

THE MESSENGER

MID-AMERICA REFORMED SEMINARY

Around the World in Ten Days

by Rev. Mark Vander Hart



I had the opportunity to travel to India in December to lecture at a three-day conference near Dehradun, India, as well as take in a familiar tourist spot. Since I arrived in India on December 11 and then left on December 21, one might say that I went around the world in ten days, since all of my flights to get to India and then in returning to the USA, went east.

The conference was held December 13-15 at the Himalayan Torchbearers conference site, near Dehradun. The overall conference theme was “The Beauty and Glory of the Church,” and the conference was sponsored by the

Mission of Peace-Making (MPM) and the Evangelical Reformed Church of India.

My particular topic, developed in three lectures, was “The Beauty and Glory of Christ in the Psalms.” The other speakers were the Rev. Dr. Leonard Pine, a Bible Presbyterian pastor from Bonners Ferry, Idaho, and Rev. Samit Kumar Mishra, pastor of the Presbyterian Free Church of Central India. Dr. Pine also teaches part-time at (Bible Presbyterian) Western Reformed Seminary. His talks focused on “The Beauty and Glory of the Confessions and Creeds.” His lecture content included a systematic outlay of the Reformed teaching on the church (ecclesiology) as well as the positive role that creeds and confessions play in the life of a healthy church. Rev. Mishra’s lecture material focused on “The Beauty and Glory of a Local Church Session.” He focused on the biblical requirements for local church government and the blessing of having such leadership.

Following the conference I had opportunity to spend time with Rev. and Mrs. Anup Hiwale and their young son Micah. I made two visits to the brand-new building that will house the Reformed Theological Institute, just outside of Herbertpur. The intention is to train pastors and evangelists at this RTI building.

We also traveled to Agra, the city where one of the “wonders” of the modern world exists, namely, the Taj Mahal. The Taj Mahal was built by a Muslim Khan in the 17th century as a mausoleum to his adored wife. Our Hindu guide preferred to speak of the place as a “monument to love.” In any case, this beautiful place is a wonder of engineering and planning, taking 22 years to construct with the labor of 22,000 workers!

This trip was a great opportunity to renew ties with Presbyterian and Reformed church leaders in India. The need for the gospel of the Reformed faith to spread there is tremendous (over 80% of India is Hindu!). Pray for our brothers and sisters there in that great country, that their testimony to Christ may go forward clearly and without fear!



Am I Called to Pastoral Ministry?

by Rev. Jeff DeBoer

Perhaps you are thinking about entering pastoral ministry. But you wonder, “How do I know if I am called?”

Consider the following:

Do you have a strong desire to serve God as a pastor? Being a pastor has special opportunity to care for God’s people and is therefore a deeply rewarding calling. But it is also challenging and often difficult. Is pastoral ministry really what you long to do?

Do you have the ability to serve God’s people? Part of this question is about natural ability—do you have the intellectual and communication skills necessary to study, learn and explain effectively?

But this question is also about your spiritual maturity. Are you growing in your walk with Christ? Are there any besetting sins in your life?

Are you humble? Do you listen well to other people, even when you do not agree? Are you willing to submit to others, reflective when criticized, and quick to repent?

Are you already involved in the work of the church? Seminary will help you with theological knowledge and skill building, but you can test your desire and ability by working in your church now.

What sort of pastor do you hope to be? The most urgent need in our culture is for pastors who have a deep desire to reach people who do not know Christ. Do you have a desire to serve Christ wherever the need is most apparent?

Are you spending time in prayer, asking God to make his will for you clear?

Have you talked to people who know you well? Certainly that will include your pastor and other leaders in your church, but seek out others who also know you, and ask them to give you an honest appraisal.

Finally, let me encourage you. The previous questions are pointed, and I would be surprised if you didn’t find some areas in which you could grow. But if others encourage you to pursue pastoral ministry, and have a convincing sense of God’s call, then please, don’t wait. The fields are ripe, but the harvesters are few (Luke 10:2).

Contact Jeff at jdeboer@midamerica.edu.

