Engaging the World
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It was last year that we began a *Forum* series called “Engaging.” We began with “Engaging the Scriptures” and followed that with “Engaging the Forms of Unity” and “Engaging the Church.” The editorial committee of the *Forum* felt a need for one more. We knew that we needed to make space in this conversation for the kingdom of God. We knew that we cannot lose that focus.

The church does not exist for herself. She exists as the bride of Christ with a particular mission. The organized church is where citizens of the kingdom of God are nurtured. One way to frame that understanding is to articulate the distinction between “the Church as institute” and “the Church as Organism.”

This phrasing is part of the articulation of our Reformed tradition’s understanding of the biblical mandate to be in the world, but not of the world. Scripture and a healthy, relevant understanding of tradition are our ground and motive for this issue of the *Forum*.

In this issue, Professor John Cooper will highlight helpful themes that frame our understanding of church, kingdom and the fulfillment of the Great Commission. I will then provide some examples of how those themes formed the ministry of a local church. Finally, we will share some of the additional training and learning venues that are at work at Calvin Theological Seminary.

As we discussed this issue, we were aware that what is “old” is seemingly new again. There seems to be resurgence in seeking to understand categories or insights from the past for the present and the future.

As we come to the conclusion (we think) of the “Engaging” series, we invite your input as to other topics for series or single-issue treatment. You can make your suggestions by emailing forum@calvinseminary.edu.

Thank you for your assistance and for your part in the conversation!

Grace and Peace,

Jul
Church, Kingdom, and the Great Commission

The Church and the Kingdom in Scripture

The last issue of Forum was about the church, and this one is about God’s kingdom. From beginning to end, the Bible is about God’s people (the church) in his kingdom—their creation, fall, redemption through Jesus Christ, and everlasting life with God. God, the Great King, created, structured, and rules the universe as his kingdom. He staffed its territories with the heavenly bodies, birds, fish, and animals. He made humans to love and obey him, to populate the world and live in community, to rule and care for it, and to develop culture. The whole creation is God’s kingdom, and all creatures are his servants, but humans—God’s people, the church—are his imagebearers, covenant partners, and beloved children.

When we humans committed treason against the King by listening to the serpent, we forfeited life and peace with God in his kingdom. Because we were created in God’s image, we still need him and his kingdom. But since the fall, we have organized our societies and developed our cultures while serving other gods—often ourselves—and seeking their kingdoms. History is humanity’s search for the lost kingdom while avoiding its King. From Genesis 11 to Revelation 17, we prefer Babylon—the worldly city.

But even before creation, God planned to restore his people in his kingdom by bringing the whole creation to fulfillment through Jesus Christ (Col 1:15-20; Eph. 1:3-10). God’s covenant of redemption made to Abraham (Gen. 17) includes the nations, their kings, and the land. The Israelites in Canaan were only the beginning of its fulfillment. Isaiah, who saw the Lord on his throne as the Great King, envisions a new Jerusalem and a new heaven and earth for God’s people (6:1-5; 65:18ff.). Jesus Christ is the royal son of David, the Son of God the King, who rescues the kingdoms of the world from Satan (Matt. 4:8-11). He was crucified as King of the Jews, rose again, and ascended to his throne with the Father. He rules the world and builds the church until he comes again as Judge, presents the kingdom to his Father, and presides with him as King of kings and Lord of lords. God’s people will worship him and reign with him in the New Jerusalem in the New Heaven and Earth forever.

From beginning to end, the Bible is about the mighty acts of God to create, save, and restore his people, the church, to be his beloved children and citizens of his everlasting kingdom. God’s project is the meaning of history and everything in our lives. We marvel and praise him for it. But he gives us a part to play too.

Jesus’ Commission, the Church, and the Kingdom

Just before he ascended to heaven, King Jesus gave his disciples the Great Commission (Matt. 28:16-20). All authority in heaven and earth belong to him. He came to redeem creation, and humans are his most beloved creatures. So he sends his disciples to evangelize, baptize, and teach people everywhere to obey everything that he commands. His commission is as comprehensive as his kingdom. He calls all of us, not just missionaries and church leaders. He sends us to all people—our children, friends, and neighbors as well as strangers and other nations. He wants obedience in all of life—education, vocation, recreation, finances, and citizenship—not just in personal faith, family, and church. King Jesus calls us to participate in God’s work of repatriating his people and promoting his kingdom. Christ sanctifies the work we do for him and his people, and he gives it everlasting significance (1 Cor. 3:10-15). He promised to be with us ‘til kingdom come, and he sent the Holy Spirit to energize and guide us (Acts 2).

