CHURCH DISCIPLINE:

FORMATION THROUGH GOD'S GRACE
"But the pot he was shaping from the clay was marred in his hands; so the potter formed it into another pot, shaping it as seemed best to him" (Jer. 18:4).

"This is not the perfect church. I am not the perfect pastor. But this is a community through which God does work and you are welcome here."

Those are words that I would say at every New Member service at the church I pastored for 16 years. It was at those services that we welcomed new members and made certain commitments to one another as a church family on how we would live together as witnesses for God, both to the world that He so loves and to each other.

For example, new members would affirm that they would commit themselves to act in love, be accountable to other members, refuse to gossip, give regularly, and live a godly life.

This issue of the Forum focuses on a topic that we do not talk often about and quite likely even avoid: church discipline. In the Reformed tradition, we confess church discipline to be the third mark of a "true" church. While there have been discussions from time to time as to how relevant these marks are still today, it has always been acknowledged that we should seek to be a community of truth and grace.

How do we grow as communities of truth and grace in the area of church discipline? Why even be concerned with discipline in an age of individualism? We hope these articles and the input of many pastors helps us see that God still calls us to mold and shape each other. God does form us and He does use discipline as part of that formation. To God be the glory!
Bonhoeffer’s exhortation echoed the apostle Paul’s warning that during the “last days” there will be many religious people who know nothing of the power of grace, “having a form of godliness but denying its power,” people with whom Christians should “have nothing to do” (2 Tim. 3:1-5). His words recalled John Calvin’s refusal to serve as the pastor of Geneva unless the State granted the Church the authority to preserve the integrity of the Lord’s Supper through the practice of church discipline. They reflect our own Belgic Confession’s teaching that one of the marks by which the true church can be recognized is that “it practices church discipline for correcting faults” (Article 29).

Despite their drastically different contexts, Calvin and Bonhoeffer both realized that discipline is an essential means of preserving the church from a sort of cultural captivity in which church membership is seen as an entitlement or birthright rather than a commitment rooted in life-changing grace. Insofar as discipline has slipped from practice in recent years, we would do well to ask ourselves whether this is because we have fallen into a cultural captivity that makes us determined to preserve our individualism and autonomy while avoiding suffering at all costs.

For many people, of course, church discipline sounds anything but gracious. And the reality is, church discipline has so often been abused – even within the Reformed tradition – that it is necessary to clarify what church discipline is not before we even begin to discuss what gospel-centered church discipline is.

First, church discipline is not a discretionary, coercive power that elders or pastors can wield at will to manipulate church members into submitting to their authority. This was what discipline had become under the medieval papacy, and the reformers would have nothing to do with it. A person cannot be disciplined for refusing to submit to the council or consistory, per se. A person can only be disciplined for the refusal to repent of behavior clearly condemned as sinful by scripture.

Second, church discipline is not a means of punishing sins, or even of requiring public penance for sins. This too had become habitual in the medieval church. Those found guilty of sin would be banned from communion for a time and made subject to humiliating public exercises, even if they were repentant. Calvin and his colleagues utterly rejected this practice because it obscured the grace of the gospel.

Third, church discipline is not ostracism. Its goal is not to isolate a person from love, friendship, or hospitality, nor to drive a person from gathering with Christians for worship. Such a practice would hardly be in accord with the love of Christ.

What, then, is church discipline? It is the means by which we as the body of Christ hold one another accountable to the gracious power of Christ’s death and resurrection through the confession of our sins and – in the power of the Holy Spirit – the growing obedience of discipleship. To put it another way, it is the means by which we ensure that we are not merely professing faith in the gospel (i.e., cheap grace), but that we are
living in the grace of the gospel (i.e., empowering grace). Its objective is not perfection but confession. It is a function not of the law, but of grace (Rom. 6:14).

When a brother or sister stubbornly refuses to repent, discipline eventually requires excommunication (Belgic Confession, Article 32), the barring of a person from (ex-) communion (-communication), which is to say, from the Lord’s Supper. This is essential to preserve the truth of the gospel that is taught and celebrated in the Lord’s Supper. For when the Supper is observed in a manner that does not communicate the truth of the gospel, as Paul taught the Corinthians, “It is not the Lord’s Supper you eat” (1 Cor. 11:20). It is also essential as a means of liberating the unrepentant person from the deceitfulness of sin and into the power of grace.

