Priesthood of All Believers

CONTINUING TO EQUIP THE

AT CALVIN THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY
In 1990 Jackie and I were considering a call to pastoral ministry. I had been a lawyer for five years in South Florida, but the prompting of the Holy Spirit was gently, but firmly causing us to take steps to move to Michigan so I could become a student at Calvin Theological Seminary.

In June of 1990, I was in Grand Rapids as an elder delegate for the then two-week Synod (annual gathering of CRCNA church leaders). During that Synod, I walked over to the seminary building. I don’t remember much about my walk around the seminary, but those steps were part of our taking a journey a year later when Jackie, myself, and our soon to be four-year-old son, Joshua, moved from Lake Worth, Florida to Grand Rapids, Michigan.

Whenever I walk into our Calvin Theological Seminary building, I am reminded of the generations of support, encouragement and prayers that have surrounded our mission of providing theological education and leaders for the Church. I sometimes think about the persons who entered a “new” seminary in 1959 and what would surprise them about 2022. I am sure that they would be amazed by the current international reach of Calvin Seminary and the technological texture of education. Chalk has been replaced by computers!

We began our plans for a major remodeling of the seminary building even before COVID with these foundational themes:

- Improving technology
- Designing flexibility
- Creating collaborative learning spaces

Even with the advent of online education, we need to make sure that our “home base” is well-suited for serving the wider world through video, podcasts and classroom discussions where we can actually bring people in to learn together.

This issue of the FORUM will share about our physical remodeling, and also provide updates on vocational formation and curriculum redesign for students and the “priesthood of all believers.”

As you read more about “your” seminary that God has used since 1876 to serve the Church as the Church serves the Mission of God, I hope you are encouraged by our continuing to be centered on Christ as we “reform” and “renew” for the future!

Thank you for your continued support for people (like me in 1990) who still walk the hallways of Calvin Seminary – physically or virtually – to discern if, how and when God is calling them to seminary!
One reason the early church grew so dramatically is that all believers saw themselves as priests. By compassionately serving and witnessing to their neighbors, these priests – average Janes and Joes – converted an empire. The church equipped them to do this ministry. Congregations provided discipleship and ministry training for the entire priesthood of all believers – everyone from the new believer to the person preparing to be the next lead pastor. There were no seminaries. For 16 centuries, the local church trained everyone for ministry, including pastors.

Seminaries, as we know them, have existed only for a few centuries. When seminaries were established, they adopted a university model of education and focused on training ministers, not the priesthood of all believers. When I was a Calvin Seminary student 30 years ago, seminaries were largely viewed as places that you would go if you wanted to become an ordained Minister of the Word. Seminaries were for those clergy type people.

Not anymore. Seminaries today are coming alongside churches to help all sorts of Christians take the next step in their discipleship or to develop a gift to serve their community. Calvin Theological Seminary (CTS) is one of those seminaries. During the last decade, CTS has developed various forms of training for the broader priesthood of all believers, including Latino laity, Christian school teachers, prisoners, and many others.

A decade ago, CTS began offering Certificates in Spanish, one for Latino pastors and one in Family Care, geared for laity. 162 people have graduated from these programs. Nearly half of them are lay leaders. These graduates have been a leavening influence on 80 congregations, and 6 new churches have been planted.

In recent years, CTS is also equipping primary and secondary school teachers. In partnership with Christian Schools International, CTS is offering a Certificate in Bible Instruction. Online courses are made to fit teachers’ schedules and can be used toward a master’s degree in education at Calvin University.

Of course, the priesthood of all believers is not only found in Christian organizations such as Latino churches or Christian schools. Part of the priesthood is in prison. In 2015, the Calvin Prison Initiative was established by CTS in partnership with Calvin University and the Michigan Department of Corrections. This initiative offers accredited degrees in Faith and Community Leadership. 145 inmates from throughout the state of Michigan have been admitted into the program and trained at Handlon Prison.

With great zeal, these students pass on and practice what they learn. They offer classes to other prisoners, lead worship services, mentor prisoners one-on-one, and serve inmates with mental health conditions or developmental challenges. Handlon Prison – once known as Gladiator School due to its brutal culture – has been transformed. Violence has plummeted, leaving corrections officers shaking their heads in amazement. Understandably. They have front row seats to watch the Spirit of God, disguised in prison jumpsuits, working through the priesthood of all believers to renew the world behind razor wire.

