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GOD'S SOVEREIGN GRACE IN CHRIST
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In a Time of War

Pretty much everyone who's a student of real history and has enough life experiences would nod their heads with this assessment:

To everything there is a season,
A time for every purpose under heaven:
[2] *A time to be born,*
And a time to die;
A time to plant,
And a time to pluck what is planted;
[3] *A time to kill,*
And a time to heal;
A time to break down,
And a time to build up;
[4] *A time to weep,*
And a time to laugh;
A time to mourn,
And a time to dance;
[5] *A time to cast away stones,*
And a time to gather stones;
A time to embrace,
And a time to refrain from embracing;
[6] *A time to gain,*
And a time to lose;
A time to keep,
And a time to throw away;
[7] *A time to tear,*
And a time to sew;
A time to keep silence,
And a time to speak;
[8] *A time to love,*
And a time to hate;
A time of war,
And a time of peace.

It's a beautifully rhythmic and memorable piece of writing and an oft-used philosophical statement on life. Given the current (as I write this) Russia- Ukraine war with the speculated potentially dire global consequences, this is no- doubt "*A time of war.*" Yes, Ecclesiastes presents war as a reality, but you miss the point if you isolate those first eight verses of chapter 3 from not only the rest of that chapter, but from the whole book and the seamless gospel of which it is a part.

The point that God, the author is making, via the preacher Solomon, is that all those "times", including "a time for war" are of the work of God that He does from beginning to end (vs 11b), and as Charles Bridges comments: "The full beauty of the work 'from the beginning to end' is only known to the Great Director , who sees the end from the beginning. We can neither unravel the thread of his counsels, nor grasp the infinite precision of his works."

Life in history, between the eternities, "under the sun," consists of the repeated "times" or seasons of life. But those seasons are not under our control but are God's works that He does from beginning to end. Apart from lifting our eyes to God and standing in awe of Him because of His works (3:14), all our pursuits and pleasures to which we devote our lives slip through our fingers without lasting satisfaction.

Only as we grasp that all of our lives come and go like a vapor and yet all the "times" are part of the all-good works of God, can

we live through all the "seasons" of this present life in the joyous hope of all things having been set right and dwelling in the new heavens and new earth (2 Peter 3:13). Because all the "times" of history are part of the fabric of God's unsearchable counsels, and the "end" of His works is the day of judgment (vs.17) of both the "righteous and the wicked" with unerring righteousness.

And what is war but the fruit of lust (James 4:2) and lust is an evil desire, wicked. When all the "times" are fulfilled in accordance with God's eternal counsel (see Eph. 1:10-12), then, and only then, will all who heeded the call to believe in God and Him whom He sent, Christ Jesus, realize their joyous hope of the promised land wherein righteousness dwells. There, life will no longer be a vapor but everlasting in such blessedness as we cannot yet comprehend.

As long a humankind lives "under the sun" there will be a division: Christians who live by faith in the God of Scripture in all "times", and everyone else. We Christians know as truth that in every one of the "times," all things are working together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose (Rom. 8:28). That's true in times of war when it's especially imperative for Christians to hold fast our confident hope with unshaking grasp.

If we are not abiding in God's Word, if our minds are not remaining focused on His covenant promises, we too might conform to this ungodly age's response of fear or resignation or even to their lustful pursuits of the opportunities of this "time of war" for self-gratification. Don't we see, as we are in a time of war, wicked grabs for power, authority, control, and ill-gotten wealth. In this "time," do we not see, among unbelievers, the pride and arrogance that refuses to be in awe of God for His works (Eccl. 3:14) but set themselves up as gods (of course, even in "times of peace" lustful behavior is evident under the sun)

But as we are, by God's grace, Christians, and show ourselves His disciples by abiding in His Word, we are set free by the truth (Jn 8:31); free from the condemning judgment coming upon the wicked when the works of God come to their appointed end; free to serve righteousness, free to serve Christ, free from being enslaved to wicked lusts, and being equipped to do the works of ministering the gospel (Eph 4:12).

The time of war, or in any of the "times," as we are enabled to be doing God's calling, is not a time to withdraw from doing. The works of God in time of war also serve His purposes to gather a church that will be full only because of and when His works in history have ended. Christ Jesus' command to go and make disciples of all nations remains in effect until the end of this age. War, as history bears out, brings not only fear, but sufferings and hardship across all the aspects of lives even far removed from the actual conflict. Families may be torn apart, household economies hurt, and persecution intensified.

War often reveals political leanings and commitments and exposes worldviews. War is an opportunity for the gospel because those who are not Christ's disciples have no hope amid war's disruption and destruction. They desperately need the gospel to find the only comfort in life and in death, and to have the joyful hope in all the "times" of life, even in the midst of war.

