stories of their revival. God is in the stories. And so is repose.

Grace and peace,
Some years ago in the New York Times Book Review, an author penned an essay that discussed—or, better said, that lamented—the recent glut of memoirs. If you go to a website like Amazon.com and type in the subject of “Memoir,” you will discover upwards of 150,000 titles currently in print that fit the bill. As the Times essayist noted, it only stands to reason that people like Winston Churchill or Eleanor Roosevelt would have memoirs worth writing because they have stories worth telling. But Paris Hilton? Ivana Trump? Puh-leeze! In the course of this essay the writer also referenced—with obvious disgust and barely concealed contempt—a recent poll that asked people, “Do you think your life story is worth telling?” Somewhere in the neighborhood of 78 percent answered “Yes.” The essayist was at best incredulous (and at worst scandalized) by this.

Three weeks later, however, an exceptionally smart “Letter to the Editor” appeared in which someone wrote, “The recent article on memoir indicates that 78 percent of people think they have a story worth telling. But that means that 22 percent of people think they have no story to tell at all. How tragic.”

The letter-writer turned the essay on its head, and in a most wonderful way at that! Even if we are prone to do some eye-rolling over the specter of a Paris Hilton memoir, as Christians we should surely agree with the sentiment that if anyone was convinced that he or she had led a life of such unimportance and low account as to be not worth talking about, that would be tragic indeed. The truth is that lots of ordinary people have stories to tell that are finally more interesting—and quite probably more redemptive—than many of the celebrity memoirs that get published these days.

Yet it may be precisely in Christian circles that we will encounter the most hesitancy when it comes to telling our stories. Pride may or may not be the original besetting sin of the human
race, but we all know it has long been listed among the “deadly sins” for good reason. The witness of Scripture makes it clear that God has little room in his kingdom for the haughty, the self-absorbed. As Mary sang in her “Magnificat,” God intends to scatter the proud and exalt the humble. And as Mary’s Son went on to say, in God’s kingdom it’s the poor, the meek, and the lowly who get exalted. “The first shall be last,” and all that.

Few things strike us as more prone to pride than talking about ourselves. As a teacher of preaching, I repeatedly tell my students that when it comes to injecting themselves and their own stories into sermons, less is definitely more. As Tom Long has said to preachers, stories in sermons about your children, your spouse, your favorite hobby, or your college years are like oregano: it’s a strong spice, a little goes a long way, and not every dish needs it. Nobody likes a self-absorbed preacher who seems to find his or her own life to be so endlessly fascinating and instructive as to season every single sermon with at least a dash or two of his or her story.

True enough. But even outside sermons, many in the church have a certain shyness about speaking of themselves too much. In the Reformed tradition—and especially in various streams of the Dutch tradition within that larger Reformed ethos—there has long been a tendency to downgrade ourselves as a way to make room for glorifying God alone.

Yet here we have an issue of the CTS Forum that is filled with personal stories. In recent years—perhaps as a part of the larger trend in memoir publishing already noted—there has also been in Christian publishing a resurgence of spiritual autobiographies and articles in which often ordinary Christians talk at some length about their individual spiritual journeys. Is this a good thing, or just another example of the church’s being co-opted by a narcissistic culture of celebrity-driven media hype?

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For the most part it’s a good thing, provided we keep such personal storytelling nestled securely in the Big Story of God’s great drama of Creation, Fall, and Redemption. To again invoke Tom Long, in the Bible, narrative is not a device; it is a reflection of the fundamental nature of reality. The Bible is not a book of doctrines that now and then uses stories by way of illustration. No, the Bible is one big Story that comprises lots of individual stories because that is how God views the universe: it is all a grand Story filled with little stories. We learn about God best not by memorizing lists of doctrines—rather, the doctrines emerge from the stories and from the Story.

When Christians tell their stories—and Christians have been doing so in one form or another since at least the time of Augustine’s now-famous Confessions—the purpose is never self-aggrandizement but rather testimony. We bear witness to what God has done in our lives—and what God has taught us along the way—so that this story can become the lens through which others can then look at their own stories.

I testify to what God has done in my life because God’s Holy Spirit has a tendency to work in similar ways in all of our lives. If I can name instances of grace I have witnessed, you are then enabled to tell your story in ways that will possibly help you spy grace in places you had not seen it before.

Each individual story counts and is worth telling because, by grace, we all are caught up in the Big Story of God’s redemption. Each of our stories is alive to God every moment. This came home to me recently when writing a sermon starter article for the Center for Excellence in Preaching website. The Lectionary passage was from Luke 20 where the Sadducees are questioning Jesus about the resurrection. At one point Jesus says something utterly surprising—in fact, if it were not Jesus who said this, you’d wonder if this could count as a legitimate way to interpret the passage he mentions. He says that when God said to Moses from the burning bush in Exodus 3 that he was “the God of Abraham and the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob,” what God meant was that each of those persons was still alive in God’s sight. They were not dead but living in God’s presence.

Our stories matter and are worth telling and re-telling because each of us is always alive before the presence of God. Individuals matter. God does not save anonymous chunks of humanity, he saves Abraham and he saves Moses and he saves Theresa and he saves Larry and he saves Mildred. God, in short, pays attention to people.