Ever since, the Lord has empowered Christians to obey the Great Commission. As a result, we have...
made disciples and engaged the world as Christians. Beginning in Jerusalem, Christ and the Spirit built the church throughout the Roman Empire and beyond (Acts). From a few disciples, we have become billions and are still growing—especially in historically non-Christian parts of the world. From a persecuted minority, Christians have become large and powerful groups in many countries. In these places we have been free to worship, evangelize, and disciple openly. We have also been able to participate in civil societies, economies, and public cultures with integrity, ingenuity, justice, and stewardship. Christians are major contributors to government, business, technology, education, and the arts. Praying that God’s will be done on earth as it is in heaven and working to obey everything that Christ has commanded, we have contributed to the general welfare and improvement of society and culture. Some have started Christian schools, businesses, social organizations, and political movements, and a few have even dreamt of a Christian civilization.

This creation-wide vision of God’s kingdom and Christ’s commission is a basic theme of the Kuyperian Calvinism that has shaped the Christian Reformed Church, our personal lifestyles, and the Christian education of our children. We cultivate personal piety and holiness, worship together, engage in evangelism, and help the needy. We also profess that Christ owns every square inch of creation, invoke the cultural mandate, and view all of our activities as Christian vocations. We educate our children to love God, obey his commands, and seek his kingdom in every aspect of their personal lives. But they cannot openly worship or evangelize, much less influence society at large. In addition, millions of gifted disciples have been side-lined because of their gender, ethnicity, or social class, sometimes by other Christians who have status and power. But the Lord blesses the faithful witness of the powerless, and the church often grows more vigorously under stress and oppression than when Christians enjoy comfort and status.

For two thousand years Jesus has blessed his disciples as they obey his commission, just as he promised. But twenty centuries of growth have also generated questions and concerns about Jesus’ church and kingdom that the disciples in Matthew 28 did not face.

**In the World but Not of the World**

The first disciples were painfully aware that fallen humans worship other gods, seek other kingdoms, and try to rewrite God’s rules for life. They were faithful as a minority excluded from the Roman establishment. Many of us, on the other hand, are included. Our challenge is to remain faithful when we participate in cultures and societies that are based on pagan deities (Babylon, Rome), modern idolatries (pleasure, wealth, power), or secular ideologies (anti-religious religions). Can we be peer-approved scientists without adopting scientific materialism and evolutionism? Can we make headway in politics without selling out to liberal individualism or romantic socialism? Can business, technology, or farming according to biblical principles of justice and stewardship survive in the ruthlessly competitive marketplace? Can Christians be successful in popular culture if they don’t share mainstream values? Participating in the world while faithfully serving Christ requires spiritual wisdom, biblical discernment, and discipline.

Abraham Kuyper helpfully distinguished common grace and the antithesis. The antithesis is the opposition of Satan and fallen humans to Christ and his kingdom. Scripture even speaks of two kingdoms—the kingdom of Christ and the kingdom of darkness, which Christ will defeat. We may not be disloyal or disobedient to Christ while participating in the world.

Common grace is God’s providential preservation of goodness in creation in spite of the fall. He graciously rules and preserves the fallen world in order to renew it. He upholds the normative order and the natural abilities of fallen imagebearers. As a result, there is still much (non-redemptive) good in nature, individual humans, society, and culture. By God’s providence, unbelievers love their neighbors, are conscientious workers, discover life-saving medicines, produce beautiful art, and promote justice. We can work with them.

Concern about the kingdom of darkness does not excuse Christians from participating in society and culture. God’s providence of the world includes Christian contributions. God wants us to pray for and promote the welfare of the societies in which we live, just as Joseph, Daniel, Esther, and Cornelius did. If a pagan emperor is God’s servant to preserve justice and order (Rom. 13), how much more fully can Christian rulers serve?

We are called to be in the world but not of it. The right balance for each of us is a matter of prayer, spiritual discernment, and wisdom—not a theological calculation. Each of us must seek to obey and implement God’s will for life as much as we can, wherever he places us. Most of us have positions with
limited choices, opportunities, and responsibilities. Some of us have significant power and influence. None of us should yield to idolatry or concede anti-Christian principles. God desires faithfulness; success is up to him.

But the world is a complex and sometimes confusing mixture of good (common grace) and evil (the antithesis). It is practically impossible to be involved in society and culture without picking battles and making compromises. Those who insist on total purity or nothing usually end up with nothing—isolated from the world. Sometimes obedience does require us to refuse compliance or even to leave a position we hold. But that choice can be disastrous for us and the families for whom we are responsible to God. Often we can remain engaged but will suffer resistance. Sometimes God blesses our participation with success and even enables us to witness about Jesus Christ, the reason for our good work. All of us need prayer, spiritual discernment, and wisdom to know God’s will for our particular situations in the world.