Last year, CTS began experimenting with another form of equipping the body of Christ. When Covid-19 hit, CTS developed a series of miniature online courses on practical topics to help believers live faithfully in a Covid-shaped world. People could audit these mini courses for a few weeks or take them for credit. Over 400 people from around the world participated. Why? Because seminaries aren’t just for ministers anymore.

Seminaries Aren’t Just for Pastors Anymore

EQUIPPING THE PRIESTHOOD OF ALL BELIEVERS

DAVID RYLAARSDAM
PROFESSOR OF THE HISTORY OF CHRISTIANITY AND WORSHIP

FORUM CALVIN THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY
What have we at CTS learned through our various opportunities to train the priesthood of all believers? It’s time to double down. Now, more than ever, CTS is hearing from churches and parachurch organizations that they need more training for leaders of all ages, experience levels, and ministry roles. Church and seminary together can provide a continuum of discipleship and leadership training, so that every disciple (including pastors) can take the next step in developing their gifts to serve.

Toward that goal, CTS is developing the Next Steps Initiative. This initiative will expand what we are already doing and equip more disciples to take their next step in missional living and service to others. We want to make resources accessible to wherever people are in the world. We want to help form disciples of Jesus in diverse vocations to further the kingdom of God.

For example, CTS plans to expand our miniature courses offered during Covid. We want to offer learning experiences in a variety of formats, including online modules, weekend retreats, and webinars. Learning experiences would include practical evergreen issues such as spiritual formation, one-on-one discipleship, transforming conflict, missional living in all vocations, forming communities for people with all abilities, adaptive leadership, or leading a part of worship well. Such topics are already being taught in current CTS degree programs, but they need to be adapted and delivered in new ways so that a broader spectrum of the kingdom of priests can benefit.

As part of our Next Steps Initiative, CTS also hopes to expand our Latino program beyond West Michigan. Within 25 years, 25% of the U.S. population will likely be Latino. Global migrations are opportune moments for the church. CTS wants to seize the opportunity to learn from and teach pastoral and lay leaders serving a burgeoning Latino population, so that together as the body of Christ we can be agents of renewal in society.

CTS will also develop new alliances in order to serve the countless anointed priests who want to take next steps. Sonlight Church in Port St. Lucie, FL is a good example. During the last 15 years, Sonlight has been training disciples to make disciples. Hundreds of lay people have been trained to engage in one-on-one discipleship (22disciple.com/about). Sonlight is giving further leadership training to many of these disciples: 22 have been licensed to preach by their CRC classis, 8 have become Commissioned Pastors, and 2 have become Ministers of the Word. Sonlight wants CTS to come alongside them in order to further strengthen this continuum of discipleship training. CTS plans to develop modules as well as a competency-based Certificate and an MA degree so that more people are equipped as lay disciplers, ministry staff, or church planters. Competency-based theological education is a new form of accredited seminary education that trains people in their ministry context with a team of pastor and faculty mentors. The goal of this form of education is not for every student to complete a predetermined list of courses and credits with adequate grades. Instead, students learn at their own pace through ministry experiences and study and mentoring, so that they can gradually demonstrate the competencies needed to do their ministry well.

The modules and programs developed for Sonlight can be adapted to other congregations in North America and internationally. Modules and mini learning experiences can also be adapted to the particular needs of leadership networks or organizations. For example, CTS is making plans with Resonate to create learning modules for cohorts of young adults who are serving local mission organizations. CTS is also collaborating with Grand Valley State University to develop training modules and mentoring for undergrad student leaders. Many of these student leaders will never earn a full degree at a seminary, but they will grow in their discipleship and ability to do campus ministry and serve churches.

Through our Next Steps Initiative, CTS is becoming not merely a pipeline for emerging clergy but also a soaker hose, spread throughout the church, collaborating with teaching congregations and organizations to irrigate the growth of a wide range of Christians. Of course, CTS will continue to serve those who will become ordained ministers. In fact, we will probably serve them better, because strengthening the priesthood of all believers makes the church stronger and makes a pastor’s work more realistic. Rather than burning out from doing too much ministry on behalf of laity, pastors can focus on equipping the priesthood of all believers for service. And they will not be alone. Seminary resources and teachers will be alongside them. It’s actually a biblical vision: “Christ himself gave…pastors and teachers to equip his people for works of ministry, so that the body of Christ may be built up” (Eph. 4:11-13). Pastors and teachers equipping together. CTS has always been a community of teachers for the church, and we will continue to be. But now we are discerning alliances so that we can be an equipping resource for a broader spectrum of disciples. Seminaries aren’t just for ministers anymore.
Formation and the Act of Being Attentive