Christians tell their stories not out of pride but out of humility. Humility is that Christian virtue which reminds us that no one is more important than anyone else and that we all exist on a level playing field in God’s sight. This is why the insights we gain from one another’s stories add to the richness of all our stories and also enhance our mutual appreciation for and celebration of God’s providential grace.
Reclaiming God’s Gifts

Questions and adventure have always coexisted in my life.

My mother will tell you I’ve always had a lot of questions. Once I learned to talk, she patiently endured my incessant ponderings and propositions. An event from my early childhood illustrates the wondering soul God placed within me. I was five and loved to play in the woods between my house and the family dairy farm. On one wooded adventure I discovered an injured bird quivering in the dirt. Terrified and broken, it tried to regain use of its body. As I knelt down to hold the damaged creature, I remembered a verse I memorized for Sunday school: “Do not be afraid, you are worth more than many sparrows” (Matt. 10:31). I held the vulnerable bird until it stopped quivering. Returning the creature to the dirt, I cried as I wondered why the bird had to die.

The Holy Spirit continued to cultivate my childhood faith and even began to call me to ministry. I recall sitting on a pile of hay as an eight-year-old, reading Isaiah 43 and the Belgic Confession to a herd of Holsteins. The black and white giants took in my first sermons as they happily chewed their dinner for the second time. They, too, tolerated my incessant ponderings and propositions. Still today, if nerves shake me while preaching, I picture an uncomplaining herd of Holsteins.

Just as the questions came as gifts from God, so did my zeal for life. Every once in a while my brain, needing a break from its seriousness, would embark on an adventure in a novel or on my horse. I loved galloping bareback and without reigns through open fields. I gleefully urged my mare to run faster, clinging only to her thin mane and the hope that she would stop when I shouted, “Whoa!” I didn’t know it then, but I would soon need reminders of that joy of being an embodied creature.

Somehow, fear gained access to my heart, quenching my love of adventure. I even started reading novels differently. I could not bear the unknown tension or trouble in a story. I flipped to the end of every story and read the end first. But this didn’t work in real life, and that frustrated me. In high school, fear burrowed deeper into my heart, conquering my zeal for life. Rather than spending energy on asking questions or running through fields, I spent it on rules. I made rules to control everything: the hours I spent studying, every calorie I consumed, each mile I ran. Every moment of every day was carefully measured, until I lay in a hospital bed terrified and broken, praying that I would die.

It was in this most vulnerable place that the Spirit once again whispered, “Do not fear, you are worth more than many sparrows.” A Scripture that had once troubled me now brought solace. The shadows of depression and fear were persistent, but so was God. As I lay in the hospital bed imagining myself at home in the safety of hay and Holsteins, a nurse walked up to my bed. When his kind eyes met my hollow gaze he whispered, “Isaiah 43,” and then left the room. Choking on tears, I opened my Bible and read, “When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze. For I am the Lord, your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.”

Indeed, God was with me, and he continued to illuminate the darkness. My family, friends, and church family encircled me in prayer and carried me back to the land of the living. My love for theological inquiry was encouraged at Kuyper College, and my passion for adventure was restored as I spent summers working road construction. God continues to restore me through wise mentors, good friends, and CTS.

A couple years ago I practiced my first real sermon from a pile of hay in front of the Holsteins. They listened contentedly, moooing an occasional “Amen.” As I sat staring at the black and white giants, once again the words of Isaiah 43 rushed through my mind: “You are my witnesses, declares the Lord, ‘and my servant whom I have chosen, so that you may know and believe me and understand that I am he. Before me no god was formed, nor will there be one after me. I, even I, am the Lord and apart from me there is no savior.’”

Intrigued by the continued presence of this Scripture in my life, I called my mom to once again consume her time with my questions. It was then that she told me that when she was pregnant with me God gave her that Scripture. Before I was even born she began to pray that Isaiah 43 would be true of my life. I hung up the phone and returned to that passage in Isaiah. “I [God] have revealed and saved and proclaimed—I, and not
some foreign god among you. You are my witnesses,’ declares the Lord, ‘that I am God. Yes, and from ancient days I am he. No one can deliver out of my hand. When I act, who can reverse it?’”

God has acted faithfully in every stage in my life. With a wedding ceremony in the recent past and graduation from CTS in the near future, I am learning to live zealously in the story, joyfully embodied. I don’t know where or when my story will end, but I know the end of God’s story. This knowledge gives me courage to live through the tension, joy for the adventure, and faith that the work God began on one wooded adventure many years ago he will certainly make complete, for my good and for his glory.

**Philip and Sarinah Djung’s Story**

*as told to John Cooper, Nov. 19, 2010*

John: Philip and Sarinah, you have come to Grand Rapids so that Philip could attend Calvin Seminary. How did you come to know Christ?

Sarinah: I came from a non-Christian Chinese family. Our house was full of idols. My grandfather was a prominent figure in our village. He made idols for the Chinese folk-religion temple. My grandmother was a devout Buddhist. So there was also a Guanyin statue at home. We also worshiped the ancestors. I was very close to my grandmother and was prepared to follow her way. But she died when I was seven, and this created big questions in my heart. I did not know why she died or where she went. Where was she, and was she okay? Was I going to die someday too? I was lonely and afraid, and I had a terrible fear of death.