May we who are Christ's disciples not be fearful in this time of war, no matter how disruptive and destructive and extensive it may yet become, even as we pray for its victims and for peace.

In time of war, it is perhaps one of the most needful of times to ask God to lift up our eyes from how it seems to our sight; to ask God to lift up our eyes to see by faith the promised victory of Christ Jesus.

As King Jehoshaphat prayed before the Lord when Judah was in a time of war: "O Lord God of our fathers, are You not God in heaven, and do You not rule over all the Kingdoms of the nations, and in Your hand is there not power and might, so that no one is able to withstand You?" And he ended that prayer as should we: "Our eyes are upon You" (2 Chron.20)

May our eyes be upon God and in awe of Him for His works which are for the sake of His glory in Christ's Church.

May we witness our awe of God for His works even in time of war. May we who are Christ's witness our comfort of being at peace with God as eternal citizens of Christ's everlasting Kingdom, the only safe haven from war under the sun. rh

Rev. George Horner
Ridgeland, SC

REPORT ON THE 2022 SYNOD

HOME MISSIONS CONFERENCE

On February 7th-8th, the Synod Home Missions Committee met for a conference at Heidelberg Theological Seminary (HTS) in Sioux Falls, SD. The main purpose of the conference was *to begin the process of building a strategy for doing mission works by learning from our missionaries*. It might be better to describe our meeting as a round table discussion instead of the term conference. When you think of a conference, what comes to mind? You probably picture a person standing on a stage giving a lecture while the rest of the group listens. That was not how it happened at our time at HTS. Our conference resembled more as friends gathering together to hear one another's input on a variety of subjects. Our main subject was missions, yet we looked at missions from a variety of different vantage points.

On Monday evening, HTS professor Dr. Maynard Koerner opened our meeting with a devotional from Psalm 96. He emphasized that the new song that we sing to the LORD is a song of victory, and it should be our desire that our unbelieving neighbors would join us in singing that song of victory in Christ. After the encouraging devotional, we immediately jumped into business by discussing the past successes and failures experienced by missionaries in the RCUS. The missionaries expressed that strong hospitality and a community of love brought the best lasting results. As Jesus said, *"By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another."* (John 13:35) In order to build a community of love, it is important for pastors and members to have constant interaction with one another, realistic expectations of people, active involvement in evangelism, and preaching which places an emphasis on Christian love and hospitality. Areas where the RCUS could improve upon concerning missions include building and nurturing strong core groups as well as encouraging more involvement from the sending churches.

On Tuesday, HTS professor JP Mosley opened our session with a devotional from Romans 10:5-6 emphasizing that although it is good to develop a strategy for missions, we must not forget that our main calling is to preach the Gospel. From 9am to 3pm, we covered a whole host of topics that included helpful knowledge before starting a mission work, training and

recruiting missionaries, opportunities and places to initiate a mission work, and evaluating when to start and end a mission work. Let me do my best to highlight some of the insights that came out of our Tuesday discussion.

A good question asked by Rev. Matt Powell was, "Do we start a work in a big or small city?" One of the advantages of focusing on a smaller city such as Casper, WY is that there are plenty of people who have a sense of community and know their neighbors. The disadvantage of a bigger city such as New York City is that there are plenty of people, but there is a lesser sense of community and at times can be quite isolating. Certainly, both need the Gospel of Jesus Christ, yet it may be more profitable for the RCUS to zero in on the smaller cities.

Another good question asked was, "Are we asking too much of our missionaries?" There is a lot expected of a man who walks into a mission work. An idea was brought up that it might be wise to delegate the work among 2-3 men. For example, a retired RCUS minister could be delegated as a regional home missionary who serves a particular area seeking people interested in the Reformed faith. After interest is identified, another minister could be designated as the church planter who serves in the interim whose role is to preach the Gospel and strengthen the core group. Once a core group is established, an RCUS minister with at least 5 years of experience can be called to be the full-time missionary of a particular work. In the RCUS, a method similar to this was successful in our Dickinson, ND mission work. Some men are more gifted as missionary seed planters. While other men are more gifted at watering the church that has been planted. Scripture gives grounds to this idea of divvying up the work of missions to a variety of gifted men. 1 Corinthians 3:5-6 says, "*Who then is Paul, and who is* Apollos, but ministers through whom you believed, as the Lord gave to each one? I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase."

I appreciated the illustration that Elder Fred Hoffmann gave during the meeting. He said, "We are trying to get our machinery in order before we buy more land." Fred was spot on, and his illustration perfectly summarized what was determined at our meeting. The Synod Home Missions Committee agreed that it is important that the RCUS establish a strong core group before a mission work is pursued, and also men need to be adequately equipped before they are sent out into the mission field.