**Gospel and Culture, Word and Deed**

Jesus’ commission is to make disciples, baptizing and teaching them complete obedience. People do not come to repentance, faith, and obedience without hearing the good news of salvation through Jesus Christ. Thus, engaging the world raises another question, the issue of gospel and culture, word and deed: Must all of our participation in society involve explicit witness to the gospel and the teachings of Scripture? Must Christian office and factory workers, nurses, bankers, and fire-fighters regularly preach the gospel and appeal to biblical commands on the job?

In general we base our participation in the world on God’s common grace, which upholds his norms for creation and the common good. God’s ways are the best for all human endeavors and aspirations. He often enables people to see the wisdom of his ways even when they do not acknowledge him (Rom. 1, 2). Thus Christians can implement God’s will effectively in society and culture without constantly invoking Christ and Scripture. It is possible to minister using deeds without words—to give a cup of water without mentioning Jesus. In many worldly situations this is the wisest strategy.

But we should always be prepared to proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior (1 Pet. 3:16). Philanthropy and cultural contributions without the gospel at most afford partial and temporary improvement of earthly life. But Jesus points out the folly of gaining the whole world and losing one’s soul (Mark 8:36). Knowledge, self-esteem, success, justice, beauty, community, happiness, health, sound environment—all of these conditions are rooted in creation and are important goals of kingdom seeking. They make crucial differences in people’s lives. But they are transient and do not lead to eternal life. Kingdom activities that are not overtly linked to salvation through Jesus Christ may only be instruments of God’s providence of the world, which is headed for judgment. At worst they are merely cultural Christianity or the social gospel.

Jesus’ Great Commission implies a mandate for social and cultural activity that is rooted in the image of God. Jesus commands us to seek first God’s kingdom. But those activities should not be separated from Christ’s mandate to make disciples of all nations. In principle, reforming culture and promoting justice cannot be isolated from sharing the gospel. Word and deed belong together.

**Church as Organism and Institution**

World-engaging Christianity is not an alternative to personal piety and holiness; it grows from them. We cannot make disciples of the nations and teach them to observe all God’s commands if we are not disciples ourselves. We cannot be obedient and effective employees, citizens, and consumers if we do not faithfully read Scripture, pray, fellowship with other believers, and gather with them around the Word and sacraments. We cannot be God’s people in the world unless we are God’s people gathered from the world for blessing and worship.

Kuyper distinguished between the church as organism and institution. The church as organism is God’s people in all modes of life—individuals in families, friendships, vocations, social organizations, and citizens, as well as members of the church as an institution or organization. The church as institution consists of the congregations and denominations where God’s people are gathered for worship, discipleship, fellowship, and outreach.

The church as organism is called to witness the gospel and obey God’s commands in every area of life and society. Sometimes it appropriately engages in public deeds without the explicit word of the gospel—it gives a cup of water without naming Jesus. But the calling of the church as institution is centered on the Word and sacraments—to proclaim Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord and everything taught in Scripture, to nurture the faith and lives of God’s people, and to share the gospel with others. It is not called to engagement or expertise in business, social reform, politics, art, or environmental stewardship. When it proclaims God’s norms for society and culture from Scripture, and when it helps the needy, poor, and oppressed, it should also share the gospel of Jesus Christ in obedience to the Great Commission. The institutional church must give the cup of water in Jesus’ name.

May the Lord be with us all as we seek his kingdom and disciple the nations until he comes again.
Dr. John Cooper has written a primer on some of the key terms and tensions that are part of the Reformed tradition—especially as it impacts our understanding of what Scripture teaches about the church and the kingdom and their relationship. For example, he highlighted that Reformed Christians believe in the pervasiveness of sin as part of our understanding the “antithesis”; but we also believe in God’s sovereign rule over all of creation, which forms the background for our understanding of “common grace.”

What does understanding such key terms and tensions mean for us? Does it matter? Does it make a difference?

I write this article as a former church planter. I also write this article knowing that we live in a world where, in the name of toleration, we many times move to a muddled middle rather than clarity based on distinctives. We may even avoid identifying differences and distinctions because we fear that we may be labeled as narrow minded. And yet, differences and distinctions are important not only for our orthodoxy, but also for our orthopraxis.

In this article, I hope to illustrate some of the “So what?” implications flowing out of Dr. Cooper’s article.

**Antithesis and Common Grace**

The categories of “antithesis” and “common grace” challenge us to be both discerning of and open to the community and world around us.

The taint of sin is everywhere. The outlooks and worldviews of others are not the same as of those who acknowledge the Lordship of Jesus Christ. The antithesis helps us see the roots of sin and idolatry and the extent of the brokenness that lies beneath the veneer of our culture.