Come Inside, Celebrate!

by Dr. J. Mark Beach



“The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him.” – Luke 15:28 NIV

Have you noticed that some people are more like younger brother sinners, while others are more like older brother sinners? Younger brother sinners are the sinners we easily recognize and warn our children about. They are scandalous sinners. At their worst, they abandon the faith. They take to the road. They move away from home and stay away from church. Their lives can be financially successful and filled with richly variegated experiences—running marathons, hiking Mt. Fuji, learning to sail, etc. (all of which helps keep them away from God and Jesus and the church), or their lives can show haunting wreckage: one broken relationship tumbling after

another; abuse of substances; financial shortage. Promiscuity. A lot of sorrow mixed into everything!

Older brother sinners are different. We do not as easily recognize, nor warn our children about, them. They are often sinners more like ourselves. They aren't rebellious, really. As teenagers they didn't trouble their parents much. They didn't go away or stay away from home; they stayed home. In fact, they are the dependable types. They make good church members and are ready to serve. Their lives are usually steady and stable, maybe a bit lackluster. They have their hobbies and commitments. Their lives can also be financially successful; but, even if not, their conduct is marked by discipline. Moreover, the wreckage of sin seldom breaks in on their relationships and activities; or, if it does, it is nothing too serious, a scuff, a bump.

Younger brother sinners embarrass us, while older brother sinners fly under the radar—most of the time. But, as in the parable, the older brother's sinfulness is exposed, and what exposes it is grace. When younger brother sinners come seeking refuge, even as hired help, among the family of God, older brother sinners are looking for a price to be paid, first. Re-admittance into the Kingdom of God comes with a fee. Grace comes with a price-tag. This is why elder brother sinners resent, above all else, the father's generosity. *“The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him.”* For some reason, the father in the parable, pointing us to our heavenly Father, isn't interested in getting even or in getting his money back or shortening the younger son's leash. Somehow the father isn't even interested in hearing out the wayward son's confession of repentance. He is generously merciful to his generously sinful son. The result? The end of the story

“When younger brother sinners come seeking refuge, even as hired help, among the family of God, older brother sinners are looking for a price to be paid, first. Re-admittance into the Kingdom of God comes with a fee. Grace comes with a price-tag.”

has nothing to do with a heart-to-heart in which God says in effect: “Look, Jack; there is a serious matter of repayment we need to talk about. I need to be able to hold my head high in this town, you know?” None of that. The end of the story is a welcome-home party. And this isn't a little gathering for some ham-buns and cake. No, this is a spread. This is more like a neighborhood block party, with music and fun, a feast. There is celebration all around. Celebration!

And the curmudgeon who objects to all this merriment? The older brother. That other kind of sinner—equally lost, equally in need of mercy, the Pharisee sort of sinner who has no eye for the “amazing” in the love and blessing of grace. He wants no galas for sinners come home. His attitude is: After we see genuine reform, we'll talk about letting you come home. For now, take your seat in the back and maybe after some long observed penance you can move up a chair.

The father (again pointing us to our heavenly Father) has to explain to the older, sinful son (who makes sure Dad knows how unfairly he bestows his favors, and how he, the respectable son, has slaved faithfully, and how he has not wasted the family funds carousing with whores), the father explains to him that salvation isn't about dollars-and-cents. It isn't about keeping score. No, it's about resurrection from the dead. Join the celebration! Come inside. Somebody you know has just come back from the dead. Come inside, celebrate!

Did he? Will we?

Evening Class—Ready for a Marriage Boost?

by Dr. J. Mark Beach

It seems this topic never goes out of style—and no wonder! Marriage is wonderful, but hard. It brings such joy, yet it's also a source of yawning misery. Marriage delights, lifting our lives out of loneliness and enabling deep communion with our other; but too many marriages are pocked-marked by old wounds, unhealed hurts, failures without remedy, resentments that are stirred into renewed spats. Some marriages have reached a kind of resignation toward one's spouse—a carefully crafted tolerance of one another has been fabricated. Much of the delight is gone, but believers resign themselves to it as the best they can do.

Christian marriage, however, can do better than this. Love for the Lord, and our call to love and respect our spouse urges us to press on to better things. Indeed, marriage is not a fairy tale, nor a Hollywood romp; and it will not make all your dreams come true. But it is from God. He designed it with our happiness in view. It is something so wonderful and holy that it serves as an analogy of Christ's love for His church. As such we do well to renew our understanding of Christian marriage.