As Paul puts in 1 Corinthians 6:9-11, “Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor men who practice homosexuality nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.”

Nowhere does the graciousness of discipline appear more clearly than in Jesus’ description of it in Matthew 18. The context, often forgotten, is Jesus’ telling of the parable of the wandering sheep, in which a shepherd leaves ninety-nine sheep to seek out the one sheep who has wandered astray. “In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should perish,” Jesus says (18:14). For this reason, Christians may not simply let their brothers or sisters who sin wander off to their own destruction. First, we must approach them individually, hoping to win them over. If that fails, we must return to them with a brother or sister. Only then, “If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church; and if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector” (18:17). When a church faithfully and lovingly walks this journey to the point of making such a judgment, Jesus promises, its judgment is that of the Father himself (18:18-20).

But even this judgment only stands with an eye toward grace. To treat a person as a pagan or a tax collector is not to shun her (as the Pharisees imagined) but to treat her as a lost sheep to be pursued with steadfast love and compassion until safely back within the fold. Peter demonstrated that he grasped this when he asked Jesus how many times he should forgive his brother. Jesus’ answer – seventy times seven – has become famous, as has the parable of the unforgiving servant that follows it (18:21-35). Christians must extend the same radical grace to the sinner that God has extended to us in Christ. Only when we forgive one another can we be confident that we ourselves are the recipients of God’s powerful grace. For in the final analysis, as Augustine reminded us, the Church is not the body of those who have been made perfect, but the body of those whose daily prayer, commanded by Jesus himself, is “Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors” (Matt. 6:12; Cf. 6:14-15).

This grace is not like the cheap grace against which Bonhoeffer warned, which welcomes and affirms us in our sin. Rather, through the power of the Holy Spirit, it graciously conforms us to the image of Christ, enabling us, as genuine disciples, to deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow Him.
It must be admitted that the Church does not have a very good track record of dealing with its wayward members in the humble, gracious, and Christ-like manner that allows for the noble purposes of church discipline to be fulfilled. Nevertheless, discipline remains one of the important tasks of the Church. In fact, discipline is so important that the Reformers identified it as one of the three “marks” of the true church, ranking right up there with the pure preaching of the Word and the proper administration of the sacraments (Belgic Confession, Article 29).

AN “X-RATED” PROBLEM

One biblical passage that reveals well the purposes of church discipline is 1 Corinthians 5. Paul describes an “X-rated” problem where a member of the Corinthian church was involved in a sexual relationship with “his father’s wife” (5:1). The woman was not the man’s mother but his stepmother (see Leviticus 18:7-8 for the distinction between “mother” and “father’s wife”). This kind of illicit relationship was not even acceptable in the sex-saturated, free-thinking perspective of pagan Roman society. The fact that no charge of incest was brought against the man by the local city authorities suggests that he was a wealthy and powerful member of Corinthian society. This would also explain why the church leaders were reluctant to discipline him.

Paul, however, is less upset with the sinful man than he is with the sinful response of the Corinthian congregation. Their failure to discipline this erring church member was exacerbated by a couple of factors. First, the Greek text of 5:1 indicates that this situation was not an isolated instance – a “one-night stand” – but an ongoing situation in which the church had ample opportunity to deal with their wayward brother in Christ. Second, the Corinthian church did not merely


"One bad apple ruins the whole bushel"

A "TOUGH LOVE" SOLUTION
Paul issues a tough solution to this “X-rated” problem—tough not only for the Corinthians to carry out but also for us today to understand properly. The apostle commands the church to “hand over this man to Satan for the destruction of his flesh” (5:5). This might at first seem as if Paul intends for Satan to cause severe physical suffering in the man’s life which will ultimately lead to his death. A more careful look at the larger context, however, reveals that Paul is calling instead for the excommunication of the man from the fellowship of the Corinthian church.