As a new church planter in New Lenox, I investigated the community I was now calling home. As part of my orientation, I met with other pastors and asked them about their ministry and the community. I still remember Pastor Dave saying that New Lenox was infected by “over” disease. He went on to explain that people were overly committed in time as shown by their calendars, overly extended in their finances as shown by their checkbooks—and overly optimistic about how a move to New Lenox was going to fix their problems.

The gods of achievement, consumerism and materialism were alive and well in New Lenox. I saw many a big house with no real furniture inside because people extended their borrowing to buy the house, but did not leave room in their budget to include furniture for their home. Living in their empty houses, people would fill their calendar with activities in an effort to fill their lives. As an illustration of how people chose to fill their calendars, Pastor Dave shared about an early Easter service where a child arrived in their soccer uniform to attend a game later that day. When asked why coaches would put together a schedule of games for Easter Sunday, the parent’s answer was, “I do not know,” along with an explanation that the parent thought it better to not push the coach on that topic.

The coach was living out the value that sport (and sports achievement) was a great way to find meaning and fulfillment in life. Parents were following along because “good parenting” was seen as making sure that your child was involved in lots of activities, which also coincided with the hopes of many that their child would be good enough to get a college scholarship someday.

The “antithesis” analysis helped me in framing the good news of the gospel to this community that had “over” disease. Understanding the idols of our day and calling people to turn from those idols helped to introduce and teach about biblical themes of ministry like Sabbath, stewardship, and discipleship not as “one more thing to do,” but as the living out of a new life with Christ. Moralism is ultimately about rules and rituals, but the gospel is about a new life, as individuals and within a community, with Jesus.

I could have taken this emphasis on the antithesis and decided that our church was called to be separate from this world, but an understanding of common grace compelled me to also engage our community. It led to conversations with schools and coaches about how to have “space” for children in terms of calendar, including Easter Sunday.

Another outgrowth of our engagement led New Life Church to join the local Chamber of Commerce and eventually led me to be a Chamber of Commerce Board member for nine years. I may have initially been accepted for “pastor’s blessing over meals,” but our church ministry became known for more. Our knowledge of the community and the community’s knowledge of New Life led to cooperation and collaboration in such areas as publicizing recovery ministries and developing a food pantry. New Life Church found favor in the community as we entered into the life of the community.

**Church as Institution and Church as Organism**

Churches and church leaders are pulled in multiple directions. There are a number of good things to do and be involved in, but the church is tasked with a particular mission. The distinction between “church as institution” and “church as organism” helps the church to focus, but also empowers the church as the people of God.
A key Bible passage for understanding the role of church leadership is Ephesians 4:11-13:

It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

Congregations can have an inward focus. Our announcements and calendar tend to be centered on congregational activities. And yet, the church gathers on Sunday to be the church in the world. The church is to do both. We gather for worship, fellowship, and mutual edification as well as to be equipped for life in the world.

A Reformed view of the world of work holds that faith is to frame and inform the work of individual Christians in their various endeavors. Works of service are not just works in the church for the congregation. Works of service are works related to kingdom service. The church as institution is a nurturing environment where the people of God (church as organism) are prepared to enter into kingdom service.

When a church holds a course on creation care, it is meant to affect how we live in the world. When a church acknowledges the 50th anniversary of the March on Washington, it lifts up the prophetic voice of the church and calls for church members to combat the effects of racism and social injustice.

When the distinction between church as organism and church as institution is lost, we can slip into a new type of legalism where to be a Christian is also to be on the “right side” of social issues of the day. The church does have a prophetic voice and needs to address, for example, the dangers of individualism, infatuation with pop culture, body images presented for young men and women, hedonism, and inequities in our justice system. However, it needs to frame the issues so that Christians who work in these areas can provide wise discernment and counsel.

Underlying this distinction between church as organism and church as institution is the understanding that the church is distinct from the kingdom of God. The church is the foretaste, vanguard, and agent of the coming kingdom. The organized church is the school where citizens of the kingdom of God are nurtured. The church is made up of God’s people, and the kingdom is his rule over the whole of creation. The focus of church life and teaching is not only to make better Christians, but to disciple Christians who live and work in the world. As Professor Cooper noted, “He wants obedience in all of life—education, vocation, recreation, finances, and citizenship—not just in personal faith, family and church.”

This distinction helps us present a gospel that calls people to live their entire lives and weekly calendar under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. As a new church planter, I was calling people to live deep lives of “reformation” and renewal rather than experience a ritual of an hour on Sunday. I was calling them to new life in Christ, which would affect all of their life and work.

Navigating the Tensions: Word & Deed Ministry as well as Gospel & Culture

Professor Cooper rightly notes that it is possible to minister using deeds without words, but we also need to be prepared to proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Any time the church and its members slide to one side at the expense of the other, there is a weakening of our witness.

