

# the messenger

Mid-America Reformed Seminary

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## WHAT'S HAPPENING IN THE ELDERSHIP?

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# THE PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE:

## “THE UNITY OF THE HUMAN RACE (ONCE AGAIN)”



My recent evening class on “The Christian and Politics” produced some results worth pondering; I’ll also do so in some upcoming podcasts, hosted by the inimitable Jared Luttjeboer. Overall, the response to that series of lectures was very encouraging. Over the course of the lectures, we had about 75 people in attendance and hundreds who livestreamed or viewed later. That number shot up significantly, into the thousands, for parts of Lectures 10 and 11, which were on the Christian Nationalism of Doug Wilson (and other theologians), and on Stephen Wolfe and his sort of Christian Nationalists.

This was due, in no small part, to Jared putting together clips from Talk 11 that sparked a firestorm. The clip that generated the greatest interest (and opposition) was one in which I mentioned Paul at the Areopagus, saying to the Greeks that God had created all men of one blood. This would be offensive to the Greeks, whose literature made it clear that they thought themselves a superior ethnic group to the nations about them. Paul made it clear that no ethnic group is inherently better than another, all being created in the image of God.

This is a common Christian observation that just a few years ago would have received no opposition. But it did yield objections from kinists and others who were adamant to maintain the opposite. Some tried to make it appear that I was saying that no culture or society might develop in remarkable ways, bettering others. This sort of cultural advancement was true even for the descendants of Cain (Genesis 4), whose achievements were often greater than those of the godly line. To be sure, as Tom Holland and others have noted, Christianity has contributed significantly to societal development, playing no small part in what the West has enjoyed for centuries.

It was clear when I said that ethnic superiority is untrue that I was not talking about these sorts of cultural advances but rather about the ontological unity of the human race (as Charles Hodge affirmed in his work). We live in a time, however, when even some who claim to be biblical and confessional assert white supremacy and argue that we need a Protestant Hitler.

This nonsense is being embraced by some in our churches, not only young men, though they may be particularly vulnerable to such charged rhetoric, especially as they feel dispossessed by our current society and see the currents of the times as against them. I am sympathetic to those who have been discriminated against. Historically, in this country, native Americans, blacks, and others (one thinks of Asians, e.g.) were the chief recipients of such. Equality under the law is a proper advance, and it should not be abandoned for a reversal that now makes other groups, even dominant ones, the new victims.

Having said that, a certain sort of embrace of victim status is a dangerous place to camp out, as it tends to foster self-pity, and when one languishes in self-pity, almost anything can be justified, including sins and crimes. Whatever “reverse discrimination” some may suffer, the remedy is not, and never has been, for that group, in regaining its group self-identity and respect, which may be rightly done, to strike out at other groups and to declare itself inherently superior to them. The latter is what’s being done by some Christian Nationalists and others who are partisans of what is being called “race realism,” but is, plain and simple, old-fashioned racism.

Carl Trueman rightly argues in his brilliant new book, *The Desecration of Man*, that part of the desecration is not only the outrages of the progressive left, which are legion, but also on the far right: things like Holocaust denial (and a host of other anti-Semitic moves) and the assertion of racial superiority. This illustrates what Kevin DeYoung aptly labeled “Wokeism of the Right” when he critiqued Stephen Wolfe’s *Case for Christian Nationalism* as suggesting a racial approach that would lose ground and set back the racial dialog by decades.

NAPARC and other churches have been dealing with this racism at various levels. Whatever is encouraging racism, and that could take up some pages (some being reactionary against progressive outrages), the churches must address and condemn it, calling for vibrant gospel witness to the whole world. Sinners everywhere need a Savior, and Christ is the only Savior of humanity. Preaching Christ and His kingdom, which is “not of this world,” should be the church’s focus and task.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Alan D. Strange".

Dr. Alan D. Strange,  
President of Mid-America Reformed Seminary

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## MESSAGE FROM THE EDITOR



June arrives, and with it, the close of another academic year.

This issue of *The Messenger* gives us reason to give thanks. We celebrated eight graduates who completed their studies on May 13 and now go forth to serve Christ's Church — students whose formation here has equipped them, we trust, for the long and holy work of gospel ministry and Christian service. We also celebrate Dr. Paul Ipema, who completed

his Doctor of Educational Ministry degree from Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, a fitting milestone for a man whose scholarship is quite literally about forming pastors from the inside out.

Our feature article is the fourth and final installment in Dr. J. Mark Beach's series on pastoral leadership, this time turning his attention to the elders who labor alongside those pastors. It's a challenging read, yet an encouraging one. Read it slowly.

In the alumni section, Leo de Vos (Class of 1988) reflects on nearly four decades of ministry, from Surrey to Pella to Hamilton, New Zealand.

May the Lord use this issue to encourage and equip you for his kingdom's work.