Later my family sent me to a public school. Here I studied Islam. It was compulsory for us to recite Islamic prayer in Arabic every morning before the class started. I am sure that is the path I would have followed, if it were not for a Christian teacher who biked miles to come to our school, just to tell us about Bible stories. Although these stories were completely unfamiliar to me, God was at work in them. In junior high school I had another Christian teacher. She invited me to go to a Christian class on Friday instead of to Islamic instruction. There I heard about Jesus Christ. She then invited me to go to teen fellowship at a nearby church. My younger brother and I went. Once the minister spoke about John 3:16. God so loved the world that he sent his only Son so that we would not perish but have eternal life! This very word of God answered the big questions I had been wondering about for years! I knelt down and asked for God’s forgiveness and accepted Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior.

Two years later the pastor encouraged me to consider baptism. But I could not do this without my parents’ permission, and they were completely against it. At one point my mother challenged me to choose between my family and my God. Since I was only a teenager, I chose to be baptized secretly. Six months later, my mom found out and angrily confronted me. At first I lied about it, but I knew that was denying Jesus. So I admitted it to her and my father. They were very upset and considered forcing me out of the house. But they knew that would not be safe. So they let me stay, but did not speak to me for six months.
During this time God enabled me to grow in love and kindness toward my parents. My brother and I continued to be good children, to love our parents, and to pray for them. That affected them deeply.

After high school I went to university in Jakarta. There were very few Christians at university, and there was much prejudice against us. Yet God was very good to me and provided for my needs in many ways. During that time my father left the village and its religious influence and came to the city. He was impressed at what good children my brother and I had become—much better than children who followed Chinese Confucianism. Once when the money that my father sent each month ran out, I went hungry for three days. I prayed to the Lord, and money came. I phoned my dad to thank him, but he said he had not yet sent it. It turned out that the bank had sent the money by mistake! My dad eventually went to a church, and he became a very strong Christian while in his fifties. By God’s grace, my mom also became a Christian.

Philip: I, too, was born into a non-Christian family that worshiped idols. I was born during a difficult political time for ethnic Chinese in Indonesia. I lived in a very small village; the education there was of very poor quality, so my Mom and Dad sent all of us—my sister, four brothers, and me—to a Christian school because it was a good education and affordable. There I heard about Jesus. One day, my friend asked the teacher why Jesus came into the world. That teacher wisely said, “The Bible can tell us,” and turned to John 3:16. [Laughter, because that was also the verse that moved Sarinah to faith.]

Many students from the school attended the church just for something to do. They were disruptive. So the pastor asked that only people who were really interested should come. Many left the church, but somehow I decided to continue to attend. During one Sunday service, as I stood singing a hymn, my heart was touched and I made a decision: “Lord, I believe in you.”

My life changed. The church became my second family. I had fellowship, support and guidance. Later I was baptized, but did not tell my parents.

At one point during high school my pastor asked whether anyone felt called to full-time ministry. After thinking and praying about it, I realized my answer was yes. I sought counsel from my pastor, who advised me to go to college first and prepare myself. I promised God that I would go to seminary after finishing college. But I also felt obligated to help my family financially when my father passed away not long after my college graduation. So when I graduated, instead of going to seminary, I worked, thinking that I could make money for family. Yet I worked for three years without making money for them. Then I remembered God’s promise:

Surely the Lord was at work in our lives from the beginning until now!

During one Sunday service, as I stood singing a hymn, my heart was touched and I made a decision: “Lord, I believe in you.”

Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and he will take care of the rest. Holding to this promise, I decided to go to seminary. And God is faithful. Not only did my family not suffer financially, but one by one they all came to Christ.

When I finished seminary I was called back to my home church, and I served there eight years as the young adult pastor. Toward the end of that time I began to realize that I needed more theological education in order to give more to the churches in Indonesia. Our churches are very practical and spiritual but not very deep in biblical teaching or theology. Many preachers are not trained in seminary. They sometimes preach strange ideas and false teaching, and this often leads to trouble and harms the church. There is a great need for good education in the Bible and sound doctrine. So that is why I came to Calvin Seminary. The Lord has made this wonderful opportunity possible for us.

Sarinah: When I went to the University of Indonesia, I joined the student fellowship. We prayed about God’s calling to our vocations. I really wanted to be a scientist because there are very few Christian scientists in Indonesia. I prayed fervently to the Lord for guidance. After graduation, I worked in microbiology for several years.

Then Philip asked me to be his wife. We had known one another in high school and kept in contact, but my parents did not approve of our relationship since they knew that Philip wanted to be a pastor. So, we prayed together for three things: give us the same calling, give us my parents’ approval, and give us the opportunity to live in the same city. The Lord provided all three. We did agree on our common calling to ministry. My parents in the meantime had become Christians and approved our marriage. And Philip applied for a job in Jakarta and got it after only one week. It was a miracle!

So that is how we came to Christ, came together, and came to Calvin Seminary. Surely the Lord was at work in our lives from the beginning until now!
A question I often get asked is, “What led you to seminary?” Usually embedded in that question is this one: “What’s your calling story?” We all love a good calling story. The Bible is full of them—Moses, Jonah, the twelve disciples, and Paul, to name just a few. We all have a calling story. All of God’s children (indeed, the whole creation) have been called by God to serve him. We are all a part of that great story of salvation that begins in Genesis and ends in Revelation.

So I share my story with you in the hopes that it will help you to understand and tell your story. Because in the end, my story and your story are exactly the same—we are sinners saved by grace and redeemed by the blood of Christ shed for us on the cross.