To be proclaimers of the Word and not doers of the Word opens us up to the charge of hypocrisy. The good news means food and justice as well as forgiveness of sins and everlasting life. To be doers of the Word and not proclaimers of the Word risks the church being likened and limited to any not-for-profit social service agency. The church is more and her message is more. The whole of the gospel is meant to address the whole of life.

And in our presentation of that gospel, it is helpful to have an awareness of how the gospel is affected by a particular culture or is presented in a particular context. Tim Keller, founding pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church, at a 2010 Urban Church conference in New York City, noted that the gospel is about presenting a way of living that is both distinctly Christian and yet relevant and helpful. Keller identified that our world tends to seek salvation in self by either the way of licentiousness (do whatever you want) or the way of legalism (follow the rules of someone or some religion). As an alternative, Keller presented the gospel as lived out in a particular culture.

The gospel is certainly presented in a particular context. There are streams of Christian witness that fail to adapt to or interact with the culture and thus increasingly appear to be irrelevant. There are also streams of Christian witness that capitulate or overly adapt to the culture; they are also irrelevant because they are indistinguishable from the culture. The gospel calls for us to seek wisdom about the extent and scope of adaptation while maintaining a distinctively Christian presence and witness.

In a world that seeks to polarize people and positions, Reformed Christianity stands out in both acknowledging the tensions that exist and seeking to navigate between those tensions. The breadth and depth of the Christian witness is flattened when we collapse categories and fail to navigate the tensions. We have a story that takes us through the full range of creation, fall, redemption, and new creation. Reformed Christianity seeks to present this full, life-giving gospel—to demonstrate that living by the gospel leads to a full life in this world, not just insurance for the life to come.

Identifying the distinctives matters because getting them right helps us to sound the right notes of the gospel to a world out of rhythm with the Creator of heaven and earth. Understanding the categories can really help us share the “good news” well.
Few of us would dispute that the Great Commission includes a call to engage the world. We can’t make disciples of all nations without first being citizens; we don’t shine much light from under a bowl. Still, many of us—even those in full-time church ministry—can wrestle with just how to engage our world. There are church budgets to balance and ministries to oversee, sermons to write and small groups to nurture. How do we do neighborhood engagement too? Is simply being a city on a hill enough?

Calvin Seminary partners with several ministries whose work includes seeing God’s kingdom expand into new territories. While these ministries serve diverse populations, they are united in missional posture.

In other words, engaging the world for the sake of Jesus isn’t simply something they do; it’s something they are. As “institution,” the churches profiled here lean into the role to preach the gospel to those near and far. And hearing the gospel, in turn, mobilizes these “organic” Christians as they bring Jesus to the soup kitchen, city street, and prison block.

Word and deed really do go together.

Cultivating Holy-Spirited Curiosity on Visits to the Citadel of Faith

Every year, Old Testament Professor Carl Bosma drives a van full of Calvin seminary students across Michigan for a visit to the Citadel of Faith, an Evangelical Covenant Church of about 800 members in the heart of Detroit.

Why? To model sincere interest in others for the sake of sharing Christ.

Most often the group starts the trip with a stop for doughnuts and coffee. Bosma is aware that his interactions with hosts and serving staff are teaching opportunities.

“Missions is taught,” he says. “Students see how I get information out of people…. You have to get to know the people.”

The students say they learn in the two-day visit what would take two months to cover in the classroom. “Going to Detroit was like doing the lab work for our theological studies,” 2013 participant Victor Perez said.

At the Citadel of Faith, students experience a church with singular focus on reaching its neighborhood. Senior pastor Harvey Carey’s dynamic, missional preaching mobilizes congregants for outreach. “You’re saved to serve, not to sit in a pew,” he says.

That saved-to-serve mentality includes everyone, new believer to aged saint. Bosma recalls one visit to the church when an attendee received Christ in the middle of a service. Pastor Carey called on the new Christian to go directly to one of the soup kitchens and start serving.

Calvin Seminary alum Mark VanAndel and his wife, Kristen, live near the church with their three sons. They have worshipped and served at the Citadel of Faith for ten years. VanAndel joined the church staff as the pastor of community three and a half years ago. His background in community development and youth ministry and his heart for lost people propelled him into this role. “We have a firm conviction that Christians should be running to places of great need in the world, and should do that in a healthy and dignifying way,” VanAndel says.

The church has held large meetings across the street from crack houses, effectively shutting many of them down. It has come alongside women working as prostitutes to share Jesus on Woodward Avenue. It also holds unannounced monthly outreach efforts during regular Sunday services.