Brett Chase,  
Vice President of Advancement

### Contributing Writers

Dr. Alan D. Strange, President  
Mr. Brett Chase, Vice President of Advancement  
Mr. Dan Fletcher, Vice President of Operations  
Dr. J. Mark Beach, Professor of Doctrinal and Ministerial Studies  
Dr. R. Andrew Compton, Professor of Old Testament Studies  
Dr. Paul Ipema, Associate Professor of Ministerial Studies  
Leo de Vos, 1988 Mid-America Alumnus

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### Our Mission

Mid-America Reformed Seminary seeks to serve Christ and His church by assisting in the formation and preparation of servants for the Kingdom of God. Our primary purpose is to train men for the gospel ministry of Jesus Christ. Guided by this focus, we are also committed to providing solid theological training for others among God's people whose life calling may be enhanced by theological education.

### Website

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# DEVELOPMENT REPORT: “SEMINARY SEASONALITY”

*For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven.*  
Ecclesiastes 3:1

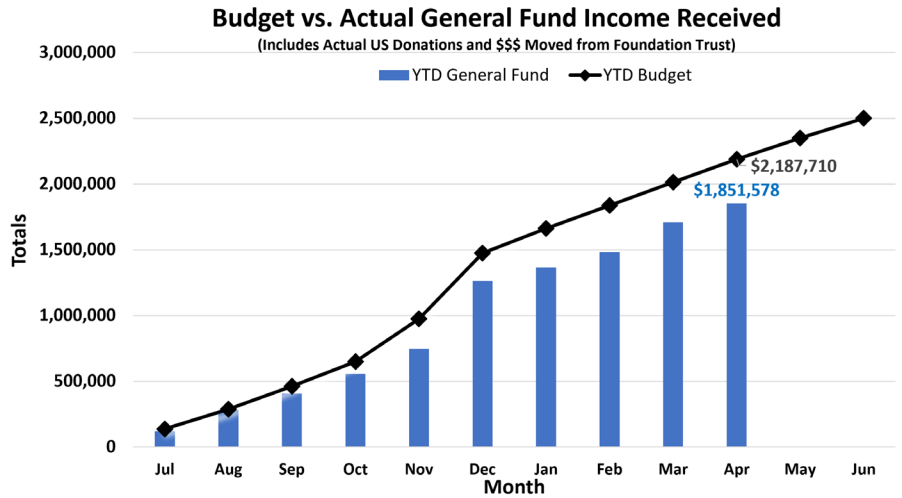
As with many areas of life on earth, we have our times and seasons that characterize life at MARS. Another academic year has ended with the accompanying awards, traditions, and ceremonies. Our continuing students are now entering a season of summer internships, summer Greek will soon begin, and plans are underway for our 22nd annual golf outing at the end of August.

There are repeated seasons at Mid-America, such as convocation, semester classes, and commencement. There are also unique seasons at our school, such as a building campaign, hiring a new faculty member, or refreshing a long-range plan. Whether repeated or unique, seminary seasonality always includes an underlying budget and a generous family of supporters that make our ministry possible and, by God’s grace, successful.

### Current Fiscal Year

The end of June marks the completion of our fiscal year at Mid-America. The generosity of our American and Canadian supporters over the past year continues to bless and encourage all of us at the seminary. Thank you! We are confident that your enthusiastic giving and faithful prayers are “a pleasing aroma to the Lord.” (Numbers 15:3) We continue to look to the Lord to inspire your generosity as we work to accomplish two remaining goals for this fiscal year:

- 1) To close a forecasted gap of \$350,000 in our General Fund. This is the fund we use to pay for our day-to-day operations, and we are trending towards a shortfall this year.
- 2) To close the outstanding balance of \$700,000 in our *Foundation for the Future* capital campaign. Since our last report, we have been able to reduce this outstanding balance by \$180,000.



### Next Fiscal Year

We take seriously our responsibility to the Lord and to our supporters to be above reproach in our financial stewardship at Mid-America. That stewardship includes controlling costs today and saving for the future. Inflation continues to challenge all our households, companies, and institutions. Mid-America faces that same pressure, and we are working responsibly to mitigate cost increases with careful management and cost reductions where possible. As noted in our Trustees Report, we will be relying on the Lord’s provision through your continued generosity to fund a \$3.3M budget in our next fiscal year.

As the saying goes, “Many hands make light work.” One area of opportunity to expand our family of supporters is to grow the number of churches that partner financially with Mid-America. Based on our FY2025 data, we have the following statistics for church support at our school:

Denom	Total Churches	M-ARS Churches	% of Churches	General Fund <sup>1</sup>
URCNA	141	39	28%	15.5%
RCUS	47	4	9%	0.6%
OPC	300	16	5%	2.0%
CRC	935	11	1%	0.9%
PCA	1,667	3	0%	0.2%

<sup>1</sup> Percent of General Fund support provided by churches in given denomination.

Lord willing, over the next fiscal year we will successfully invite more churches to

see the missional impact of our ministry at Mid-America and have them join our family of supporters.

### 2026 Long-Range Plan

An important work is underway at Mid-America, and that is updating our Long-Range Plan (LRP). This is a document that will be our strategic plan for the next five years, and it is a critical component of our ongoing ATS accreditation. The document will be submitted for board review and approval at our October meeting, and the final draft is due at ATS in November. There are ambitious and exciting opportunities that are expected to result from this work, and we are looking forward to sharing more details in future issues of *The Messenger*.