My road to Calvin Theological Seminary has been, surprising as it may sound, quite mundane. There is no dramatic conversion, no life-altering event that caused me to dedicate my life to the Lord, no Jonah-like running from God. Nevertheless, the faithfulness of God is no less evident in my life. First of all, he saw fit to raise me in a God-fearing, loving, and stable home. We went to church twice every Sunday for as long as I can remember. I’m a graduate of a Christian elementary school, high school, and college. I married a wonderful Christian woman while I was in college who also came from a good, strong, Christian family, and we have three beautiful children.

Already in high school I wondered if God was calling me to full-time ministry. So when I entered Dordt College in the fall of 1994, I did so as a pre-seminary student. However, after graduating I didn’t feel particularly called to seminary—at least not yet. I had worked in Admissions for more than three years as a student and loved every minute of it. So when an opening for a new admissions counselor became available, I jumped at the chance and got the job.

It was just going to be temporary—you know, work a few years and then head off to seminary. Well, a few turned into seven and we established ourselves in Northwest Iowa. We bought a home, had two children, and were very involved in church and community activities. God (and life) was good.

However, the travel demands of my admissions work were significant and it became clear that my family needed me home more. About that time, the hand of the Lord reached through the telephone by means of a conversation with a local bank that was looking for a new loan officer. Banking could not have been further from my mind—I hadn’t taken a single business course in my life, and the Lord (because he loves variety) did not bless me with strong math skills. I had a degree in Philosophy, of all things! Nevertheless, I became a banker for the next three years, and it was a wonderful experience.

Though I truly enjoyed banking and helping people with their finances, it became clear to me that God did not intend for me to be a banker forever. Going back to seminary entered my mind briefly, but it wasn’t time. So I went back to working at Dordt College serving as their Marketing and Public Relations Coordinator for two years. I was back serving in an environment where I felt comfortable and capable. It was during this time that our third child was born.

At this point, you may be looking at this litany of jobs and saying, “What do you mean, no Jonah-like running from God? Three careers in twelve years sure looks like running to me!” But I believe that all my education, my careers, and my life experiences up to this point have been nothing other than God’s way of preparing me for my future role as a pastor.

In my career as an admissions counselor I learned the importance of building relationships. My career in banking taught me about the significant challenges that arise as a result of poor financial decisions, as well as the importance of compassion for people when they encounter circumstances that are beyond their control. In my marketing and public relations role I learned the importance of working cooperatively in order to achieve a common goal. In all three of these roles, God was teaching me the value of clear and honest communication, how to work as part of a team, and how to learn from my mistakes. In addition, the Lord gave me the opportunity to gain valuable...
experience by serving on the local school board, as a deacon in my church, and as the president of my local Kiwanis Club.

Therefore, I’ve never considered myself to be running from this call. Quite to the contrary, I’ve considered all of these life experiences to be God saying, “Take what you’ve learned and use it to serve me in pastoral ministry.” I believe the things I’ve learned are valuable assets that I can bring to my congregations. As I look back, I see that God was shaping me.

Most recently, God has prepared me by using several other experiences—a series of sermons at my home church about Christians and work, conversations with those around me, and overwhelming support from my wife and extended family. These experiences have not only shaped me but also have shown me that now I am ready. Ready to start this journey of learning and of faith. Ready to start the next chapter in His story of my life.

So now that you’ve heard a bit of my story, I’d like to ask you, “What’s your story?” How has God led you to be a teacher or a farmer or a businessperson?

I, like you, am just trying to follow the Lord where he leads, rely on his grace, and trust in him to provide. Whether we received the gift of faith early in life or later, our stories are different and yet the same. We are all saved by grace through the blood of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, and we are all called to live lives worthy of that gift we have received. Whether farmers, factory workers, business owners, or homemakers, our lives all tell the story of salvation; and it’s not just the story, it’s your story. Tell it.

God’s Interruptions

Oh, how I wanted to be like Perry Mason! I watched this suave 1950s television lawyer with rapt attention. (When I later found out he was just an actor, I was shocked.) Where I grew up in the Lawndale neighborhood of Chicago, there were three or four churches on every block; I thought preachers were really just pimps with a Bible. What I did not see were law clinics to help people who needed legal advice or representation. So I was going to go to law school, open a law clinic, and help people like Perry Mason did.

After graduating from high school, I was a pre-law major at Culver-Stockton College. My heart was set on going back home and making a difference in my community. Once I was handed my history/political science degree, a friend of my mentor, Pastor James Wolff, encouraged me to apply for an entry-level job at his law firm. Kirkland and Ellis was one of the top law firms in the nation. I was hired to work in the mailroom as a messenger and mail clerk.

About a year into my employment at Kirkland and Ellis, I saw a newly hired law associate, fresh out of law school, working in the law library one Friday evening. This did not seem unusual until I returned Monday morning and saw that the associate was still there in the same suit, working his fingers to the bone. After that, I did not want to be an attorney anymore. Seeing the dark side of practicing law swallowed up my naiveté. I was ready for a different challenge.

I left the law firm to become an employment associate at Spiegel, the catalog retailer based in suburban Chicago. My job was to hire people at the warehouse. I loved the work, the people, and the corporate scene. However, Pastor Wolff and others at Lawndale CRC kept after me about considering the ministry. I wanted nothing to do with being a pastor. I liked going to corporate parties, wearing a suit, and making good money. But God always seems to interrupt life when I think it’s getting good. One day my supervisor called me into her office. Her words pierced me to the core: you are fired. The reason was corporate downsizing. I was sent reeling into a place I had never been before: no job. I did not know what to do. I was given my last check and sent to the door by escort. Thanks, God!