This spring, Mid-America plans to offer an evening class on a Christian view of marriage, scheduled to meet on four-successive Thursdays nights: March 1, 8, 15, and 22. The class is designed to be a team-taught event. Professor Andrew Compton will treat the Old Testament teaching on the foundations of Christian marriage; the next session will take up some pivotal New Testament materials on marriage. The biblical foundation classes will be followed by an examination of the understanding of marriage (with various attendant issues) as it unfolds in church history. Dr. Alan Strange will examine this part of the class. Last, Dr. Beach will address some practical issues relevant for a healthy marriage.



A Sabbatical Yes, Inactivity No

by Dr. Cornelis P. Venema

At my request, the Board of Trustees granted me a sabbatical for the fall term of our 2017-2018 academic year. As the term “sabbatical” suggests, it was a period of “rest” from the ordinary administrative and teaching duties that are mine as president and professor of doctrinal studies at Mid-America.

According to Mid-America’s Board/Faculty Handbook, professors are eligible for a sabbatical after six years of teaching. In order to be granted a sabbatical, we must provide the Faculty and Board with a proposal regarding the specific projects that we aim to pursue during our leave and “rest” from regular seminary responsibilities. Contrary to the popular suspicion that a sabbatical is simply another term for an extended vacation, a sabbatical is a form of resting from ordinary tasks in order to free up time for fruitful engagement with other activities that will enrich our classroom instruction.

During the course of my sabbatical, I was able to engage in the following activities and projects:

- In the month of September, my wife Nancy and

I had the privilege of traveling to New Zealand. While in New Zealand, I gave three addresses at a pre-synod conference (Sept. 8-9) in Palmerston North on the topic of “Why the Reformation Still Matters.” This conference preceded the triennial meeting of the Synod of the Reformed Churches of New Zealand (Sept. 9-16). It was also my privilege to attend the meeting of this Synod as a fraternal delegate and representative of the United Reformed Churches in North America on behalf of CECCA (Committee for Ecumenical Contact with Churches Abroad).

- From October 28-November 9, Nancy and I also enjoyed the privilege of leading a Reformation Jubilee Tour to Germany, France, and Switzerland, visiting various sites and places where important events occurred at the time of the Reformation in the sixteenth-century. In addition to the information provided by our tour guides, I had the opportunity to answer questions along the way regarding the Reformation and its ongoing significance for the church today.



- The largest portion of my time, however, was spent in writing and completing a manuscript on the doctrine of election, which will be published by Christian Focus Mentor Press (Scotland). The tentative title of the book is: “*He Has Mercy Upon Whom He Wills: The Doctrine of Election in Biblical, Historical, Theological, and Pastoral Perspective.*”

I am grateful to the Board of Trustees for granting me the opportunity to pursue these projects, and am hopeful that they will prove beneficial for my continuing service at the Seminary.

A Little Extra Space

by Mike Deckinga

A couple of weeks ago, the committee responsible for publishing *The Messenger* met in our conference room to discuss what we might like to include in this month’s issue. I hope you’ve enjoyed reading what we picked out! What I find pretty exciting is that I’ve been given more space. “The Development Report,” as it’s affectionately called, has a little more room to stretch out, and elaborate a bit on a few things. I began to wonder what I might do with the extra space. **Should I change the font? Maybe I could keep the same font, but perhaps make it bigger?**

Should I add extra spacing between the lines?

I’m actually quite happy with the extra space, because I get to spend a bit of time filling you in on our year-end donations, as well as the overall financial position of the seminary at this point in our fiscal year.

This past fall, I sent out two appeals highlighting the financial needs of the seminary. One was sent to our friends in Canada, the other to our U.S. donors. I’m also aware that many of you give generously through your local church, and may not get our mail, so I reiterated the message in the December issue of *The Messenger*. Even though the language differed among all three, the mes-

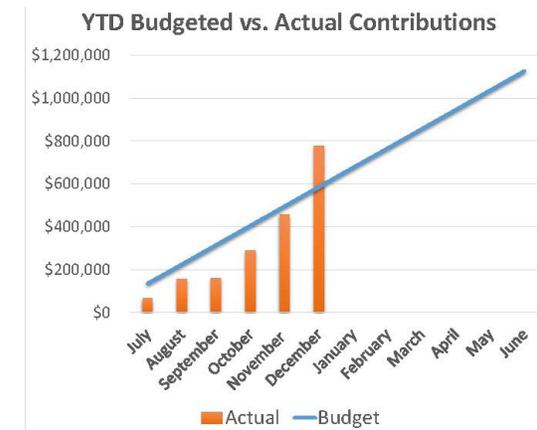
sage was the same: Mid-America Reformed Seminary cannot remain a viable institution without your contributions, and the need this year in the general fund is substantial.