### Times and Seasons

As we conclude our 2025-2026 school year and fiscal year, there are a variety of emotions that confront us as we look back on this season of seminary life. There has been a time for (almost) every matter under heaven at our school, and through it all we continue to love, serve, and praise God our Father, Christ our Savior, and the Holy Spirit our comforter. Thank you for your steadfast support and partnership in our ministry over this past year. May the Lord bless you and your families with his presence and favor over the summer season!

**Brett Chase,**  
Vice President of Advancement

# THE 41ST COMMENCEMENT

On May 13, 2026, the seminary community gathered at Redeemer United Reformed Church in St. John, IN, for the seminary's 41st commencement.

The service began with an organ prelude and processional played by organist Dr. Pamela Compton. After a welcome from president Dr. Alan Strange, the congregation sang *I Will Extol You, O My God*.

Rev. Douglas B. Clawson, General Secretary of the Committee on Foreign Missions of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and a former board member of the seminary (2000-2003), was introduced and delivered a commencement address from Revelation 7 entitled "Standing Before the Throne." Preaching from the text, Rev. Clawson described the church's hope amid suffering and reminded graduates that trials are meant to focus believers more fully on Christ and His gospel. In

response, those gathered sang *The Church's One Foundation*.

After high praise and warm thanks were extended to the wives of the married graduates by Dr. Strange, board president Rev. Harry Zekveld conferred the Master of Divinity degree upon six graduates and the Master of Theological Studies degree upon two graduates. The graduates were hooded by Drs. J. Mark Beach and Marcus A. Mininger before receiving a standing ovation.

Having himself graduated with his D.Ed.Min. five days earlier, Dr. Paul Ipema gave the charge to the graduates before Dr. Mininger led the litany for commencement. In response, soprano Maria Luttjeboer sang the words of benediction, beautifully set by John Rutter (b. 1945), *The Lord Bless You and Keep You*, and Dr. R. Andrew Compton closed in prayer.

After the final hymn, *O God, Our Help in Ages Past*, the faculty, graduates and their



spouses, and board members recessed to the heroic strains of *Trumpet Voluntary* by Gordon Young (1919-1998).

Following the service, family and friends gathered to congratulate the graduates and wish them well as they begin new callings in Christ's service.

**Dr. R. Andrew Compton,**  
Professor of Old Testament Studies

# PROFESSOR IPEMA, NOW DOCTOR IPEMA

Mid-America Reformed Seminary is pleased to announce that Rev. Paul Ipema, Associate Professor of Ministerial Studies, has successfully completed his doctoral studies. In May, Professor Ipema received his Doctor of Educational Ministry (D.Ed.Min.) degree from the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky. This achievement marks the culmination of a journey that began in the summer of 2023, ending with Professor Ipema successfully defending his doctoral ministry project in March 2026.

Since joining the Mid-America faculty in January 2023, Professor Ipema has taught most of the Ministerial Studies courses (Homiletics, Liturgics, Pastoral Care and Counseling, Catechetics) in addition to overseeing the seminary's Ministerial Apprenticeship Program (MAP). His dissertation, titled "Incorporating Christian Spirituality

Into the Master of Divinity Program at Mid-America Reformed Seminary in Dyer, IN," reflects his deep commitment to the spiritual formation of future church leaders. He defines Christian spirituality as "the living expression of Christian faith in union and communion with the Son, through the enablement of the Spirit, and unto the glory of the Father."

A central conviction of Professor Ipema's work is that spiritual formation is essential for those in pastoral ministry. He argues that such formation serves as a vital shield, protecting pastors from the common spiritual pitfalls associated with Christian ministry. To address this need, a key component of his research involved the development of a specialized seminary course.

Using the Pastoral Epistles as a primary foundation, Professor Ipema identified five essential spiritual requirements for ministry: holiness, tenderness, self-control, spiritual discipline, and self-awareness. He then designed a comprehensive curriculum



for each requirement, incorporating a rich tapestry of readings from ancient, Medieval, Reformed, and contemporary authors. The development process was rigorous; Professor Ipema sought extensive feedback from student participants and presented his work for review by an expert panel of seminary and college professors specializing in Christian spirituality. We congratulate Dr. Ipema on this significant milestone and look forward to the continued impact of his research and teaching on our students.

**Dan Fletcher,**  
Vice President of Operations

# SEMINARIANS IN THE FIELD

Supervised ministry training remains one of the distinctive features of Mid-America's field education program. In addition to working closely with local pastors and congregations throughout the academic year, seminarians also participate in summer internships designed to apply classroom theological instruction and refine practiced ministry skills. The following seminarians will be participating in ministries throughout North America:

## Student:

Andrew Barbour  
Andrew Baugh  
Caleb Cornelius  
Geoff Doyle  
Joe Gilbert  
Michael Hakze  
Elzo Honorato Neto  
Joshua Hoogerdijk  
Abraham Kakileti  
Nathan Kortzen  
Ajay Kumar  
Petrus Lourens  
Kelvin Morales  
Adam Nicholson  
Reid Selmer  
Jared Strong  
John Waldrop