GEOFF VANDERMOLEN
DIRECTOR OF VOCATIONAL FORMATION, CO-DIRECTOR OF DOCTOR OF MINISTRY PROGRAM

Fear. Anxiety. Sorrow. Enmity. Uncertainty. Cruelty. Mistrust. Scattered throughout this world are human hearts and communities bearing the burden of these internal realities. Were these the sum total of liabilities on this season's spreadsheet for humanity it would be more than enough. To the pandemic woes one must also add sorrow of ordinary time including illness, systemic injustices, war, famine, racial inequity, gender bias, the politicization of faith for human gains – and more. The combination of any number of these factors could easily swamp the naïve faith of the innocent, and also nudge resolute followers of Jesus to places of despair and a faith-strangling cynicism.

What's needed is something to offset the weight of the season, a kind of ballast sufficient to keep one's faith aright. This is no pithy recipe to save the church, or a concoction to buoy leaders just a wee bit longer until we can return to a “normal” that is arguably lost forever. No. Jesus will uphold his church, and leaders will make their vocational assessments. What we need is something which enables faith in Jesus to endure, and ministry within a plurality of contexts to be both imagined and realized. What is needed is the courageous discipline of being attentive.

One of the ways that the Vocational Formation Office at CTS serves emerging leaders, mentors, and ministry leaders is by inviting people to develop the discipline of “being attentive.” The act of being attentive includes at least the ability to step outside of one’s self, to wonder, to watch, to listen, to examine, to prayerfully engage and ask questions of the Holy Spirit about all that is going on. Being attentive is often driven by a curiosity that inhabits a space beyond the “oughts and shoulds” of behavior modifications in Christian faith. Rather, it propels one into the territory of imagining simple, good acts, as well as Kingdom responses impregnated with meaning so vital as to act as an antidote to faith-robbing cynicism. Being attentive invites one to return to a place of wonder, where the simple beauty of doing and being good is restored. To be attentive is to courageously and humbly inhabit a interrogative space that is responsive to God's invitation in Jeremiah 33: 3 to "ask, and I (God) will show you great and unsearchable things that you do not understand."

1 The Barna Institute has recently published research showing that nearly 40% of local church pastors are currently in crisis, experiencing burnout, and contemplating leaving pastoral ministry.

2 https://worship.calvin.edu/resources/resource-library/leading-beyond-the-blizzard/
What is needed is the courageous discipline of being attentive.

How do we do this in the Vocational Formation Office? We pursue this mission of critical attentiveness in a variety of ways, including:

- Inviting students to develop the skill and ability to be attentive in community to the stirrings, convictions, and work of the Holy Spirit in their lives as they adjudicate the stewarding of God-given gifts and abilities, as well as their own deficits – both inherited and cultivated.
- Inviting emerging Kingdom leaders to be attentive to areas of sorrow, pain, brokenness that are part of their lives, families of origin, etc. and to lean in, keen to discover and participate in restorative acts in these areas.
- Inviting mentors from real time ministry settings to walk alongside emerging leaders and offer assessments of skills, of character, of person.
- Inviting faculty and students together to wonder about the intersection of biblical theological truths and the challenges of facing this world as a servant of Abba.
- Exploring the development of learning opportunities for pastors who long ago entered ministry, but who desire to be attentive to their person in light of their experiences.
- Inviting students to give developmentally fitting self expression to a growing understanding of all that God is calling out of them and redeeming them to be.

If the past few years in particular have taught us anything, it is the need for humility. Yet, our humility is not without conviction. In fact, our conviction around CTS is that emerging Kingdom leaders must be equipped with biblical knowledge and theological frameworks that are deployed in a plurality of contexts by ministry leaders who know how to be attentive to self and others, who are keenly aware of contextual challenges and considerations, and who are able to live and act in step with the Holy Spirit and the redeeming power of the Gospel for all people.

This constellation of activity makes possible the recollection of incredible truths, including: We are image bearers of God with a truth that is capable of arresting cynicism. We are a people capable of being and contributing goodness. We can love deeply and act redemptively as we bring good news. When we are attentive to God’s grace and the Holy Spirit’s presence, we can see the stains, the injustices of rebellion and the corruption of hearts and culture, all the while looking this world in the eye and speaking words of hope and doing that which is right and good.

While it is no silver bullet or panacea, a good measure of this work relies on our willingness to simply, courageously, and humbly – be attentive.