“Our pastor says, ‘If something is important enough to do in a church, often you’ve got to do it between ten and noon on a Sunday,’” VanAndel says. “[Pastor Carey] doesn’t diminish the value of worship; he raises the value of evangelism.”

People gather for worship and a short sermon; then go out in groups to meet neighbors and offer prayer. “Our goal is that people live ongoing lives of mission and evangelism, but we recognize that some people will never take a step to go to a special outreach event. So we take that to them…. It has become the new normal in our church.”

Bosma has visted the Citadel of Faith five times, and he plans to take students again. “Very few of the students have done evangelism. They learn about it in class and think they can just write it down in a bluebook and be done with it. That’s the model I want to break. You’ve got to show ’em.”

The Renewal Lab Keeps Mission Central

Back in West Michigan, Pastor Keith Doornbos of Providence CRC has partnered with Calvin Seminary’s Institute for Global Church Planting and Renewal to strengthen churches in their sense of mission. His program, called The Renewal Lab, provides practical tools and support to guide churches through a two-year, directed process to kick-start revitalization.

The task of church revitalization and redevelopment is familiar to Doornbos. When he became the pastor at Providence twenty years ago, his congregation numbered eighty. Today he shepherds 800.

“We’ve been relentless in the pursuit of revitalizing the congregation and creating a missional community that’s an epicenter of God’s love in this world,” Doornbos says. “God has blessed that.”
Doornbos’s goal now is to help foster other “pulsating epicenters” that radiate God’s love. “North America is the only continent where Christianity isn’t growing,” Doornbos says. “We’re about creating vibrant missional communities, not just vibrant communities. Churches that are healthy and strong and full of the gospel.”

What compels a busy pastor to take on a renewal project outside his own congregation? An unflagging sense that the church exists for the sake of the world. Two years ago, Doornbos recognized what he calls “excess capacity” at Providence. John Burden, a recent Calvin Seminary graduate, had joined the church’s staff and had begun preaching twice a month. Doornbos viewed his freed-up time as a gift from God for the sake of the kingdom. “We had the ability to do something beyond ourselves,” he says. So Doornbos partnered with a congregation in his classis as it underwent a leadership transition and sought revitalization. Then he worked with Calvin Seminary to place an intern at the church.

One conversation with seminary staff and faculty led to another, and The Renewal Lab was born. Doornbos now devotes 60 percent of his time to Providence and 40 percent of his time to The Renewal Lab. Participating churches attend eight quarterly, four-day learning labs at Calvin Seminary. Each lab begins with two days of practical instruction for pastors, and pastors then teach what they’ve learned to their teams. The whole group comes together for a banquet, large group lecture, and peer learning. Expert coaches are assigned to each pastor and lay leader for ongoing encouragement and feedback.

Eleven churches and 120 leaders make up this year’s cohort. Some churches are growing, and some have seen membership plateau or decline. Seminary interns are placed at three of the participating churches.

Seminarian Elaine May is an intern at one of the Renewal Lab churches, Mayfair CRC. May began her work at Mayfair early this summer. Her first sermon text? The call of Abraham, Genesis 12:1-9. The theme was “blessed to be a blessing.” May undertakes her work with sensitivity to the congregation’s context balanced by conviction about what God asks his church to become. “Change happens when there’s tension between where we are and where we believe God is calling us,” she says. “It’s my human nature to resist tension, and as a result, not experience change. And yet it is the power of the Spirit that gives me the courage to embark on an adventure only Jesus can lead.”

Expanding Ideas of Where God Works: Prison Ministries at Angola and Handlon

Imagine an ideal setting for spiritual revival. Odds are good that the razor wire and guard towers of Angola prison, Louisiana’s infamous maximum-security penitentiary, don’t fit the bill. Yet spiritual revival is precisely what is taking place among the prison’s inmate population, most of whom are incarcerated for life.

“Dr. John Robson [who heads the seminary extension program inside Angola] believes that spiritual revival in the United States may begin in the prisons,” Calvin Seminary Professor Ron Nydam reports. Nydam and Professor John Rottman have taken multiple trips to Angola with students. They have seen firsthand the difference the gospel makes in the lives of men who have lost hope.

“At first I didn’t want to visit Angola,” Rottman admits. “But it’s really an astonishing place.”

“You see that psychology is very inadequate in terms of explaining this kind of human transformation,” Nydam says. “This is a God-thing. It’s very spiritual.”

Angola prison has a tough hundred-year history. The facility is the size of Manhattan Island and home to 5300 inmates carrying out life sentences. It’s a place where the “worst of the worst” go and never come out. Inmates used to sleep with a magazine stuffed inside their shirts, their best defense against a 3:00 a.m. knifing.