## Church:

Redeemer United Reformed Church  
Divine Hope Reformed Bible Seminary  
Michiana Covenant Presbyterian Church (PCA)  
Christ Reformed Church (URCNA)  
Spruce Creek PCA  
Rehoboth United Reformed Church  
Zion United Reformed Church  
Redeemer United Reformed Church  
New Haven United Reformed Church  
Mercy Church (Canadian Reformed)  
Immanuel Christian Reformed Church  
Immanuel United Reformed Church  
Providence United Reformed Church  
Immanuel United Reformed Church  
Cornerstone United Reformed Church  
Grace Reformed Baptist Church  
Bethany United Reformed Church

## Location:

St. John, Indiana  
Westville, Indiana  
Granger, Indiana  
Nampa, Idaho  
Port Orange, Florida  
Hamilton, Ontario, Canada  
Sheffield, Ontario, Canada  
Lacombe, Alberta, Canada  
New Haven, Vermont  
Hamilton, Ontario, Canada  
Burbank, Illinois  
Jordan, Ontario, Canada  
Des Moines, Iowa  
DeMotte, Indiana  
Sanborn, Iowa  
Rockford, Illinois  
Wyoming, Michigan

Dr. Paul Ipema,  
Associate Professor of Ministerial Studies

# BOARD OF TRUSTEES REPORT

The Board met on May 14, led aptly by Chairman Rev. Harry Zekveld, with 12 Trustees present, one attending via Zoom, and the balance out with illness or excused absences.

After opening devotions and rollcall, the Board dove into their business, approving minutes, and adopting and proceeding through their agenda.

**Trustees** – The seats of Mr. Tim Beezhold, servant for nine years, and Mr. Dennis Schreur, who stepped down for personal matters, are to be filled. Two nominees were approved for Mr. Beezhold's seat, and one identified for Mr. Schreur's; the Executive Committee was tasked to identify a second. The Seminary Association selects Trustees over the Summer. Furthermore, Trustees Mr. Robert Clausing and Rev. Richard Zekveld were interviewed and reappointed to corresponding terms.

**Vice President of Advancement** – With great acclamation, Mr. Brett

Chase was welcomed warmly, having come aboard on May 4. Mr. Chase shared his vision via three words: "Thanksgiving" – Giving God the glory for the opportunity to work at Mid-America, "Enthusiasm" – God's granting Brett a love, joy, and passion for the role, and "Ambition" – To serve the Lord with excellence and to his utmost.

**Enrollment** – Mr. Blummer, Director of Enrollment Management, spoke of the challenges with the 2026/2027 enrollment: six incoming students are confirmed, several others are in the application process, with a potential total enrollment of 10.

**Finances** – The 2026/2027 budget of \$3,320,170 was approved, a 12.9% increase, containing a 4% COLA for employees. Driven by a 2025 study, 6% is intentional funding of capital reserves, forward-looking investments that anticipate large, future expenditures for HVAC systems, roof replacements, and other long-term capital projects necessary



to maintain the facility's optimal performance.

**Long Range Planning** – With Mr. Chase aboard and on the heels of the recent ATS accreditation, work has begun in earnest on a long-range plan, with subcommittees formed, kick-offs held, vision cast, and writing begun to present an initial submission to the Board in the fall.

Lord willing, the Board will reconvene on Thursday, October 1, 2026, prior to the CME Conference.

Mr. Dan Fletcher,  
Vice President of Operations

# WHAT'S HAPPENING IN THE ELDERSHIP?

## ELDERS: THEIR WORK AND SPIRITUAL FORMATION

by Dr. J. Mark Beach

We come to the last article in what has become a four-part series on pastoral leadership. In the previous three articles, we first looked at hazards facing pastoral leadership, or the lack of it. Specifically, we looked at the problems of treating a pastor as “hired help.” This is a model where the minister is reduced to a hired hand, paid to perform for the congregation. He answers to the eldership, and they monitor how well he completes prescribed duties. The pastor’s task is to keep the troops happy. He is not a leader. He is not a prophet. He is not Christ’s servant, *first of all*. He is our servant. He is here “to do for us.” The elders rule, and “he is paid to please us.”

This model does not fit the biblical portrait. Indeed, sheep are not lords of the shepherds, for Jesus Christ is the lord of us all. The “hired help” model of pastoral leadership is backward. Thus, we argued that sheep need a shepherd to lead them in the right paths, beside the still waters, to restore their souls. Sheep need Christ. Christ’s under-shepherds (pastors and elders) have the duty to Him to nurture the flock and engage in the shepherding leadership that is best for the ninety-nine in the pen and the straying one that needs rescue. This is not a transactional (hired help) model but a transformational model.

We also warned about a second hazard: the bully pastor. This is perhaps worse than the hired-help error. The bully pastor can even masquerade as the humble servant who only does what

the elders demand. But behind the scenes, he calls the shots. It is his way or the highway. Perhaps, after years of manipulation, intimidation, and aggression, no elder dares challenge him. He is a bully. Oh, but he is a leader, yes, very conservative and censorious. And he is the man, the boss. Do not cross him. This transgresses the biblical portrait as well, for Jesus directly warned us against this wolf in sheep’s clothing. He calls us to servanthood (Luke 22:25).