It is the committee's desire to be good stewards of the time and responsibility the LORD has given us. This is why we met together, yet we are acutely aware of the fact that, *"unless the* Lord builds the house, *men labor in vain who build it."* (Psalm 127:1) Please continue to pray for us as we seek to build a faithful and biblical strategy for home missions. More importantly, pray for all the mission works and pastors in the RCUS. I will leave you with a portion of the hymn that Rev. Vern Pollema read at the closing of our meeting.

The church's one foundation
is Jesus Christ, her Lord;
she is His new creation
by water and the Word:
from heav'n He came and sought her
to be His holy bride;
with His own blood He bought her,
and for her life He died.

By Rev. Cody Schwichtenberg

MOURNING WELL

"Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted." That's the consolation Matthew 5:4 offers to the grieved. As we look at the blessing of mourning, allow me to frame this examination in the form of a compound question: are you a happy mourner, or are you mourning happiness? That may appear to be an odd question. How can a mourner be happy, and why would anyone mourn happiness?

Well, that depends on your definition of happiness. In this life there are generally two types of mourners, and as late nineteenth century American Paul Laurence Dunbar captures it, the one type, puts on a face "that grins and lies, hides our cheeks and shades our eyes" ("We Wear the Mark").

It is this ungodly mourner who vainly lives never to expose personal grief–not even to him or herself if this denier can help it. These mourners deny a life of emptiness, but will not own up to their sin, nor will they look to Christ who is the only true source of happiness.

Their displaced grief comes because deep down inside they are holding the truth in unrighteousness; they are exchanging the truth for a lie, and while they go out to bleach their teeth, dye their hair, bronze their skin, and work out every tired muscle in their body for an idealized image that will some day end up in a box six feet under, if not reduced to the contents of a Ziploc bag, they mourn, but you will not likely not see their tears.

They mourn happiness–that is, their definition of happiness.

One of the most elusive things in the world is true happiness. It is so elusive that the world has to redefine it just so that it can pretend to have it. Judas Iscariot mourned in his self-pity and guilt, and instead of going to the One who could save him, he killed himself.

Cain in Genesis 4:13, mourned the judgment placed on him instead of grieving over his sin.

Is that not like our society today? It refuses to look at the idolatry of self-righteous works as anything to grieve over, but how it is quick to mourn the consequences of its own evil actions that befall it.

The mourning in Matthew 5:4 is decidedly different because the text is about a happy mourning, which then presents to us a bit of a paradox. How can you be a happy mourner?

The happy mourner can be the very one who mourns the physical loss of another, but realizes that the loss is eclipsed by the soul found in Christ. A happy mourner is also one who properly grieves over personal sins—a sorrow for the transgression with an eye to Christ.

Solomon understood this in his wise statement in Ecclesiastes 7:2, "It is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting, for this is the end of all mankind."

But who wants to go to the house of mourning, when you can go to the party,

when you can enlarge your territory, when you can discover health and wealth through positive innovation and personal gospel, and yet Solomon tells us there is something to be learned in the house of mourning, and that's this: all men die.

Unless the Lord no longer tarries, you will all die.

Dear friend, when you enter the house of mourning, you see death stare back at you as if to say your time will come, because your time will come, and likely the presence of your dead body will be a reminder for another soul in the funeral parlor that life on this side of God's kingdom is short, that the days of one's pilgrimage are numbered.

It is even a reminder that even some Christians would prefer to pass over—no, thank you—not for me.

An old Reformed minister told me once as I was preparing for the ministry that when he was just starting out, his parishioners kept literally dying on him. He thought maybe it was his preaching that was killing them, but his consistory assured him that the congregation was just elderly.

Nonetheless, it seemed to him as though every two weeks he was performing a funeral service. He became very good friends with the local funeral director, and he asked the director once what was the most difficult aspect about his job. The director said, it was never the mourning that bothered him, but it was the denial of death that always got to him. He would spend hours upon hours making corpses look fresh, and this was done to the satisfaction of the bereaved, so that relatives could see death through an artificial lens, as if they could be convinced that the deceased was only sleeping.

God's Word tells us that true mourning is a very real part of the life of the Christian.

As the writer of Hebrews states, "It is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment" (Heb. 9:27).

Entering the house of mourning with a heart primed for conviction, points the soul to the second part of that Hebrew passage: ". . .so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him" (9:28)

The King is coming. Are you preparing for the bridegroom to come again? Are you living in preparation to meet your bridegroom? Or are you too busy in the house of feasting to bother?

Listen to the words of Job: "Man wastes away like a rotten thing, like a garment that is moth-eaten" (Job 13:28). What a simile! It's not very flattering to humankind to be compared to a garment that is moth-eaten.