That this is the apostle's intention is clear first of all from the rest of the chapter where the emphasis is never on the death of the person or the destruction of the yeast but on their removal: “... put out of your fellowship the man that has been doing this” (5:2); “Throw out the old yeast ...!” (5:7); “Expel the wicked person from among you!” (5:13). Second, Paul’s command “not to associate with ... nor even eat with such a person” (5:11) clearly envisions that the sinful church member is still alive. Third, Paul’s theology would never allow that this man’s death somehow pays for his sin. The word “flesh” also has in Paul’s letters an ethical meaning where it refers to a person’s “sinful nature.” The apostle's intent, therefore, is that the Corinthian congregation will shut this man out from their church fellowship with the goal to bring about the destruction not of the man’s physical body but instead of his “sinful nature”.

THREE PURPOSES OF CHURCH DISCIPLINE
For the Sinner’s Sake: The first purpose of church discipline is not to weed out undesirables from membership in the church nor to proclaim divine judgment on wayward sinners, but to ultimately bring about the person’s salvation. As Paul puts it to the Corinthians, they must take the “tough love” step of excommunicating the man “so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord” (5:5). The stakes could not be any higher: the eternal destiny of the erring brother is in such a precarious position that the Corinthian church must act. Such a disciplinary step is never done vindictively or self-righteously but always “in a spirit of gentleness” (Gal. 6:1) and in a way that treats the errant member “not as an enemy but as a brother or sister” (2 Thess. 3:15).

For the Church’s Sake: Second, discipline is crucial to preserve the salvation of the whole congregation to whom the sinner belongs. Paul makes this important point in the paragraph of 5:6-8 where he uses a baking analogy. This analogy does not involve “yeast” – as it is commonly translated – but more accurately “leaven.” What is the difference? Yeast is put into dough to cause it to rise and become leavened. Since yeast was an expensive commodity in the ancient world, people would commonly not bake all the leavened dough but keep a little bit of it separate. They would then put this leavened dough into the next batch of dough so that it would become leavened, and this process would repeat itself over and over again. Paul’s sentence, “A little leaven leavens the whole batch,” (5:6) is probably a common saying of his day (see Gal. 5:9) similar to the familiar phrase, “One bad apple ruins the whole bushel.”

Paul’s analogy, then, is a powerful one. One bad portion of yeast will taint only one batch of dough, but one bad batch of leaven will taint all the successive batches of dough. In a similar way, one sinner jeopardizes not just himself or herself but endangers all the other people in the congregation, too.

For God’s Sake: The third purpose of church discipline focuses not just on the sinner and the broader Church but on God Himself. The glory and holiness of God ought to be revealed in and through His people: “Be holy in all you do; for it is written: ‘Be holy, because I am holy’” (1 Pet. 1:15-16) and “Live such good lives among the pagans that ... they may see your good deeds and glorify God” (1 Pet. 2:12). When the Church tolerates sinful conduct and fails to practice discipline, there is the danger that the world views the Church – and the God which it worships - as being no different than any other religion or institution and consequently fails to bring God the glory that He is justly due.

There are many reasons why Jesus-followers and congregations today are reluctant to practice discipline: we don’t want to appear judgmental or self-righteous; we don’t want to get involved in an awkward situation; we don’t think that it will do any good. And yet discipline, when it is carried out properly, ought to be seen ultimately as an act of love. The writer of Hebrews reminds us in an echo of Deuteronomy 8:5, “The Lord disciplines the one he loves” (Heb. 12:6). Jesus affirms these words when He says, “Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline” (Rev. 3:19). For the sake of the sinner themselves, and their holy God, the 21st century Church must follow the example of God and of Christ, practice tough love, and dare to discipline! 
PRACTICING CHURCH DISCIPLINE:
WISDOM FROM THE FIELD

Practically speaking, what does it look like for a person to be faithfully discipled, especially when Belgic Confession Article 29 teaches that the third mark of a true church is one who “practices church discipline”? We solicited input from the CRC Pastors Facebook group and connected directly with a cross-section of ministers serving in a variety of contexts throughout the United States and Canada. What follows is a summary of the wisdom these pastors shared with us.