That was until the mid-1990s, when Warden Burl Cain came to Angola. Cain’s conviction that moral rehabilitation is the surest way to recover a prisoner’s humanity has completely changed the culture of Angola over the past 20 years. Under Cain’s direction, New Orleans Baptist Seminary started offering Bible classes inside the prison. The program grew, and today a full range of seminary classes is available to qualified inmates, complete with Greek and Hebrew.

The incidence of prison violence has been reduced by 73 percent.

The Bible classes led to the establishment of inmate-led churches. These worshipping communities are the heart of the prison’s transformation.

After experiencing Angola, Rottman began wondering whether a seminary would ever be allowed inside one of Michigan’s prisons. The student he talked with didn’t think so. “Michigan prisons are locked up too tight,” he said.

“Eight months later we got a pack in the mail,” Rottman says. Eight inmates of the Handlon medium-security correctional facility in Ionia, Michigan, wanted to enroll in Calvin Seminary’s certificate program in pastoral care. So Professor Ronald Feenstra wrote a letter to Handlon’s warden. His inquiry went unanswered for months. Then one day Feenstra spoke to the warden’s secretary, who arranged a meeting.

“So we went down.” Rottman remembers. “And the warden said, ‘You must have a lot of influence.’”

“Feenstra and I thought to ourselves, We don’t have any influence.”

“The warden said, ‘I got your letter, and I didn’t know what to do with it. Having a seminary teach a class in a prison is unprecedented in Michigan. Then the new director of corrections for the state [Daniel Heyns, appointed by Governor Rick Snyder] came in. I said to him, ‘Dan, what do you want me to do with this letter?’”

“He scanned it and said, ‘Make that happen.’”

And thus Handlon prison became a seminary extension site. “Two or three weeks after that we taught our first class,” Rottman says.

Now in its fifth class at Handlon, the program is bearing fruit. A small group of inmates have established a Christian Reformed congregation inside the prison, pastored by Calvin Seminary alum Andy Hanson. Hanson was a student visitor to Angola on Rottman’s first trip. “There are now about 50 people attending every Sunday,” Rottman says.

These stories of fellow Christians, living as Christ’s church in the world through word and deed, inspire us for ministry in our own local contexts. They remind us that we’re not “in it alone.” Jesus is indeed using his church as organism and as institution to bring hope and help for this life, and for the life to come.
S
ome time ago I was taking a walk through a neighborhood near campus and I witnessed something that we’ve all seen and even participated in at one time or another. In a corner of a fenced-in backyard, four young children were playing. And in the 45 seconds or so during which I could observe them, it was clear that one little girl was calling the shots. “OK, Billy, you stand over there and you have to watch for wild animals. Jill, you have to sit behind me and get me things when I need them. Eric, your job is to ...” Again, we’ve seen this scene before. And we know what it means. In that backyard this little girl was establishing her kingdom. And she was the kingdom’s Sovereign.

In his fine book *The Divine Conspiracy*, Dallas Willard claims that we all have our little kingdoms in life. A kingdom, Willard says, is any area of life where my will and my desires determine what happens and what does not happen. “A man’s house is his castle,” the old, rather sexist, adage says. And indeed, in our homes, at our places of work, even here on campus we all have little spheres of influence, little patches of this earth where we make a kingdom for ourselves, where we try to arrange things so that what we say, what we think, what we believe determines the shape of life.

The kingdom of God is where God’s desires, God’s dreams for this creation, God’s will and God’s intentions rule. The kingdom of God is where the shape of life mirrors God’s design for life. And whenever we pray our Lord’s Prayer, one of the first requests we make is “Your kingdom come.” But when you think about it, that’s an odd thing to pray.

It’s odd because the gospel tells us that the kingdom has already come. After Jesus rose again from the dead, the disciples understood the reality of what Jesus had meant when he told the disciples that they would live to see the coming of his kingdom. But, of course, they’d also live long enough to start to understand that God’s kingdom is not like the kingdoms of this world. Whereas the kingdoms of this world are loud and proud and powerful and impressive, God’s kingdom is quiet and humble and hidden.

Over and over again Jesus taught that the kingdom of God is never quite what you’d expect. It’s not the whole lump of dough that you can see and knead and touch and feel, but rather it’s the yeast hidden in and invisibly permeating that dough. The kingdom of God is not right off the bat some majestic tree you can see and touch and climb, but rather it’s the grain-of-sand sized seed that disappears into the dirt and from which something bigger eventually grows, be it ever-so-slowly.

So we pray “Your kingdom come” and yet we are also taught that it already has come. It’s here. It’s real. It’s on the move. But we forget. We think it’s all future. That’s even the way it’s talked about in common parlance. “You better watch your step or I’ll knock you from here to kingdom come!” The kingdom, we think, is up ahead of us. It’s future. It’s distant. It will arrive when Jesus arrives. And so we pray, “Your kingdom come,” and we think that’s the same thing as praying for Jesus’ second coming. We think the kingdom is what will come when Jesus finally shows up and rings down the curtain on human history.