Then came a dream. In the Bible dreams are scary because God seems to use them to turn people’s lives upside down, and they are never the same again. Well, God spoke to me in a dream, revealing I was headed into the ministry. I told God I needed a second opinion, and told no one about my dream. 
Two weeks later, Lawndale’s associate minister, William Ipema, came to preach. He only graced the pulpit four times a year. He preached on the vocation of ministry. I felt like I was the only person in the church. After the service, Ipema came straight toward me and inquired if the sermon was for me. I had my second opinion.

God closed every door I wanted to open. But he opened the doors toward ordained ministry. Author Craig Barnes observed, “Nothing is ever wasted when God converts us. What we want changed is what God wants to transform into something useful. He will use our past hurts, our long detours in the wrong direction, our old gifts and skills. He will even use all that religious stuff we’ve learned, all those memory verses” (When God Interrupts: Finding New Life through Unwanted Change, p. 35). God helped me give up my fighting and yield to the direction he was leading. In the fall of 1989, I packed up my things and headed to Grand Rapids. God had opened the door to attend Calvin Theological Seminary. I had to do my part and walk through the open door.

After arriving in Grand Rapids, God interrupted my existence again, this time with a simple request from a pretty collegian. “Can I catch a ride with you to Madison Square Church?” was the question that changed my life. The question came from a college junior named Sharon Huisingh, who was the only white person in Harambee Jaharde, the black student club on the Calvin College campus. Sharon grew up in Hudsonville, with middle-class values and limited experiences beyond West Michigan. After a month-long internship during her sophomore year at a Chicago high school where she fell in love with the diversity she saw there, she came back to Calvin determined to seek out some diversity in the mostly Dutch college. She found it by joining the black student union, where she hoped to broaden her horizons and learn more about people of another culture. This person sent from God challenged me to keep walking through those doors that he continually opened.

Sharon and I were married on April 7, 1990, at Madison Square Christian Reformed Church. We continued to attend Madison Square because it was a place of refuge and community. Pastors David Beelen and Dante Venegas supported us with friendship and advice. The church had a sizable group of biracial marriages and children. It was a place where we did not have to fight the stares, indignation, and rumors. Madison Square felt like home.

After I graduated from Calvin Seminary, Sharon and I waited for a call to a church. Many of my classmates were receiving calls. We waited and wondered for six months. Through the grace of God (and the help of some people in the denominational Race Relations office), Northside Chapel Community CRC, located in Paterson, New Jersey, gave me a call to co-pastor with Stanley VanderKlay. My eighteen months at Northside were challenging and insightful.

In September 1994, I received a phone call asking me to consider the pastorate of Roosevelt Park Community CRC in Grand Rapids. It was a newly formed church, through the deaths of Grandville Avenue CRC and Bethel CRC. They wanted to be an outreach ministry that attracted people from the neighborhood. In October 1994 Sharon and I flew out to meet with the leaders and church members. After preaching and leading at worship services, observing their outreach ministries, and discussing their dreams and strategies, I came to the conclusion that God was leading me there.

I tell my story only to tell you who I am and Who is leading me. Jesus, a storyteller like no other, told stories to reveal who he was. Jesus’ stories go straight to our souls and hearts. He described life in the most unassuming and yet piercing way for this purpose: to call people to a Person, himself. Nothing is more important than following Jesus. When we all truly listen to our life stories, this theme constantly recurs. It is easy to lose our way through sin, anger, blame, or simply refusing to give up running our lives. Jesus keeps calling us back to the path of followership. My entire life was preparing me to be called to a Person. Every person, relationship, and event was used by Jesus to draw me to following him. And this is true for all of us.

Every person, relationship, and event was used by Jesus to draw me to following him.

Smith is a CTS alum, mentoring group leader, and instructor in missions and evangelism.
Lifelong Promises

Peter replied, ‘Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call’” (Acts 2:38-39).

For me these powerful words of the Apostle Peter are so helpful in illuminating my faith story. My story does not begin with anything I did, but with what God did for me. He called me to be his child. He did that by placing me in the home of a young Christian couple, Rich and Dorothy Sytsma, in Denver, Colorado. In 1942 my parents, believing that the promise of Acts 2:39 was not only for them but also for their newborn son, presented me for baptism in the First Christian Reformed Church of Denver. At the baptismal ceremony they promised to instruct me in the Christian faith and lead me by their example to be Christ’s disciple. I believe that my baptism was the most significant event in my life. My entire faith journey has been an outgrowth of what happened that day. As the Apostle Peter proclaimed on Pentecost, my baptism means that God has called me to be his child, has forgiven my sin, and has given me the gift of the Holy Spirit.

My parents promised to instruct me concerning the meaning of my baptism, and they did that faithfully. They prayed for me and taught me to pray. Reading the Bible together regularly and attending church as a family was as much a part of our family life as the meals we ate together.

I cannot recall a time when I did not know God loved me. And I loved God. I believed Jesus was my Savior and was so grateful he had forgiven my sin. As a little kid one of my favorite songs was “Come into my heart; come into my heart, Lord Jesus.” I loved to read the Bible, and when we came to church early I would read as many chapters as I could before the worship service started. There is only one explanation for all of this: God had given me the gift of the Holy Spirit, which Peter said was promised to everyone who is baptized.