Discipleship and discipline go hand-in-hand. Relationships are vital for the practice of church discipline. Pastors noted that the best encouragement and admonishment happens in small groups and ongoing relationships with mentors or elders. One pastor compared these established relationships and regular interactions to weed-pulling, a task much easier than trying to uproot sin that has grown into trees with strong roots. For example, someone described a time when a small group came to a chapter in their book study on personal finance. The conversation brought up an issue that needed to be addressed in one member’s life, and the book study was the first time the church leadership became aware of this need. Because the group had established trust with one another, it was easier to give and receive hard truths about what it means to be a Christian in the area of stewardship. Before the situation snowballed out of control, this person had a supportive community in place for encouragement and accountability.

Discipleship and discipline go hand-in-hand. Relationships are vital for the practice of church discipline. Many pastors also stressed the need for a slow pace and cautioned against overreacting. A deliberate yet patient course of action we read about was for a consistory to offer a course or discipleship group that focused on a certain area of life (e.g., finances, parenting, or marriage). In one case, the leadership made very direct invitations to the group, based on the known needs of some members. It turns out that others who joined the group either had similar needs or a specific passion or strength in this area. Many benefited besides the few who were targeted to participate.

Church discipline is not only for sexual sins. We must not be arbitrary or inconsistent in our discipline. One pastor mentioned how we have a functional hierarchy of sins and “only seem to apply discipline to certain things that fit our hierarchy—even if it doesn’t match God’s.” The pastor said that sins such as racism, selfishness, or exploiting the poor are rarely addressed by the consistory. On the other hand, a sexual sin is often treated more publicly. Several pastors emphasized that we must be accountable to one another in all areas of life. We were glad to hear positive stories of successful care and discipline in cases of greed, slander, and conflict besides sexual sins.

Confidentiality may be more important than making a public announcement or confession.

The Christian Reformed Church Order calls for all members of the church to encourage and admonish one another in love, and for those in leadership (i.e., the consistory) especially to encourage hospitality, forgiveness, and unity within the body. When a member sins, the first step is for him or her to be “faithfully discipled by the consistory” (Articles 79-81).
guidelines in the Church Order Supplements to Articles 78-84). One pastor spoke about the consistory’s desire to protect victims, especially when minors are involved. Another pastor said that they do not make public announcements because their congregation has multiple services or sites.

However, other pastors noted times when a public announcement or letter to the congregation is necessary. This might be the case if a staff person or office-bearer is involved, or if the situation would appear in the local news.

A few pastors shared stories of incredibly powerful public testimonies when a person was repentant and receptive to the discipleship of the church, or formally readmitted to membership. These testimonies were voluntary, and tears were shared all around. One pastor described how a member publicly asked for ongoing help: “This almost instantaneously rallied the congregation to shower [the person] with grace and squelched any judgment. This all happened rather quickly and within a month [the person] had a completely different outlook on life, their faith, and the church. In fact, [the person] had declared, ‘I could never be anywhere else.’” The pastor concluded, “I wish all cases of discipline were like this.”

Finally, we can have hope for the difficult task. “I wish all cases of discipline were like this.” All our respondents acknowledged how very difficult and messy church discipline usually is. Not often is there such visible transformation or a clear sense of resolution. Pastors lamented that when things get hard, people tend to go elsewhere—either to another church or no church at all. One pastor identified this as a misunderstanding of the church as a voluntary association, instead of a covenant community.

Nevertheless, these pastors also expressed hope. Their approach to discipline keeps in mind a clear view of who we are as sinners and who God is as mighty to save. The proclamation of the good news of the gospel was identified as foundational to the ongoing discipleship and discipline in the church. We share their trust that God is active among us. As one pastor said, “a member’s good standing doesn’t require perfection, but it does require a desire to cooperate with the Holy Spirit in their sanctification.” Another shared, “The grace of God is the seed of change in a soul.”