MDiv student Kelsey Bruinwood entered seminary with a specific vocational outcome in mind. But today, her sense of calling is full of possibilities.

“I came into seminary thinking that I would do non-profit work after seminary, but have since opened myself up to the possibility of doing more focused church ministry,” she says. “I feel both called towards doing work in the church, as well as doing work with those outside of the church.

“I know that I’m currently being called to learn more about God and his world at Calvin Seminary, and I know that I’m called to serve God in whatever space I end up.”

For the Portage, Michigan, native, her contextual learning experience has played a role in how she views her calling. Currently at Calvin Christian Reformed Church for her in-context placement, Bruinwood has the opportunity to be mentored by church leadership and assist in leading the community she first joined as an undergraduate at Calvin University.

“I’m enjoying being able to participate as a weekly liturgist in their worship services,” she says. “Having the opportunity to take the things that I’m learning in class and apply them to the work that I’m doing at Calvin CRC has been so helpful in continuing to form my education.”

Makahal Hartgerink, of Byron Center, Michigan, is graduating this spring with a master of arts degree in ministry leadership, with a focus in education, youth, and family. She also works part-time as a nurse at a pediatric office downtown, living out a passion she has had for years.

“What I have realized is that God is calling me to serve him with all that I am, to use each of the unique gifts he has given me to care for others and bring him glory,” Hartgerink says. “That includes using both my passion for ministry and for nursing.”

When Hartgerink started seminary, her choice to decrease her nursing hours was “a surprising and also difficult decision.”

“But I felt God clearly leading me toward ministry,” she reflects. With that conviction, Hartgerink moved forward with seminary courses online and in-person, while still working with patients a few days a week.

During the course of Hartgerink’s study, the vocational formation office partnered with her to offer a ministry-based elective at City on a Hill Ministries.

“This internship gave me the freedom and opportunity to explore ministry in a parachurch setting for a semester, while getting credit for it,” Hartgerink reflects. “I really enjoyed my time and it helped me more clearly understand my calling and passion for ministry.”

Hartgerink says she has seen firsthand the value Calvin Seminary places on her vocational formation through her contextual learning experiences, formation groups, and relationships with the vocational formation office teams.

“I have benefited from meetings with vocational office staff, such as Rev. Samantha DeJong McCarron and Professor Vandermolen,” she says. “Meeting with them and talking through how the Holy Spirit has been working in my life has been incredibly impactful.”

“Understanding my calling has been an ongoing process,” says Hartgerink, noting that the vocational formation office has nurtured this process in meaningful ways. “The specifics are not yet clear, but I know that God is calling me to continue trusting him and to stand with my hands and heart open to where he is leading me.”
In order to address shifts in student needs and provide an optimal learning environment that supports the equipping of the priesthood of believers for the Kingdom,” Medenblik says, “seminary facilities needed a significant renovation.”

“Our campus experts in the areas of infrastructure and maintenance preserved the building through decades of high caliber stewardship,” Medenblik explains. “Now we are building on that stewardship by allowing this renovation to advance our mission for years to come.”

“After years of careful stewardship, we faced a clear and unavoidable need for building renewal,” says Robert Knoor, director of development. “The seminary’s stakeholders have rallied in the past when the need for additional space arose, and all campus space has been maintained faithfully,” Knoor says. “With an eye toward flexible learning environments, technology, and engagement, the seminary campus was reimagined and infused with new life. Supporters have once again made it possible to align our physical setting with the innovative, life-giving learning and formation that happens here daily.”

The recent Rooted in Christ, Renewing for the Future campaign invited the seminary community to come together to refresh and renew what was built over 60 years ago, in order to continue forming ministry leaders within today’s changing theological education landscape and into the future.

The renovations, which took place from spring 2021 to spring 2022, have launched a new era for the seminary; “an era where technology enables us to reach and serve ministry leaders in training locally, regionally, and globally,” says Chief Operating Officer Margaret Mwenda.

“The renovations are already bringing to life enhanced collaboration in our community, adaptable teaching spaces, and a hospitable environment for all who step onto campus,” says Mwenda.

For over 146 years, Calvin Theological Seminary has trained, equipped, and prepared ministry leaders to serve the Church. The seminary first opened its doors in 1876 as De Theologische School – the CRC pastoral training institution to which Calvin University also traces its origins.
Renewed Spaces

“The seminary’s building renovations mean that the quality of the environment matters to our learning journey,” says student Jean Gomes. “I am confident that students will notice the difference and enjoy the new structure to pursue God’s calling in ministry.”