The bully (know-it-all) pastor! What an abysmal business! Sadly, there are churches afflicted with this sort of minister, too.

Obviously, each of the above representations of pastoral leadership is unbiblical. Each presents a caricature of what pastoral leadership ought to be, for certainly a pastor is a servant and aims to bless the flock in performing the duties of his pastoral office; and certainly, too, a pastor needs to have a spine; he needs to instruct and train his co-shepherds (the elders) to help them to nurture and care for the flock alongside him. But the pastor as hired help? No! The pastor as bully? God forbid! A plague on both their houses!

Thus, in the third article, we showed that elders, in seeking to be co-shepherds of the flock of God, need first to *get the gospel right* if they

are to be faithful shepherds. All is derailed from the outset if elders aren’t clear about the gospel. We used the parable of the prodigal son (actually, it is two sons: the younger, prodigal son, and the older, stay-at-home son, with the waiting father) to help us get the gospel right, for we must administer the gospel to people (both inside and outside the church) if we are to shepherd people in the gospel. Make no mistake: Jesus is the gospel. People need Him! Not so much us. Hence, the need to gospelize elders for gospelized oversight.

But now we want to focus on the duties of elders, the actual work that elders do, and their spiritual formation.

The Bible is clear that the eldership is a gift to the church. In Ephesians 4, insofar as we may include elders under the description of “shepherds and teachers,” we may regard them as Christ’s gift “to equip the saints for the work of ministry” (Eph. 4:11, 12). Elders have the task, with zeal for Christ, to cultivate zeal for Christ among the flock. The challenge for the church’s leadership is to cultivate love for God, love for the gospel, love for one another, and love for the lost. Truly, the eldership serves well when it aims to follow Christ’s example, desiring to serve rather than be served (see Matt. 20:26-28). Elders, accordingly, learn to ask diagnostic questions, taking the pulse of the

congregation: Are they growing in faith? Do they love and trust Jesus more? Or is zeal flagging and love waning? Does the congregation exhibit apathy or energy, boredom or a passion to press forward in faith? Is Christian living marked by the fruit of the Spirit (love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control) or are the lives of parishioners marked by dullness and indifference, judging others while congratulating themselves, being comfortable and having fun, or self-denial and desire to serve? Is our congregation marked by high moral living and nurturing children to be polite and well-behaved, while, however, forgiveness is in short supply, and concern for others outside our group is dried up? Does the great commission at home and abroad matter, or is the attitude instead that lost neighbors may just as well remain lost? *Who cares?*

Part of the elders' duties includes governing the church according to the Word of God, in obedience to Christ Himself. What figures large here is the doctrine of the keys of the kingdom of heaven. In Matthew 16:19, we learn that the preaching of the gospel declares who enters into the kingdom and who is shut out. The Word, the message of the gospel, binds and loosens. It proclaims the way of being under grace rather than wrath, welcome rather than exclusion, being healed unto life rather than sick unto death, forgiven and embraced rather than guilty and estranged (cf. Matt. 18:18; John 20:23). This applies also when the gospel is administered face to face in disciplinary cases. Remember, keys gain access. Keys open and close doors; they unlock doors. The faithful preaching of the Word and the proper exercise of discipline, by the Word, are these keys. And elders supervise the preaching and find themselves active in the work of the disciplinary, corrective ministry of the church.

Key here, concerning the keys of the kingdom, is the church's spiritual well-being. Such is the elders' task. This involves protecting the flock. Doctrinal error and brazen, unchristian behaviors may not be allowed to flourish unchecked. More positively, protection

manifests in that the eldership helps preachers keep their balance, neither lopsidedly spanking the congregation Sunday to Sunday, making members look to themselves (rather than Christ) to find motivation for Christian living, nor one-sidedly ever consoling the congregation in the mercies of Christ when his preaching never discomfited them by exposing their sins and compromises with the world. Elders need to reach agreement on the effectiveness and faithfulness of the pastor's preaching and communicate the results to him tactfully and lovingly. Meanwhile, godly instruction, gospel grace, and corrective discipleship are what the entire congregation needs—the pastor, elders, and deacons included. It applies to the youth and the aged, to

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**“[E]lders ... offer themselves up in service and devotion, prayerfully knowing their own weaknesses.”**

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parents and children, to the straying and the lost. This is all the elders' work.

In doing this, as elders learn to exegete the congregation and diagnose the members in their faith and walk with the Lord, they see that word and sacrament belong together. In fact, the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper work alongside the word of the gospel, and the elders will want the sacraments to function as visible signs and seals of confirmation of God's saving promises in the hearts of believers. Consequently, since elders want hurting hearts to accept God's mercy, they seek to offer faithful counsel. Since they care about covenant youth whose lives may drift from devotion to Jesus, they go after the straying to bring them home. Since they know the church is to be a communion of saints, a fellowship of love, they befriend the lonely and commandeer others to do the same. Since that fellowship needs good examples and concrete demonstrations, they practice hospitality both to those under their care and to newcomers. The polity of the church promotes good order and consistency of practice. Therefore,

elders, with the pastor, together learn its contents and pledge themselves to its implementation. Elders have a big job, biblically speaking. Setting a Christlike example means to become more like Christ in your attitudes, actions, disposition, and aims. It means visiting the sick and instructing the misinformed. It means gaining knowledge and offering guidance and wisdom from God's Word in accord with lived Christian experience. It means patient counsel and prayerful pleading before God's throne of mercy to heal the brokenhearted and to transform the hardhearted.