And the gospel tells us we’re wrong. The gospel tells us the kingdom is already here. When you realize that, then you realize that to pray “Your kingdom come” is really to pray that the Spirit of God will work through you to live in such clarion clear kingdom ways that people who might otherwise miss the presence of the kingdom in this world will see it. They’ll see it in you. They’ll see it in us.

And so we pray, “Your kingdom come,” and then we open our eyes and get up off our knees and follow up on that prayer by going out and proclaiming the good news that God loves this old world and has dreamed great dreams for it. We pray, “Your kingdom come,” and then we sally forth into the world. We become church leaders and pastors who show the world that in our Father’s kingdom, it is precisely the last, least, lost, and lonely who come first. We serve in such a way that we display the soft spot in our Father’s heart for the meek, the lowly, the poor in spirit, and those who mourn.

We pray, “Your kingdom come,” and then when we hear the TV news program tell us “We bring you the world,” when we hear the *New York Times* assert they’ve printed all the news that’s fit to print, we say, “Not so fast!” Because there is a reality beyond what Brian Williams and Anderson Cooper can tell us...
about because we see down to the truest and deepest reality. We see the kingdom of God hidden in this world and at work—like yeast in dough, like a seed quietly yet powerfully germinating under the soil. Even when the news is bad and there is much to lament, we don’t despair because our world belongs to God and we live accordingly.

All of you are here this morning because you are beginning your seminary journey. You are beginning an education that will lead you to serve God’s kingdom as pastors and church leaders. It will become your high and holy privilege one day to help people see that they are kingdom people already right now, today. You will proclaim to people that they have the joy of living into that kingdom every single day.

Because we are kingdom people. We live in the sphere of our heavenly Father’s influence. His will calls the shots here, and so we celebrate the racial and ethnic diversity that our God created, we look for and we discover the image of God that indwells every person we meet. And we repent of everything that rages inside us to pull us another way, that makes us content with stereotypes, or that causes us—however subtly—to diminish the sheer worthiness of every person.

We pray, “Your kingdom come,” not to bring what is not yet but to reveal what is already here. We pray, “Your kingdom come,” not to point ourselves or anyone else to some future time far off but to transform this present moment in ways that line up delightfully with the will and intention and desires and dreams of our heavenly Father. We pray, “Your kingdom come,” because this time, this place, this earth, and our very hearts are the sphere of influence where God is Sovereign and where we proclaim with hope and boldness that our wildest dreams for this world are never wild enough, that our vision for all things made new is no unrealistic fantasy, and that the bright center to the universe really is that eternal love that is our very life.

We pray, “Your kingdom come,” and when we do, we are saying more than we know most of the time. We are saying that God’s program is our program and we’re on board with it right now and with everything we’ve got. “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come.” By grace it has come. The gift and joy of the Christian life is that we get to live in that kingdom right here, right now. Thanks be to God! Amen.

Welcome new staff members

Alena De Young joined the admissions team at Calvin Seminary in July of 2013 and is looking forward to connecting to potential students as the Admissions Counselor. Before coming to CTS, Alena attended Dordt College in Sioux Center, Iowa, where she graduated with a degree in English. She also worked at Dordt as the English Department Assistant. She and her husband, Brian, a first-year M.Div. student at CTS, live in the Baxter neighborhood of Grand Rapids and attend Eastern Avenue Christian Reformed Church.

Amanda Smartt recently joined the Calvin Theological Seminary staff as the Admissions Office Assistant. New to the area from Winston-Salem, North Carolina, Amanda graduated from Wake Forest University in 2010 with a degree in English Literature, and previously worked as a paralegal. Amanda is joined by her husband, Sam Smartt, a professor in the Communication Arts and Sciences Department at Calvin College, and their dog, Darby. She is excited to serve by welcoming guests and potential applicants to the Calvin Seminary community!
Paul’s Missionary Journeys in Greece

Walk in the footsteps of Paul during the day and learn more about the apostle at night! Travel by motor coach and cruise ship to sites connected with Paul’s Second and Third Missionary Journeys: Neapolis, Philippi, Amphipolis, Apollonia, Thessaloniki, Berea, Athens, Corinth, Cenchrea, and Ephesus. Also see other major sites of biblical, archeological, and cultural interest including Patmos, Delphi, Metéora, Vergína and the island of Santorini. Each evening features a study session on “Paul: His Life & His Letters.” Join host Jeff Weima, professor of New Testament at Calvin Theological Seminary and leading Pauline scholar, for this truly inspirational tour.

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