Visit the seminary in 2022 and you will notice the following renovations, enhancing learning and hospitality community-wide.

Student Center
The Student Center is the community hub of seminary life. Students meet in this central, open space to study, enjoy a meal, or simply find a comfortable space to unwind between classes. The redesign of the layout of this area increases collaboration, maximizes flexibility, and facilitates a better connection to the outdoors. By updating the finishes, furnishings, and lighting, large and small groups alike are now able to enjoy this adaptable space.

Classrooms & Collaborative Spaces
Seminary classrooms have served the community well for over sixty years, but over time, the fixed layout and furniture had limited the flexibility of teaching and learning activities. Current teaching styles emphasize collaboration, encourage more participation, and have increasingly incorporated technology use in the classroom. The addition of furniture and fixtures that are easy to reconfigure and upgrading technology to serve both resident and online students will now enhance and facilitate learning. Further, the creation of social and collaborative spaces to allow for conversations between classes now provides students with comfortable and flexible areas to continue learning alongside one another.

“I am excited to see the updated classroom technology and flexible seating which encourages creative and interactive learning,” says student Rebecca Hall. “I have already experienced students and teachers creatively rearranging the rooms to suit their needs.”

Seminary Spaces
Over the Years

1876
Occupying a small building, De Theologische School opened its doors on William Street in Grand Rapids.

1892
The institution moved to Madison Avenue, with shared use by the seminary (“Theological School”) and the preparatory school (or “literary department”) associated with it from 1892 to 1917, along with Calvin Junior College, which started in 1906.

1917
The institution moved to the Franklin Campus.

1930
A new, separate seminary building is dedicated on the Franklin Campus.

1959
Construction began for the core seminary facilities on the Knollcrest Campus, including classrooms, the chapel, and the auditorium. The transition to this campus took over a decade, starting in 1960 and concluding in 1973.

1973
Faculty offices and several open study spaces were added.

1991
Additional faculty offices were built to handle growth.

2002
A secondary entrance was added, along with the Covenant Room and the Administrative Suite.

2004
The Student Center was constructed.

2021 – 2022
The seminary was renovated to create collaborative spaces, improve outdoor areas, promote learning flexibility, and upgrade furnishings and technology.
Outdoor Space
Being in God’s creation allows for inspiration, renewal, and a connection to nature. The recent addition of outdoor collaborative areas gives students additional study spaces and provides the seminary community with a place to recharge. Offering different environments for students supports the community culture on campus and supports multiple learning.

Welcome Center
First Impressions are Important. When the Welcome Center entrance was constructed, it was created to mark a common and welcoming entry point. As the building has evolved over the years and more entrances have been added, the seminary once again found a need to provide a clear and welcoming entrance. By elevating the roof and adding more windows for natural light, students and guests now know exactly where to enter. Additionally, adding furniture that is flexible and adaptable has allowed this space to seamlessly transition from a classroom into an adaptable meeting room.

Covenant Room
The Covenant Room is used as a classroom or a meeting room by students, faculty, and board members. Upgrading the technology in this space now allows for a variety of course delivery approaches, including hybrid, synchronous, or face-to-face, as well as support video and web conferencing. Further, adding furniture that is flexible and adaptable has allowed this space to seamlessly transition from a classroom into an adaptable meeting room.

Chapel
The Chapel – the soul of the seminary – is a space where students, faculty, staff, and guests gather to worship both individually and in community with one another. This space endures as a welcoming environment, now with updated flexible furnishings and upgraded technology. Additionally, a prayer room along the chapel hallway has been created, providing students space for quiet reflection on campus.

Other Key Improvements
Common spaces at the seminary have also been updated, including fresh wall treatments, flooring, windows, lighting, furniture, and signage, to enhance the premier hospitality that Calvin Seminary is known for.

As the final touches to the renovated seminary building are completed, and while the pandemic continues to complicate gatherings, the seminary campus has yet to re-open fully. It is with anticipation that students like Micah Ringelberg wait for the gathering space to be finalized.

“We often take for granted the good things which God gives and neither notice nor give thanks,” Ringelberg says. “I look forward more to the opportunity for the community to learn and gather again in light of the completion of construction.”

“I can’t wait for the renovations to be finished because the beautiful new entryway will communicate ‘welcome’ and connect us back together, something we’ve all been longing for during the renovations,” Hall adds. “The freshness of it all says, ‘We’re ready and open for where God is leading Calvin Seminary next!”