On Easter Sunday, April 17, 1960, I confirmed my baptism and professed my faith in Christ. I did that in the Kawagoe Reformed Church in Japan with my sister Carolyn and my Japanese “sister” Setsuko. Setsuko, who lived with our family for several years, did not come from a Christian home, so after her profession of faith, she was baptized. The three of us still treasure that shared profession of faith experience fifty years later.

Growing up as a missionary kid in a country which was more than 99 percent non-Christian, I wondered and worried about the eternal destiny of the Japanese people. My parents’ enthusiasm to share the gospel was contagious. I saw first-hand how people who attended Bible classes and Sunday worship services were gripped by the power of the gospel and, one after another, were baptized. They were living proof that God’s call and promise were also to those “who are far off.” About the time I made profession of faith, I felt God was calling me into the ministry. Dad and Mom’s example and God’s blessing on their ministry were big factors that drew me into ministry.

At Calvin College I met Sandy Benthem. We had played together for three months as neighbor kids in the summer of 1951 when Dad had served the Lucas Christian Reformed Church as a seminary intern pastor. I could not believe it when this beautiful girl told me that from a young age she had dreamed of being a missionary. We were married in 1966.

Two summers of ministry in Salt Lake City among Mormons whetted my appetite for evangelism. After I graduated from Calvin Seminary in 1967, Christian Reformed Home Missions invited me to serve on loan to InterVarsity Christian Fellowship in San Jose, California. At the 1967 IVCF Urbana Missions Conference, Rev. Akira Hatori, a Japanese radio pastor, challenged us to consider serving in Japan, where there were so many millions of people who did not know Christ and so few Christians to share the good news with them. We felt God calling us through his appeal. Ten months later Sandy and I arrived in Japan, where we spent 32 years in campus ministry, church planting, and mission administration. With our Christian Reformed Japan Mission colleagues we worked in a “side-by-side” relationship with the Reformed Church in Japan (RCJ). This small denomination of Reformed believers has grown from 9 churches right after World War II to about 145 churches today.

What a privilege it has been to be used by God to communicate the promise of salvation—both to our own children and to our friends in Japan. I witnessed the conversion of university students, some of whom later became my colleagues in church planting ministries. In seven locations I teamed up with Japanese pastors in the RCJ to plant and grow churches. Over and over we shared in the joy of Buddhists, Shintoists, and secularists who became followers of Jesus. We praised God as he formed these small groups of believers into thriving congregations.
Sandy and I intended to serve in Japan until retirement, but in the summer of 2000 in ways too obvious to ignore, God led us to return to Calvin Seminary. I serve as the Dean of Students and International Student Adviser. Sandy volunteers as a teacher of ESL and leads Bible classes for wives of international seminary students. We thank God for this privilege of serving church leaders who will communicate the promise of salvation to people in North America and also in many countries around the world. We also thank God as we see God’s promise bear fruit in the lives of our children and grandchildren. “The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call.”

The Power of a Moment

According to the certificate in the family Bible, my parents presented me before the congregation of First United Methodist Church of Coral Gables and vowed to raise me in the Christian faith and the church. I have no remembrance of the vows or the water that was sprinkled on me. I do not even remember attending church. All I remember is that weekends were spent fishing, hunting, and playing little league baseball and football. We went to church on Christmas and Easter. I never understood why; it was just something we did.

The entry into high school was not smooth. I was scrawny and did not feel like I fit into Westminster Christian School. I did not want to be there. I wanted to be at Palmetto High School. It was a confused time in public education, and my parents thought the Christian school was academically superior. I hovered on the edges, ran cross-country, and survived academically. There was a lot of “God talk” around me, but it did not make sense. God was not a concern, though there was always a part of me in my struggle for independence that knew I was ultimately dependent on something larger than me.

During my sophomore year I ventured to a church youth group and Youth for Christ meetings in order to win points with a young lady who intrigued me. She was pretty, friendly, and kind. I remember the youth director asking me when I would accept Christ, and me laughing while mumbling something cynical. The youth director pursued me. As I reflect on that time in my life I realize there were four things that continued to attract me to the youth group and Campus Life club: the people there appeared to enjoy life and each other; they engaged me as a person and valued what I had to say; they dealt with questions that I had in a real-life manner; and they validated me as a person. Yet in spite of a variety of experiences—Bible studies, retreats, camps, and so on—the gospel did not click.

I remember the morning when my dad greeted me with the words “We need to talk.” I had been at a party the night before and attempted to spike the punch. Unbeknownst to me the hosts had seen me, removed the punch, and called my parents. Sitting by the pool on a warm day my dad asked about the previous night’s party. I responded simply, “It was okay.” He asked if there was anything else I wanted to tell him about it. I wondered whether I was busted. I did not want to confess in the event he did not know. I felt trapped but played it cool. He then told me that the host of the party had called and described what happened. I thought about denying it and accusing them of lying, but common sense won out. I sat there silent, busted. My dad turned to me and said, “I love you and I trusted you. I still love you, but you will have to earn my trust back.” His statement sucked the wind out of me, and at the same moment the gospel clicked. I got it. I do not know why God used difficult words from a loving father, but he did. This marked the beginning of my journey with my new elder brother Jesus, who through the gift of the Holy Spirit is still at work transforming me into his likeness.