Perhaps, about now, if you are an elder, you might be thinking, do people realize how busy an elder's life is even without the duties of the eldership? Many elders are not yet retired; they have full-time jobs and family responsibilities. How can an elder do all this?

Indeed! Elders need each other, and they need a hardworking pastor—a pastor as a transformational leader. Obviously, elders, like the pastor, have to live within their limitations. That's why we have multiple elders. That's why we split up pastoral care among the pastor and the eldership. That's why the elder and the pastor aren't in competition. They labor alongside one another. Consequently, in the model for pastoral leadership presented in this series of articles, an elder seeks to carve out time over the course of a year to come to know individuals, families, or couples within his flock. Ministry is always nimble. Speaking directly to elders: You don't know what ministry is until you get to know people, such that you discover who they are. *“Oh, I never knew that hurt. I never knew that background. I never knew that marital struggle.”* But because you've come to know them, now you can offer specific counsel and care. You can solicit the pastor's help and advice.

Remember, neither the pastor nor the elder should be expected to do it all. Sometimes it is not the elder doing all the work; rather, an elder can organize and commandeer other members of the congregation, other couples, to pay attention to members with particular needs, to befriend them, and help them. Sometimes church members think that the minister has his job, and the elders have their job and duties, and that covers

it—as if the members are only there to be served. But a healthy church uses everyone. In fact, in the case of corrective ministry, often a wayward soul needs Christian friends within the fellowship of the church. Include them in a group that offers affection and fun. Befriend them with members of the church, people who will pray for them, love them, and include them in things that friends do. That itself is often corrective. The wayward are given better examples to follow. They see that they are loved and wanted in the church, and God uses this fellowship to move them to a better path.

Elders (with the pastor) are called to come alongside parishioners in their pain: the loss of a spouse, a tragic providence that turns life upside down, a debilitating illness or injury, a shocking infidelity, or the breathless hurt of a loved one who turns away from Christ. It involves consoling the lonely aged, lifting up the forgotten single, or encouraging the wedded un-mother. Elders also are those who have the role to communicate to the pastor legitimate criticisms about him, which likewise requires building him up, commending him in his work, targeting his strengths with well-phrased words, and gently pointing him to areas of ministry that need his attention. The elders hold the pastor to account, even as the pastor is to hold them to account. In fact, the pastor has the task to disciple the elders to become better elders!

Bundled with these duties is the duty of prayer that permeates each of them. Since we are all so vulnerable and inadequate, we need blessings from above. We need these blessings desperately! Pastors and elders need to pray through all these duties and tasks. While those duties include elders' meetings, the principal work of elders, like that of the pastor, is not in the meeting but outside the meeting. Important work can transpire in the consistory or session room, but the bigger work, most of the work, is out there! Thus, we must pray for wisdom, pray for faith, pray for purity, pray for courage. We pray for ourselves in doing the work of shepherding, and we pray for the flock, for every family and soul under our care.

With prayer, you (as an elder) gain affection for the souls of your mini-parish. You gain courage to venture to ask the sensitive question, to beat the bush, to

follow an instinct about what is troubling a soul. Ministry requires that you become nimble. Sheep are not a one-size-fits-all business. As an elder, you need to become familiar with the people of your district (the names under your roster). Befriend these members. Discover who they are. Come alongside them. Learn about their sorrows, their fears, their old wounds, their new wounds. Find out their hobbies, talents, and gifts. Have lunch with them or go to dinner. Plan an outing with two or more families. Learn who your sheep are!

As is evident by now, most of the hard work of being an elder (and a pastor) happens outside the consistory or session room. It happens in homes; it happens in hospitals and coffee shops, in neighborhoods, administering the gospel to real people in their daily lives. Elders, with the pastor, urge each other onward in the task. They call each other to account. Are they faithful or derelict in their duties?

But if elders understand that part of this spiritual oversight means setting an example to the flock in faithfulness and devotion, seeing themselves, likewise, as under (just like the pastor) Christ's leadership and call, then they offer themselves up in service and devotion, prayerfully knowing their own weaknesses. That is, they see themselves as needing oversight and care as well. They, too, are vulnerable. They, too, need encouragement. They, along with the pastor and the congregation at large, need nurture, correction, and training in righteousness, for elders likewise face temptations that allure and insecurities that gnaw at them. They, like the rest of the sheep, need attention and the healing power of the gospel.

Not surprisingly, then, many elders feel quite inadequate for the task. They know the foulness of their own sins. They don't regard themselves as standing a head above the rest. They don't view themselves as the best examples of Christian living. Yet, God has placed them in this office.