Current students, alumni, faculty, staff, and friends of the seminary are warmly invited to in-person and virtual grand opening events for the newly renovated seminary.

Professor of worship John Witvliet shared these insights into the priesthood of believers over a decade ago – and they have rung true since the early church.

As Witvliet walks through the newly renovated halls of Calvin Seminary – complete with collaborative spaces, inviting navigation, state-of-the-art technology – he cannot help but think of the many individuals who have made it all possible.

“The original seminary building and each subsequent renovation has only been possible because of a large number of donors and advocates, architects and builders, board members and administrators, faculty and staff. The collective whole is greater than the sum of the parts.”

John Witvliet, Professor of Worship, as told to Reformed Worship

“...where God is leading Calvin Seminary next!”

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We each, as individuals, are priests with full access to the priesthood of Christ. But the notion of the priesthood of all believers is even better than this. The central biblical texts involved here speak about the “royal priesthood” or a “kingdom of priests” – a collective whole. The most luminous and beautiful part of this doctrine is that the church as a whole is a royal priesthood in which all of us as individuals find a home and identity. The whole is greater than the sum of the parts.

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“The original seminary building and each subsequent renovation has only been possible because of a large number of donors and advocates, architects and builders, board members and administrators, faculty and staff. The collective whole is greater than the sum of the individuals involved, and it’s wonderful to have a sense of forward momentum.”

He adds: “the significance of the phrase ‘the royal priesthood’ doesn’t just come from its collective identity, but also from the sense of calling to serve a larger mission. What will make this building beautiful for the sake of the gospel is if it inspires and equips a new generation of leaders for faithful and prophetic ministry in the world. A seminary building is never a destination, but rather a launching pad.”

1 Reformed Worship 5, September 2007
Since 2015, the Calvin Prison Initiative (CPI) has been equipping new students to be Christ’s agents of renewal, offering 20 scholars each year the opportunity to pursue a bachelor’s degree.

Students of the CPI are also inmates, studying at Richard A. Handlon Correctional Facility in Ionia, Michigan, where they are currently incarcerated. At the Handlon campus, students take the same liberal arts core courses as other Calvin University students at the Knollcrest campus, and then take courses specifically oriented toward faith and community leadership, through a partnership between the university and Calvin Theological Seminary.

Unlike students on the seminary and university’s Knollcrest campus, Handlon campus students face judgment from society due to their status as inmates.

“We all live in a world where the burden of proof is upon us that we are worthy of being loved. If that’s true in society generally, that’s true, squared, in an incarcerated setting,” said Reverend Dale Cooper, CPI professor. “Day after day after day, they are reminded that they are chunks of protoplasm. The thing that defines them is ‘you’re an inmate.’”

“If you want to preach to inmates, just remind them that they are of value in the sight of God,” said Cooper. “Several years ago one of my students [an inmate] asked me ‘Pastor Cooper, do you look upon me more as an inmate who happens to be a student or as a student who happens to be an inmate?’ I could say to him, “I look upon you, with me, as one who is understood, accepted, loved, treasured, and valued by the God who pulls us together.”
Gary Burge, dean of the faculty and professor of New Testament, had never stepped foot inside a prison until joining the seminary’s faculty in 2017. To him, the chance to teach students at Handlon the New Testament has been both a privilege and an opportunity for personal transformation.

“The fullest transformation for me was understanding these students as friends and neighbors,” Burge said. “Moreover, the students coming through our program have complex, thoughtful lives, and spiritual maturity of great depth.”

“As Christians, the priesthood of believers doctrine not only shows us our collective impact as the body of Christ – including those incarcerated – but also shows us the direct priestly role we all can take on as transformed people.”

Rick, a CPI student, recently reflected on his experience in the program.

“I learned to grow into a young man who deserves to be seen as human,” wrote Rick. “Before Calvin, I was simply a scarred (and scared) little boy fearful of life. After Calvin...I am a man who seeks to bring hope to others who live in the strongholds...that I once resided in.”

“Rick’s told me continually ‘what I have come to discover through CPI...is my worthwhileness as a human being, and that my insights are valued,’” said Cooper.

After Calvin...I am a man who seeks to bring hope to others who live in the strongholds...that I once resided in.

“The days I share with our class inspire, uplift, and direct my life,” Rick wrote. “As John the Baptist leapt in the womb, so my Spirit leaps on these days. I crave a community such as this on a more daily basis.”

It’s up to men like Rick, through the powerful work of the Holy Spirit, to make this true through their unique, yet universal, priesthood.