The journey was and is an adventure. It has taken me through some dark and lonely times as well as some exciting community-orientated and vibrant times. As I reflect on the journey, the question “Where is God?” is not a concern. I know from his Word, from the life of Christ, and from the witness of his world that God is good and at work in ways that I do not see nor can always understand. In Christ, I am confident that God is good, comforted by the truth that this is his world, and content because Christ is my elder brother.
During the summer after my junior year of high school I was invited to attend a program called “Facing Your Future” at Calvin Seminary. The program revolves around the ongoing discovery of every individual’s place in God’s kingdom. Where do we belong? What are we here for? Although it’s impossible to ever answer such questions with absolute certainty, the discussions we had at FYF helped me see that there really is a place for everyone on this huge planet—that as tiny and easily overlooked as we all are, we matter to someone, somewhere.

The thirty-four of us arrived at Calvin Seminary on June 30 and went through the usual, semi-awkward name exchanging before everything truly began. The next ten days were filled with some of the most sleep-deprived, ridiculous, and truly life-altering experiences of my life. Our days were packed with classes, discussions, games, prayers, small groups, and worship all over Michigan. Although the average day took place solely on Calvin’s campus, we went to several different churches in the area for meals and drove as far away as Dearborn, Michigan, to dialogue with one of the Muslim leaders in the large Islamic community there. This is where the program split from my expectations. I had never been in a group of students and leaders so willing to talk openly about big issues in Christianity, much less about conflicts between Christianity and other worldwide religions like Islam. We debated, we read, we prayed. We dissected everything we saw in order to learn what a life built for Christ really looks like.

After ten days on campus, we split into three groups and left for the excursion portion of the program. One group of students drove to Toronto, Ontario; another to Paterson, New Jersey; and the last to Portland, Oregon. Although I was on the Portland excursion, my experiences were roughly comparable to those of the students in New Jersey and Ontario. We spent the majority of our time volunteering for different community organizations, rotating between several different locations and still finding time to spend a day recovering at the beach. One particular event that really struck me was our participation in “Night Strike” in downtown Portland. A local church collected food and clothing donations and then spent Thursday night feeding and clothing the homeless in the area. There was even a foot-washing station under the Burnside Bridge. In the middle of a huge industrial sprawl you were able to look down and see Christ’s disciples at work.

Although the excursion portion was concentrated on the idea of service, I was also amazed by how close the group was growing. It felt like we had been together for years, not weeks. We spent every spare moment hanging out, hiking around Portland, running in the morning fog, or gorging ourselves on meals provided by different churches in the area. It was incredible how close we became in such a short period.

On July 19, we all arrived back at the seminary, three small worlds colliding, exhausted, trying to remember who was in on the thousands of different inside jokes from around the continent. Although the final day was spent debriefing and presenting our separate excursion experiences, the program never really ended. I entered Facing Your Future with the mentality that it was going to be just like every other summer camp I’d ever attended, but I left with new ideas about everything my life entails. No, we can’t know what the future will bring. But we can teach ourselves to be prepared for anything by placing our faith in something greater, in God above. And that’s what Facing Your Future is all about: the idea that we don’t even need to know, we don’t need to worry. God has always been there, is there, and will always be there. What else matters?
O

n my recent trip to Israel and Palestine, I read a book by Julie Orringer. In the beginning of The Invisible Bridge, the main character, Andras, expresses doubts about his ability to fulfill the expectations placed upon him as he embarks to study in Paris on a scholarship. He speaks to his father about his doubt. Orringer writes, “At best, he told his father, he was the beneficiary of misplaced faith; at worst, a simple fraud.” He asks his father, “And what if I fail?” His father’s answer is succinct: “Ah! Then you’ll have a story to tell!”

I have a story to tell. I traveled to Israel and Palestine this past summer as part of a group of ten North American graduate and undergraduate students on a trip with Hope Equals. Hope Equals is a joint project of the Christian Reformed Church’s offices of World Missions and Social Justice. The trip offered four components of learning: touring of religious sites, visiting organizations working for peace and reconciliation, living with Palestinian Christian families, and working to build a home for a Palestinian Muslim family.

Much of our learning had to do with the impact of the Wall, a barrier constructed by the Israeli government. The Wall has been controversial since Israel began building it in 2002. While supporters argue that the Wall is necessary to protect Israeli civilians from Palestinian terrorism, the path of the Wall deviates significantly from the Green Line—the border agreed upon by Israel in 1949—into the land also known as the Occupied Territories, captured by Israel in the Six-Day War of 1967.

On our trip, we spoke to those affected by the Wall. In addition to being an eyesore, the Wall is being used by Israel to annex Palestinian land and resources. Israel also places restrictions on the movement of the Palestinians who live near the Wall, particularly on their ability to travel freely in the West Bank and to work in Israel.

We visited a town in the West Bank which was cut off from a thoroughfare by the Wall. The empty storefronts facing the road testified to the Wall’s crushing effect on the town’s economy. We visited a park built by Christians on a former Israeli army base. It is the only park for children in that town, but after its completion, the Israeli military decided that they wanted the land back. Families are now afraid to allow their children to play there because Israeli soldiers have doused visiting children with gasoline, and hurled canisters of tear gas into the cars driving by.