All of us here at the seminary were very encouraged by your response to the appeals. The graph I have included here shows year-to-date actual general fund contributions (orange bars), versus our budget (blue line). You can observe that from July through November, our revenue was trailing our budgeted needs significantly.

Enter: December. December proved to be a very good month, financially speaking. It is not new to see a spike in giving at calendar year-end. It is typically our highest revenue month of the year. We do not take this for granted, though. We trust in the Lord to provide for our needs through you – and He did! You were asked to dig deep. You were asked to give sacrificially. You were asked to think about the importance of the work that is being done at the Seminary for Christ’s kingdom, and to partner with us prayerfully and financially – to all of these requests, you responded so generously. After all US and Canadian Foundation gifts to the general fund were calculated, I am pleased and thankful to report that we are properly po-

sitioned financially to enter into the second half of our fiscal year.

You’ll notice the graph continues into the next six months. The financial needs of the Seminary remain with us going forward – but so does the Lord’s providing hand. He provides for our every need, and He does that through your willingness to participate in the training of men for gospel ministry. Please keep our work in your prayers, and please continue your financial support in this New Year. Thank you!



To give, or plan for a gift today, contact Mike Deckinga at mdeckinga@midamerica.edu.



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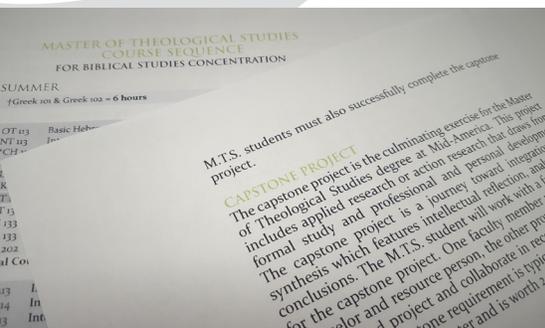


2018 Spring Conference
featuring
Dr. Robert Kelleman
speaking on
**“Counseling Under the Cross: How
Martin Luther Applied the Gospel to
Daily Life”**
on
Thursday, March 8 at 1:00 pm
more info at www.midamerica.edu

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◆ CAMPUS UPDATES

Capstone Projects by Rev. Andrew Compton



Every spring at Mid-America Reformed Seminary, when senior Master of Divinity (M.Div) students are taking oral exams, participating in theological reflections, and preparing for licensure and ordination exams in their local presbytery or classis, another group of senior students is immersed in a different set of tasks. In addition to the M.Div, Mid-America also offers a Masters of Theological Studies (MTS), a degree designed for men and women who desire to know the full counsel of God, and

yet who feel called to serve in Christ's kingdom and church in non-pastoral ways. Believing that an educated laity is a great blessing to Christ's church, MTS students spend the spring semester writing a senior capstone project. The capstone project is the culminating exercise for MTS students. It is a journey toward integration and synthesis designed to help MTS students tie together their coursework and ongoing research, with their vocational goals. As Scripture and theology are not studied in a vacuum at Mid-America, this project aids MTS students in articulating the wide-ranging application of their education to the contours of their vocational interests.

This spring, three students will embark on capstone projects. Jared Luttjeboer is engaging in a research project related to eschatology. Pablo Martínez is working on a capstone that studies God's attribute of immutability relative to His work in creation. Glem Melo is taking

up the topic of planting confessional-reformed house-churches among Muslim communities in North America. While there is always a degree of anxiety about producing a work of the length and methodological rigor of the capstone, the primary experience of students is one of eager anticipation. Jared Luttjeboer puts it this way: "I'm excited for the opportunity to pool various resources – either ones I've read or papers I've written – to hone my writing skills and best craft a project that will help Christians to think about eschatology using correct categories unto their comfort and spiritual growth."

Please pray for all our MTS students, but especially Jared, Pablo, and Glem as they embark on this project. At Mid-America, we are excited to build up Christ's church as we train future pastors and also well-educated lay people, graduates who will be equipped to serve Christ's kingdom and church with an advanced degree in theology and Bible.