Our sincere thanks to the ministry leaders who contributed to this article.
The fall of 2017 marked the 25th anniversary of Calvin Seminary’s PhD program. Seminary faculty had floated the idea of such a program as far back as the 1940s, but it wasn’t until the 1980s that then-President James De Jong and board member Norman De Graaf launched a fund-raising campaign to endow two PhD faculty chairs and to provide scholarships for doctoral students. Much of the impetus for the new program came from the seminary’s desire to serve the needs of the global Christian Church, which was expanding at a remarkable rate in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. An increasing number of international students were coming to Calvin Seminary to study for a ThM (Master of Theology) degree, and they would often express a desire to earn a PhD degree at the seminary as well. After years of praying, planning, and fund-raising, the first class of students was admitted in the fall of 1992.

Since the first PhD degree was awarded at commencement in 1997, 66 men and women have graduated from the program and are now serving in a range of academic and ministry roles around the world. Today, they are seminary presidents, college and seminary professors, pastors of congregations, and leaders in a variety of other ministry organizations. About half of these graduates are from outside North America—Brazil, Democratic Republic of Congo, Indonesia, Japan, Madagascar, the Netherlands, Nigeria, the Philippines, Poland, South Korea, People’s Republic of China, and Uganda. Their years on the Calvin Seminary campus have enriched not only them, their families, and their current ministries, but also the seminary community itself as these students have brought to their studies in North America perspectives and questions from their experiences in churches around the world. However much Calvin Seminary has been a blessing to them, they have fully as much been a blessing to us.

The PhD program currently admits about four new students each year and offers concentrations in the areas of church history, Christian doctrine, ethics, and philosophical theology. Through the generosity of multiple donors over the years, each one of these students has received funding to cover full tuition and a modest living stipend for four years. If sufficient funds can be raised, we hope to expand our concentrations in the next few years to the fields of Old Testament and New Testament as well. With God’s blessing, we trust that the PhD program will continue to make its mark on the life of the seminary—“a very distinctive and significant mark,” as former President De Jong put it a few years ago. “Our doctoral students create a sense of esprit de corps—a very continuous, close, caring interaction with the faculty and with each other. They’ve made us better as an institution and as scholars and as stewards of the Church worldwide.”

PhD PROGRAM CELEBRATES SILVER ANNIVERSARY

LYLE BIERMA

PhD Program exists to equip scholars from all parts of the world for teaching & research in colleges, seminaries & universities & general church leadership

PHILIP WANDAWA
Principal, Kampala Evangelical School of Theology (KEST)

As a Ph. D. student, I was trained and taught what a scholar is upposed to be, what “academic” means, and how scholarly work is done. As a seminary student, my eyes were opened to the diversity and reality of the Christian world through fellowship with North American and especially overseas students. I was grateful, with my family, to experience, in many ways, the Reformed Church Life in Grand Rapids.

TAKASHI YOSHIDA
President, Kobe Reformed Theological Seminary; Moderator, Reformed Church in Japan

Calvin Seminary introduced me to Reformed theology in perhaps the best and most rigorous way possible. During my studies I soared the heights and plumbed the depths of Reformed theological thought [and] found [...] an apt theological framework for wrestling with the issues and conundrums in my own African context.

KEST equips men and women for works of ministry and service in Church and society through formal and non-formal programs.
Reformed thinkers. By then, I had read through the Bible with fascination and eagerness several times. I would weigh what I was hearing against what I had read, and for me the Reformed guys made the most sense.

That led him to enroll at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, and then on to complete a Ph.D. at the University of Pennsylvania. It was while working on his doctoral dissertation that Williams received a phone call from Calvin Theological Seminary, inquiring if he would be interested in a two-year lecturership in Old Testament.

“I had never heard of Calvin Seminary or the Christian Reformed Church,” Williams recalled. “I looked it up in Sydney E. Ahlstrom’s A Religious History of the American People, and there was one paragraph about the denomination, which was described as the most solid and dignified bastion of conservative Reformed doctrine and church discipline.

“I had no idea what I was getting into here,” Williams continued. “I wasn’t ordained. I didn’t have an M.Div. and didn’t have my Ph.D. yet. I was a complete outsider, but they were willing to take a chance on me. It was 1995 and I read through the Acts of Synod to become familiar with all the controversial issues. It was clear that every effort was made to hold the line on what Scripture said, but not to require more than Scripture said—be as fair as possible with the texts. I thought to myself, I could work for these people.”