Yet in the midst of such human sinfulness, we were encouraged to learn about the ways the Palestinians and Israelis are working together to resist the injustices and work for the creation of a lasting peace in the land. One such group we met with was B’Tselem, an Israeli agency that documents and reports incidents of human rights violations in Gaza and the West Bank.

We also met with Archbishop Elias Chacour, a three-time nominee for the Nobel Peace Prize. He spoke to our group about the issues he faces as leader of the largest Christian church in the Holy Land today. It was inspiring to hear him articulate the calling Christians have to communicate “clearly and courageously” as agents of God’s peace in the world.

During the last eleven days of the trip we lived with Palestinian Christian families in the town of Beit Sahour. It was probably the most encouraging part of the trip for me—sharing in the lives of those directly affected by the policies and circumstances that we had been learning about.

We also had the privilege of helping to rebuild the home of a Palestinian family in the town of Al-Walaja. The family had lost their home twice before to Israeli bulldozers. Working with them—practicing the trade of Jesus in the land he called his earthly home—gave me insight into how God blesses his children when they work to bless others.

There were times on this trip when I said to God, “Why am I here? I am much more comfortable reading about injustice in books than seeing it with my own eyes.” But I learned once again that God does not call us to be comfortable. He calls us to be courageous. He calls us to be peacemakers—agents of his shalom here on this broken earth.

But we don’t have to go to Israel and Palestine to be peacemakers. We have all kinds of people in need of reconciliation to one another, and to God, right here. Yes, we may be frauds. We may be the beneficiaries of misplaced faith. But, what better opportunity for God to tell his story?
CTS Faculty Involved in Significant Ecumenical Efforts

CTS faculty are regularly asked to serve as theological advisers to the synod of the Christian Reformed Church (CRC), and they also serve as key members of CRC study committees, most recently the Form of Subscription Revision Committee (Cornelius Plantinga, Jr.), the Faith Formation Committee (Howard Vanderwell and John Witvliet), and the Committee to Study the Migration of Workers (Scott Hoezee). Professors often are also involved in ecumenical committees and conversations in significant ways, including the following current examples:

Reformed Churches and Worship

Emily Brink is a member of the CRC’s Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations Committee (EIRC) and was very involved in the meetings of the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC) in June 2010, when that organization formed through the merger of the Reformed Ecumenical Council and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches. She and John Witvliet coordinated an international worship planning team that prepared the daily worship during the Assembly, as well as a statement on worship and spirituality for the WCRC which has now been sent for study and reflection to its member churches. Worshipping the Triune God: Receiving and Sharing Wisdom Across Continents (2010 edition), a set of proverbs on worship, can be found in several languages at www.wcrc.ch.

Reformed-Catholic Dialogue and Baptism

Conversations have been happening as well between the CRC and other Reformed denominations and the Roman Catholic Church. CTS professors Lyle Bierma and Ronald Feenstra and CTS grad Sue Rozeboom have participated in this Reformed-Catholic dialogue, which recently produced a “Common Agreement on Mutual Recognition of Baptism.” This document was approved by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops in November 2010, a “milestone” in Protestant/Catholic ecumenical relations, according to Bierma.

Calling baptism “the sacramental gateway into the Christian life,” the agreement says baptism “is to be conferred only once, because those who are baptized are decisively incorporated into the body of Christ.” For baptisms to be mutually recognized by the five churches, the baptismal rite must use flowing water and the Trinitarian formula, “Father, Son and Holy Spirit.”

The CRC Synod 2011 will be asked to approve the “Common Agreement on Mutual Recognition of Baptism,” which can be found at http://oga.pcusa.org/ecumenicalrelations/resources/report-cath-reformed-bilateral-dialogue-baptism.pdf.

Family Donates Venison to CTS Food Pantry

Years ago during a mission emphasis week at Trinity Christian Reformed Church in Fremont, Michigan, the extended Prins family heard about the Bill and Bea Idema Food Pantry and Clothing Bank at Calvin Theological Seminary from Roger Greenway, then the seminary’s Professor of Missions. They learned that the food pantry was chronically short of meat, an important source of protein for the student users of the food pantry, and that international students and their families in particular relied upon the pantry as their primary source of food.

So the three generations of men in the Prins family took action. They began donating wild turkeys to the seminary during hunting season and once gave a side of beef. However, venison became their specialty. During the fall of 2010 the father, son, and grandson donated the venison from the sixty-fifth deer their family has given to the food pantry. CTS is grateful for their faithful support of seminary students and continuing commitment to the future leaders of the church worldwide.

In the photograph, Raymond Prins, D.D.S. of Fremont, Michigan, is on the left. He and Phyllis served for many years in Nigeria with Christian Reformed World Missions. Center is Raymond (Chip) Prins II, D.D.S. He and Julie also reside in Fremont, where Chip practices dentistry. Both couples attend Trinity Christian Reformed Church. On the right is Raymond (Little Ray) Prins, III, who works for Amway in an international division and with his wife, Janelle, attends River Rock Christian Reformed Church in Rockford, Michigan.
At Calvin Theological Seminary we are deeply invested in the personal and spiritual formation of every student. The M.A. in Worship provides a rich biblical, theological and historical grounding for providing leadership in worship.

Is God calling you to lead others into meaningful participation in worship as part of a church or parachurch context? Calvin Theological Seminary’s integrative approach to worship is designed to prepare you for the opportunities and challenges ahead.