This needs to be addressed. There is a saying that *God doesn't call the equipped, he equips the called*. There is much to that. No one is sufficient for this task. But God cares for his people in providing godly oversight through pastors and elders. And, note, the church needs an eldership (plural), not just an elder. The collective

gifts and wisdom of a body of elders, where they offer mutual counsel and perspective, and where each elder is submitting to God's Word and cultivating a godly walk of faith, produce (usually) better shepherding care. The spiritual formation of elders is too often neglected.

Acts 20:28 urges those commissioned to the shepherding task (a watching over the flock task) to take heed to themselves: *"Pay careful attention to yourselves and all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood."* Stand guard—over yourselves and over the flock. Be shepherds of the church, a church purchased by the blood of Christ. But, first, before you pull splinters from parishioners' eyes, tend to the logs in your own. Jesus is your master, so be mastered by Him (cf. 1 Tim. 3:2-7). Elders, like all sinners, pursuing a godly walk with the Lord, still struggle with their sins—yes, sins they rebuke in others, yet find in their own hearts. Elders need what all sinners need: they need the gospel; they need Jesus; they need Christ to embrace them and help them along the way. Pastors need that, too. We're all flesh. We're all weak. And this is why I think it's important that pastoral leadership takes the lead to help elders take the lead. Elders, like ministers, need to admit where they are weak and burdened. *"I'm really weak and struggling here."*

In seminary, when I was a little M.Div. student (I always refer to it as little M.Div. student), I remember hearing a fellow student minister to another student, *"But Jesus does love you. But he does forgive you. But he does. But he does."* I remember overhearing this conversation. And I thought, *"Right!"*, because the devil says, *"No, he doesn't. No, he doesn't. You're not good enough. You're not adequate."* Well, of course, you're not good enough, and you're not adequate. That's nothing new! God equips. God makes adequate. Christ builds his church, not us. So, our prayer: *Build us, Jesus*. Notice, we are always brought back to the good news of salvation in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Since elders are supposed to cultivate authentic faith and nurture transformation in others, they need to be pursuing these things in their own lives. They, too, like parishioners, may have unchecked bad habits of heart, unchallenged prejudices, or become lazy in prayer. We can all flex devoutness in public but prove flimsy or flabby in private. The petition in the Lord's Prayer, "*Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil*" (Matt. 6:13), is not for parishioners only but for pastors and elders, too. Consequently, the very sins that elders are called to confront in others may likewise take root in their own lives. For this reason, elders need to guard their hearts so that their leadership is credible and authentic rather than performative and hollow.

Elders, in their spiritual struggles, need (as do pastors) someone who can serve as a confidant—a fellow elder, a godly friend, or perhaps their own pastor. With such a person, he can, with transparency, expose his vulnerabilities and express his need for spiritual support. Elders can be hurting souls with hidden sins. The internet and smartphones have significantly changed the spiritual battlefield. Church members, along with pastors and elders, who do not reckon with this circumstance are not equipped to fight the modern good fight of faith (cf. 1 Tim. 6:12). Elders, like pastors, are sinners. They need the gospel ministered to them; they need Christ. Being nurtured and graced by the gospel, they are better equipped to minister the gospel to the souls under their care. They, like the whole flock of God, have a stake in sound gospel preaching. They need a faithful, wise, courageous, and loving pastor who prophetically ministers the Word to them. They do not need a bully or a hired hand.

Especially in the area of corrective ministry, seeking to lead a church member out of a hardened state of mind and to repent of a sinful behavior or habit, elders discover in themselves their own hypocrisies and inconsistencies. They repent their own sins as they call others to repent. And what a challenging task this part of oversight proves to be! Discipline ministry is the most disagreeable part of being

an elder. It is the most bothersome and burdensome, requiring the most patience and wisdom. It exposes cowardliness heretofore undetected. It exposes laziness as well. It also reveals to the elders and the church whether they love the lost and the straying. Sometimes the answer is that they don't. And right there, the eldership is exposed in its own sin. Yes, it is most difficult to discipline others when we need self-discipline. "*Take heed to yourselves and to the whole flock of God.*" Be fortified in forgiveness and in God's grace, for corrective ministry exposes our own need for correction and for grace.

Elders, then, find themselves encouraging the members of the church to walk with Jesus Christ in faith, and to walk together as a communion of saints. And the front line of all of that is elders (and pastors) exercising oversight, first, over themselves. We are all blood-bought rebels. The church doesn't belong to the pastor or to the elders. It belongs to Jesus. We supervise someone else's property. We watch over someone else's bride. We're stewards of Christ's household. Elders (alongside the pastor) have to give an account.