I look upon you, with me, as one who is understood, accepted, loved, treasured, and valued by the God who pulls us together.

MATT KUCINSKI
Assistant Director of Media Relations
Calvin University

This story was modified from When the Numbers Begin to Fade, an article appearing in Calvin University News & Stories, 2021.
Even before the Covid-19 pandemic, major social and cultural shifts were already re-shaping congregational life in North America. Quickly changing ministry contexts meant that ministry leadership needs were also changing. Before the pandemic, Calvin Seminary had been hard at work to adapt and keep in step with a changing world. Then came the profoundly disruptive and prolonged global pandemic. Almost overnight, the pace of social change accelerated as we experienced disruption in every area of our personal and collective lives. For many of us, the pandemic prompted intense personal soul searching. As an organization, Calvin Seminary did some soul searching, too. Amidst all of the pivoting, flexing, building, and adapting of our educational models for the short term, we engaged in a process of strategic imagination and design for the long term. The result was a project called the Next Steps Initiative. While we remain committed to providing robust graduate degrees, the Next Steps Initiative is intended to deepen our mission by expanding our impact. This new effort is aimed at equipping the broader priesthood of all believers through innovative educational models that are more collaborative, flexible, adaptable, and accessible.

For over 145 years, the primary mission of Calvin Seminary has been to equip pastors and leaders for the flourishing of the church. As we have listened to what experts are saying about the future of theological education, we have been particularly struck by the call to change issued by Justo González, an advisor and teacher in our Latino Ministry Program. In the past, Calvin Theological Seminary has prepared pastors mainly through traditional degree programs, an approach that González refers to as the “theological education pipeline.” He argues that the pipeline approach is no longer suited to today’s educational and cultural landscape. Instead, González exhorts seminaries to transition from a pipeline model to an “irrigation hose” model, developing flexible educational programs that support the growth and flourishing of a wider range of Christian leaders. The Next Steps Initiative aims to do exactly that. The purpose of the Next Steps Initiative is to equip a wider spectrum of ministry leaders who need innovative educational support in order to take the next steps in their ministry leadership development. Specifically, the Next Steps Initiative will:

1. Prepare and equip adult learners who might not desire to complete a full seminary degree, such as commissioned pastors, and seasoned ministry leaders seeking continuing education.
2. Make ministry training more accessible to adult learners with diverse family situations, schedules, languages, and income levels.
3. Develop a network of “teaching congregations” with whom we will collaborate to facilitate innovative and customizable learning opportunities for those congregations’ adult learners and ministry leaders.

By working toward these goals, we will be fulfilling our primary mission of equipping pastors and lay leaders for the flourishing of the church. Starting in 2022, we will begin collaboratively developing modules, cohorts, regional events, certificate programs, and other learning experiences that equip and support the work of the Priesthood of all Believers.

AARON EINFELD
Director of Lifelong Learning and Partnerships

As its name obviously suggests, the Center for Excellence in Preaching (CEP) is designed primarily to help preachers in the writing of sermons. CEP strives to jump start every pastor's creativity in engaging God's Word, inspiring them to produce lively sermons of power and beauty.

In the Fall of 2021, CEP launched a new website, cepreaching.org, that restructured our existing, high-quality content and now provides an immersive experience with easy-to-find sermon commentary for all preachers. It also includes a new Preaching Connections section allowing pastors to search for relevant illustrations and quotes to fit preaching topics and themes. Since the launch of the new website, CEP has had as many as 17,000 different visitors to the site in just one month!

Sparking creativity to help preachers preach.

The Center for Excellence in Preaching (CEP) at Calvin Theological Seminary provides busy preachers with the resources they need to preach fresh, compelling, vibrant sermons from God’s Word and has been doing so since 2005.

In 2021, CEP provided content 2.1 million times to individuals in many denominations spanning over 200 countries, reaching the worldwide church.

Probably most of those visitors are pastors but in the spirit of the Priesthood of All Believers, we want to encourage many more people in the church to consider using the resources on the CEP website. Every church has Bible study leaders, and the sermon commentaries on the website provide lots of insight and ideas for Bible Study groups eager to dig deeply into God’s Word. Churches also have Sunday school teachers, youth group leaders, and others who are asked to do opening devotions for various events. Again, the information on a wealth of Bible texts contained in the sermon commentaries would be helpful for many people in the church. Just search for the Bible passage you are looking at and results will pop up!