And so he has, with duty and distinction for nearly a quarter-century, rising through the ranks from lecturer to assistant professor and associate professor to full professor and more recently the occupant of the Johanna K. and Martin J. Wynjaarden Senior Professor in Old Testament Studies.

“I discovered that this is a whole new life that’s being offered in service to God.”

“As he takes leave of the Calvin Seminary faculty at the close of the current academic season, Williams expects to remain involved in his longstanding work with the NIV and the New International Reader’s Version of the Bible. He also hopes to teach “an occasional course at the seminary, if they’ll have me.” There are at least a couple of new books that he is in process of writing. And he and his wife, Dawn, plan to visit their favorite mountain village in Switzerland a bit more frequently with a more flexible schedule in the offing.

Bruce Buursma
Freelance Writer

Retirement Profile: Michael Williams

Brue Buursma

It was down in the darkest nether regions of the north Atlantic ocean, cloistered for a 70-day navy submarine patrol in the claustrophobic confines of a titanium tube, when Michael Williams at last encountered a possible purpose for his heretofore drifting, aimless existence.

“I’d been sort of free-floating through life,” said Williams, recalling the moment when the submarine began its steady descent toward the ocean floor. “It occurred to me that I could die down here. All it would take would be one crack, one rupture from a seawater pipe and that would be the end.

“And it hit me that if I did die, well, what difference would my life have made,” Williams went on. “Why am I even breathing? Why am I doing this? Nothing was making sense to me. The fluidity of living without any purpose or direction was crashing in on me. Where can I go for answers? What’s the point? And right then, providentially, one of my crewmates held up a Gideon New Testament.”

Williams had grown up in Tampa, Florida, in a nominal Roman Catholic family, but knew precious little about the Bible and perhaps even less of God’s nature and the possibility of experiencing a deep relationship with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

So when he was offered the slender Gideon volume containing the New Testament as well as the Psalms and Proverbs, Williams devoured it and began an astonishing journey of self-discovery and personal and professional development.

“I found [in the Bible’s message] meaning and purpose and direction,” he recalled. “I discovered that this is a whole new life that’s being offered in service to God.”

Williams’ decisive encounter in the salty depths of the sea touched off a passionate pursuit to learn more about the grand plan of redemption and the story of God, a journey that carried him to college, seminary, and advanced graduate work in biblical studies.

“No one in my family had gone to college,” said Williams, who opted to leave the Navy after eight years of service and find a Christian college to attend. “I found a broadly evangelical Bible college in South Carolina, Columbia Bible College, and it was great. I was exposed to dispensationalism, charismatics, Pentecostals, and
If I organize my decades of interactions with Calvin Seminary into chapters, I have just completed “Ann at CTS, Chapter 3.” Chapter 1 would be the years when I studied at Calvin Seminary full time for my MTS degree in the early 90s, chapter 2 would be the enrichment courses I took over the years to better equip myself as a missionary, and chapter 3 would highlight the two wonderful years spent at Calvin Seminary as a Lee S. Huizenga missionary-in-residence.

My husband and I have been serving with Wycliffe Bible Translators for 20 years, living in Brazil and Cameroon, and in 2015 we moved to Grand Rapids to start a new chapter of ministry closer to our children and our families. During my time at Calvin Seminary, I split my time between seminary responsibilities and my Bible translation consultancy work with Wycliffe, making many trips to the Central African Republic to lead conversation groups for international students who wanted to practice their English. Through these groups, I met inspiring students with a wealth of experience, and I gained insight into cultures I knew little about. An example of this can be found in the photo above; I was learning all about the Chinese Communist Party from my three Chinese conversation partners.

Another highlight of my time at Calvin Seminary was taking time to step back from working as a missionary and instead spend time reflecting on missions. What is the mission of God? What has been the legacy of the work of missionaries, both positive and negative? How does the reality of the enormous growth of the Church in the Global South change things? As I read about these topics, I came across articles written by African theologians, such as Lamin Sanneh, underlining the importance of Bible translation for the growth of the Church in their countries. This reading convinced me all over again to continue the important work of supporting African Christians in their efforts to translate the Bible into minority languages. I plan to continue to work full time for Wycliffe Bible Translators from Grand Rapids.