So, in giving account, do the duties of an elder, befriend the outsider, practice hospitality, set an example. Be apt to teach, not because you're gifted to run a classroom, but because you're willing (as best you can) to open the Bible personally and explain the basics of the gospel to people. You're brave to go after the wayward. You're humble to offer counsel to the hurting and rebuke to the straying. You want to win them back. You will visit the dying and show them the crown of Christ that follows bearing the cross of Christ. You visit the sick and the weak, and you console them, and you come alongside people's pain. Being an elder, like being a pastor, you enter people's lives. You are present. You participate in joys and sorrows. You come alongside a woman who has lost her spouse, a family that's lost a young mother. It means traveling a long way to bring care. Maybe some elder's work is going to be a long haul, because a father died tragically, was taken out of

his children's lives, and now these children need the whole church to minister to them. But the elder is part of that, along with deacons organizing such care. Some people know debilitating illness. Elderly people often face their hardest life at the end of life. And you're there, prayerfully consoling them in Christ their Savior. Being an elder also means coming alongside the pastor and encouraging him in his work. Maybe you will need to offer gentle, well-phrased words of correction (not in front of everybody, just brother to brother). "*Dear brother, may I lovingly alert you to a particular disposition you exhibit when ...*" Pastors and elders must be humble—humble to listen to heartfelt brotherly counsel.

Elders need each other, and they need the pastor. They need pastors to help elders be elders. They need training. Practically, that might mean a weekend, a Friday night, Saturday morning outing, at a retreat where it is all about eldership training. There, the pastor can befriend the elders. They can build brotherly love and talk about the concrete challenges of being an elder. (And there are formal training models for elders.) If nothing else, elders ought to be instructed in their duties and how they can be little parish pastors. Specifically, elders ought to be instructed in how to conduct sick ministry and discipline ministry.

Pastoral leadership is Christ's ministry to His people. He uses frail, flawed men for this task. It is difficult work, requiring courage to confront willful sinners, wisdom to counsel the depressed, compassion to comfort the bereaved, and patience to pursue transformation rather than settling for *status quo* spirituality. But such is the work to which Christ calls his under-shepherds, to feed his lambs, to take care of his sheep, and to shepherd the flock by faithfully administering the gospel in every situation. Therefore, pray for your elders, that those who serve in this office would find their strength in Christ, their wisdom in His word, their joy in the gospel, their reward in seeing His flock flourish, and the lost found.



Dr. J. Mark Beach,  
Professor of Doctrinal  
and Ministerial  
Studies

# ALUMNI PROFILE: LEO DE VOS

My wife, Carol, and I have four adult children, all married with a total of 9 grandchildren so far. Our family is spread in New Zealand from Auckland in the North Island to Dunedin in the South Island. Our daughter has four daughters. Two years ago they lost a son who was born full term but unconscious. We just found out that she is now expecting another boy! The Lord is gracious and kind!

After graduating in 1988, I answered a call to serve in the newly formed Surrey OCRC (now URCNA). From there I served in Pella IA, and then served for 7 ½ years in the Burlingtonm, WA, OCRC. Since immigrating to New Zealand, I have served in Wellington for 12 ½ years and, by the time we retire in January 2027, I will have been serving our current church in Hamilton for 14 years. I have found that it takes at least four or five years to get to know a congregation. For this reason I recommend longer ministries as one grows in experience.

Our congregation in Hamilton was planted in the fast-growing suburb of Rototuna in 2003. We currently have a membership of 207 including baptised children. We are made up of Dutch Kiwi families descended from immigrants, a growing number of Chinese and Asian people, South Africans, South Americans, Americans, and New Zealanders. Our morning

sermons are currently being translated into Mandarin. I am responsible to preach twice a Lord's Day, lead a new members class, teach senior catechism, attend to pre-marriage instruction, and participate in pastoral visitation with the elders and deacons.



My greatest joy in Christian ministry is being able, by God's grace, to proclaim our Biblical and Confessional truth to a growing congregation. At times I have preached Biblical truth outlined by our Confessions in the morning services. This kind of preaching can be exciting! I have also had the privilege of teaching our reformed heritage to new members classes to people from all over the world. I can't think of a greater joy than this!

During my ministry I have faced mental health challenges, mainly arising from anxiety and depression. These challenges arise from both external circumstances and my constitutional makeup. For many years I could power my way through the darkness, but some years ago I hit a wall. Because Christ does not break a

bruised reed or snuff out a smoking wick, through some good medical intervention and pastoral care, I was soon restored. I believe that this experience has made me a more thoughtful pastor to the suffering.

I have found that Mid-America Reformed Seminary has helped to shape my understanding and practise of gospel ministry. Throughout my ministry I have strived to make preaching well a priority. I have found that if the preaching and teaching is sound, the confession and life of the church is shaped as the congregation hears the voice of the Good Shepherd.

Leo de Vos,  
1988 Mid-America Alumnus



## COMING UP ON MARSCAST

Producing *MarsCast* has been one of my greatest pleasures this past year, and the response from listeners has only fueled the drive to create more.

In the weeks ahead, Dr. Alan Strange returns to the microphone to address the response generated by his recent evening class on "The Christian and Politics," with episodes focusing on ethnicity and the doctrine of election. These conversations are ones the

Church needs to be having, and I'm glad to host them.

*MarsCast* will take a brief rest in July before returning in August with Dr. Venema launching a new series called "What Did Calvin Actually Say?," beginning with the Servetus affair and Calvin's views on politics. Subscribe wherever you listen and stay tuned.

Jared Luttjeboer, Director of Marketing



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