We would also encourage all church members to point their pastors to the offerings of CEP. There are “Fine Tune Your Preaching” short teaching videos designed to help pastors shine up some of the most basic skills of sermon writing. CEP continues to offer one-week summer seminars that pastors can participate in as part of their annual study weeks. In the summer of 2021 a seminar on the Seven Deadly sins was led by Neal Plantinga and Scott Hoezee. Additionally a brand new seminar on preaching in the power of the Holy Spirit was led by David Beelen and Joy Bonnema. In summer 2022 a seminar on how pastors deal with grief is slated for July.

As the year 2021 came to a conclusion, so also did CEP’s participation in The Initiative to Strengthen Preaching in North America, a grant program sponsored by Lilly Endowment. From 2014-2021 the Center used generous Lilly grants totaling $750,000 to sponsor numerous Peer Learning Groups throughout the U.S. and Canada. Although the grant program has ended, CEP will continue to sponsor Peer Learning Groups and we encourage pastors to consider forming a group with area peers.

We remain grateful to God for generous donors and for Lilly Endowment who make this vital work possible. Former CTS President Neal Plantinga said at the founding of CEP that the goal was to help preaching in Christ's church be eventful, an occasion for the Holy Spirit to change lives through the Word preached. We give thanks to God that CEP continues to be able to help support just that kind of preaching ministry.

Scott Hoezee
Director of the Center for Excellence in Preaching
A New Testament scholar, a seasoned preacher and an experienced tour guide who has led over 40 trips to ancient biblical sites in Greece, Turkey, Italy, Israel and Jordan explains in this book the meaning of the seven sermons of Revelation 2-3 and shows how these ancient messages are relevant for the church today.

A common reading of the book of Revelation sees these seven churches as healthy communities of Christ-followers who are suffering much for their faith at the hands of oppressive Roman authorities, and the book of Revelation is assumed to have been written to encourage these persecuted believers with the good news that Christ will ultimately be victorious and that their faith in him will be vindicated. This widespread but mistaken view of the readers’ situation makes it too easy for contemporary Christians to ignore the book of Revelation because our current North American situation does not similarly involve this kind of persecution, and consequently Christ’s message to the seven churches does not seem relevant to our day and situation.

A careful study of the sermons to the seven churches of Rev. 2-3, however, reveals that the majority of these congregations are spiritually unhealthy – more in danger of compromising with the world than of dying to it. Christ warns five churches against a variety of problems such as their failure to love fellow believers, idolatry, sexual immorality, false teaching, and complacency – all problems with which the affluent Western church struggles today. Although the central problem for the remaining two healthy churches is persecution, which is not a primary concern for the Western church, opposition to the Christian faith is increasingly an issue for many contemporary churches around the globe. All of this makes the sermons to the seven churches extremely relevant to our times and important texts on which to preach and teach.

Desiring to return to the mountains that continue to serve as a reminder of God and a comfort of what he is capable of, I moved back to California to teach at a small Christian school in San Jose. I taught middle school English to the generation of the internet and social media. I encouraged those students to step outside their bubbles and open their eyes to God’s majesty, to see how he is at work in all things.

After all these years of building on my passions, I find myself on the board of a small retreat center nestled in the foothills of the Sierra Nevadas of Northern California – Red Bench Retreat Center – and serving as the Admissions Counselor at Calvin Seminary. Living out God’s majestic kingdom community requires places for self-reflection and places to further understand the Word of God. I look forward to connecting people to opportunities at Calvin Seminary that will help them see more clearly God’s majesty on Earth and how they may be a part of helping make it shine even brighter.

I grew up in the valley of a big hill with the Sierra Nevadas in view from my backyard on clear days. I grew up with a daily reminder of how great our God is and how vast his accomplishments are. I came to believe that if he is able to create such majestic beauty, there is no doubt that he is able to use my life to make his kingdom on Earth just as beautiful as the world that towered over me.

Early on I strived to be someone who helped others reach new heights and experience God’s joy. I passionately pursued building strong communities because if there is one thing I’ve learned from climbing mountains with a pack on my back, doing it with others makes the experience a little easier and much more enjoyable.

These pursuits manifested themselves through different capacities in the education realm. I began my career teaching conversational English to Hungarian high school students. I entered an environment where alcoholism, depression, suicide, and divorce were high. I sought to be God’s light in a place where freshman students would talk about how bad their hangovers were over the weekend. Being a Christian had to actually mean something.

Leaving Hungary, I began work in Residence Life at Calvin College (now University). I walked alongside students as they began discerning their calling. I worked with student leaders to model what a community centered on God could look like.
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