I want to express my heartfelt thanks to Calvin Seminary, to the donors who underwrite the missionary-in-residence program, and to the faculty, staff, and students for their warm welcome.
Upon immigrating to the United States to further his studies, he pursued and received his MDiv from Calvin Theological Seminary in 1987 and subsequently completed all his course work in 1991 for his Th.M. After 30 years in ministry, he completed his Doctorate of Intercultural Studies—with a focus on the Syncretism in the Korean Church—from Grace Theological Seminary in Indiana in 2016.

In February of 1988, Christian was ordained at East Paris Christian Reformed Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan and commissioned as a church planter to the Troy area of greater Detroit. By the Lord’s grace, he planted Han-Bit Korean Christian Reformed Church where he has served for the past 30 years.

A well-known leader among Korean churches in the CRCNA, Christian, aside from his own parish ministry, has concurrently served denominational ministries in various ways. He has served as an ethnic advisor for Synod, a member of the study committee group for health and renewal of smaller churches as well as a member of the homosexual study committee, and for six years each he has been an implementation team member for Sustaining Congregational Excellence (SCE), a member of the Board of Trustees at Calvin Seminary, and a denominational board member. Because of his experience and years of immigrant ministry and continued work with the CRC and Calvin, he has found tremendous joy in being called to serve as a translator for Calvin Seminary presidents and faculty in the U.S. and South Korea. Since 2008, he has been a teaching instructor for KIM (Korean Institute for Ministry) alongside Calvin faculty for those who come from other denominations through Article 8 of the CRCNA Church Order and its Supplements.

To this year’s graduates, Rev. Oh advises: “Be convicted about Divine calling. Stick to the basic essence and principles of His Words and ministries. Pursue His mission, not your own missions, to avoid all manner of manmade competition. In parish ministry, while your relationship with God is paramount, so your personal relationship with others is as well”.

“Be convicted about Divine calling. Stick to the basic essence and principles of His Words and ministries.”

Christian Y. Oh, born and raised in a devout Christian family in South Korea at the end of the Korean War, grew up attending church Bible schools and other church activities marking special childhood memories. He received a BA in Theology/Philosophy in Seoul, South Korea in 1980 at Chongshin University.
As the youngest of five children, he managed his father’s farm until enlisting in the Air Force during the Korean War, at which time he publicly professed his faith as a follower of Jesus.

While in the Air Force, he discovered new academic abilities, took the GED test, and enrolled at Calvin College in 1954. Two years later, Dennis married Jeni Plooy.

To increase his capacity for kingdom service, Dennis took many additional college courses, meeting the requirements to attend Calvin Seminary and receive a high school-level teacher certification. He taught introductory Latin at Calvin College from his senior year through his studies at Calvin Seminary, from which he graduated in 1961.

Dennis received his doctorate degree in education through a joint program with Union Theological Seminary and Columbia Teachers College in 1963. In addition to his part-time employment as a tutor at Union Seminary, he and Jeni also worked part time at Manhattan Christian Reformed Church where Dennis had a 15-minute weekly Gospel program on a black radio station, and also led a youth group at the church.

"... don’t neglect always finding new ways for you to lead the members of your church."

After a year of Fulbright Scholarship work at the University of Utrecht in the Netherlands, he returned to Calvin College as a professor to initiate a joint program between the Bible and Education departments to prepare church leaders and Christian school teachers.

Through God’s providence and his variety of experiences, Dennis discovered untapped potential that could only be maximized by becoming available wherever new opportunities for Christian service became accessible. This resulted in a variety of leadership opportunities: director of the Calvin College January interim, founder of the Baxter Community Center, president of Trinity Christian College, co-founder of Roseland Christian Ministry Center, first full-time director of the Barnabas Foundation, and in retirement a volunteer co-founder of both Partners Worldwide and Timothy Leadership Training Institute.

Today, Dennis and Jeni—ages 87 and 85 respectively—are still involved in volunteer work after 24 years. For Dennis, what made these somewhat unorthodox career opportunities possible was the blessing that Jeni was as an eager participant, encourager, and tremendous help. She was able to build a productive career of her own wherever the Lord brought them to, helping others stay focused on building God’s kingdom.

"My word to the graduates is to do your expected preaching, teaching, and pastoral work well. But don’t neglect always finding new ways for you to lead the members of your church and communities to see new areas where God is at work, and then by example lead your people to show up to help. I believe the biblical Gospel requires it, your community and world depend on it, at least some of your congregation members expect you to do so, and a surprising number of them will find personal growth and increased energy and capacity for kingdom ministry which can be mobilized only if you help them as their servant leader to become personally involved to release this much-needed potential."

Dennis Hoekstra was born in 1930 and was baptized by Rev. Leonard Verduin in the Corsica, South Dakota Christian Reformed Church. His loving, Christian farm family experienced desperate poverty due to a worldwide depression and five years of droughts, dust storms, and hordes of grasshoppers. He attended one- and two-room multi-grade rural schools and dropped out of high school after six weeks into the ninth grade.
In the extreme context of the American slavocracy, how do we account for the robust subjectivity and agency of Frederick Douglass? In an environment of extremity, where most contemporary psychological theory suggests the human spirit would be vanquished, how did Frederick Douglass emerge to become one of the most prolific thinkers of the 19th century? To address this question, this book engages in a psychoanalytic examination of Douglass’ autobiographies and reflects on the resulting psychodynamic, pastoral, and practical theological implications.

FREDERICK DOUGLASS, A PSYCHOBIOGRAPHY
BY: DANJUMA G. GIBSON

In Calvin’s Political Theology and the Public Engagement of the Church, Matthew J. Tuininga explores a little appreciated dimension of John Calvin’s political thought, his two kingdoms theology, as a model for constructive Christian participation in liberal society. Widely misunderstood as a proto-political culture warrior, due in part to his often misinterpreted role in controversies over predestination and the heretic Servetus, Calvin articulated a thoughtful approach to public life rooted in his understanding of the gospel and its teaching concerning the kingdom of God. He staked his ministry in Geneva on his commitment to keeping the church distinct from the state, abandoning simplistic approaches that placed one above the other, while rejecting the temptations of sectarianism or separatism. This revealing analysis of Calvin’s vision offers timely guidance for Christians seeking a mode of faithful, respectful public engagement in democratic, pluralistic communities today.

CALVIN’S POLITICAL THEOLOGY AND THE PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT OF THE CHURCH
BY: MATTHEW J. TUININGA

Tiffany Gosselink joined Calvin Theological Seminary in April 2018 as the part-time Administrative Assistant for the Certificate in Latino Ministry Program. She is a graduate of Calvin College where she majored in international development studies and minored in missions. Tiffany loves learning new languages and traveling. She is fluent in Spanish which she learned through her three summers in Guatemala and her semester abroad in Honduras. Tiffany hopes to do missions and community development work in Central America someday but is happy to get to do so in the U.S. through the Latino Ministry Program. Originally from Pella, IA, Tiffany moved back to Grand Rapids a few years ago. She has worked in the field of education in varying capacities and is very excited to be a part of the Calvin community again. Outside of work, Tiffany keeps herself busy tutoring, taking Wing Chun Kung Fu classes, and cross-stitching.

Tiffany Gosselink

Calvin Seminary welcomes Becky Impellizzeri to the Calvin Seminary community. In her new role as Admissions Office Project Coordinator, Becky helps with a number of initiatives related to admissions and communications. With over a decade of experience at Calvin College having worked in a variety of departments—including event services, student life, development, communications, and enrollment—Becky brings with her knowledge and skills that have already positively influenced the work of enrollment management here at Calvin Seminary.

Outside of work, Becky has a variety of interests and hobbies. She is a golfer and a baker. Becky is a television and movie savant, always ready to provide a suggestion for a good show to binge. She is also an award-winning costume maker. Becky, her husband Mike, and their two children attend LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church. Welcome to Calvin Seminary, Becky!

Becky Impellizzeri
Whether you choose Master of Divinity, Master of Arts in Ministry Leadership, or another program, Calvin Seminary will prepare you for a rich career in ministry, cultivating communities of disciples of Jesus Christ.

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

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

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

Master of Arts in Ministry Leadership

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

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

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