Job has a few more words for us to consider: "But a man dies and is laid low; man breathes his last, and where is he?" (Job 14:10). "He will perish forever like his own dung; those who have seen him will say, 'Where is he?'" (Job 20:7).

Years ago when I served as a ruling elder, one of the men died in my elder parish. I was asked to conduct the funeral since we were without a pastor at that time. I had not even started my first semester of seminary, so I was not feeling the most confident. During the private family service prior to the more public funeral service, someone had asked me point blank, "So where is he, preacher?" He was asking about the corpse.

I said, "Well, he is in two places. One, we know by sight, another we know by faith.

Physically, that is bodily, we know he is still out there in the main auditorium, but spiritually, we have a hearty trust, that he is in heaven with our Lord Jesus Christ."

Dear friend, if you were to die tomorrow, how would that latter question be answered of you?

"Blessed are those who mourn."

"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by Go" (2 Cor.1).

In Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians, he talks about this mourning.

"But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep.

For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. Therefore encourage one another with these words" (4:13-18).

What an event that will be! If we can take comfort from these words today, should one who really trusts in the promises of Christ ever mourn?

We look to our Lord for that answer in two words. From John 11:35, "Jesus wept." He mourned the passing of his dear friend Lazarus, and the Jews responded, "See how he loved him!"

Proper mourning comes from the heart of one who loves another. Improper mourning comes from the heart of one who loves only oneself.

Jesus wept; He mourned. And so may we. In fact, it could be argued, if we do not properly mourn. then we have not properly loved.

The third chapter of 1 John, tells us: "For this is the message that you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another. By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers."

How then can you love someone and not mourn his or her passing? When you are closely bound together in the unity of Jesus Christ, how then can you not grieve over the loss of your brother or sister?

Physical death comes because of sin, and we grieve as Christians not just because of the physical consequence of sin, but also because we do the sinning and when our eyes are open we are penitent for that which we have done to grieve the Spirit.

When we see what we have done that drove Christ to suffer on the cross, we grieve our sinful actions.

The apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthians that he was happy over the outcome of their grief. He writes: "As it is, I rejoice, not because you were grieved, but because you were grieved into repenting. For you felt a godly grief, so that you suffered no loss through us. For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death. Therefore we are comforted" (2 Cor. 7:9-10;13).

What do the mourners receive beyond the tears?

Let's begin with the tangible–the means of grace. At the Lord's Supper we have a table that is ordinary and is holding up ordinary bread and ordinary wine, but the simple feast presents an extraordinary message.

This table is about comfort–the bread and the wine symbolizing the flesh and the blood of the one and only source of comfort in mourning: "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted."

In this sacrament, we see, touch, smell, and taste the tangible signs of comfort.

We have these familiar words from Romans 5, "Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through

sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned. So as sin reigned in death, grace also might reign through righteousness leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord."

The bread and wine are reminders that death has been conquered, that sin has no more mastery over us, but that through the blood of the Lamb, that glorious work at the cross, we are a comforted people because grace reigns.

"For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 6:23).

"O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?" (1 Cor. 15:55).

One Christmas Eve my father passed away, and a year later, I compiled pictures and video footage of his life into a home movie to be given to my siblings for Christmas.

My adopted daughters had never met him, but one of them remarked, "Grandpa was a good man," and I asked, "How do you know?" And she answered, "Because Jesus Christ was in Him."

His funeral was a true celebration not because of the efforts of a husband, father, grandfather and long-standing ruling elder, but because of the graces given him and to all of us.

"Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted."

Beloved, we do not celebrate the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper mourning Jesus as if He is still suffering on the cross. Properly grieve over your sins, yes, but do not grieve over Jesus.

There are those who come to the table in the false church and do just that, but Jesus asked Mary Magdalene in John 20:15, "Woman, why are you weeping?"

Her tears were true, but she was mourning the passing of her teacher and master and failing to realize that the One who asked her why she was weeping was her risen Lord and King.

Christ came into this world to live for us and to die for us. We know in the latter that he paid the penalty for sin, that He gave His life as a ransom for many, and in the former He lived for us by obeying the law in our place, by performing the perfect righteousness required by a holy God.

So we come to worship, to hear the Word proclaimed and we come to the table

sober-minded, knowing that it was our sins that drove Him to the cross, but also knowing that Christ's earthly work is complete, and that's the comfort, dear friends–that's the comfort.

Mourn over the loss of a dear one, mourn over your sins, but take comfort in knowing this from Romans 6:5: "For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his."

And with that comfort that you have been given, be a comfort to others. Become instruments of comfort to your brother and sister, and let the world around you see your radiating that comfort.

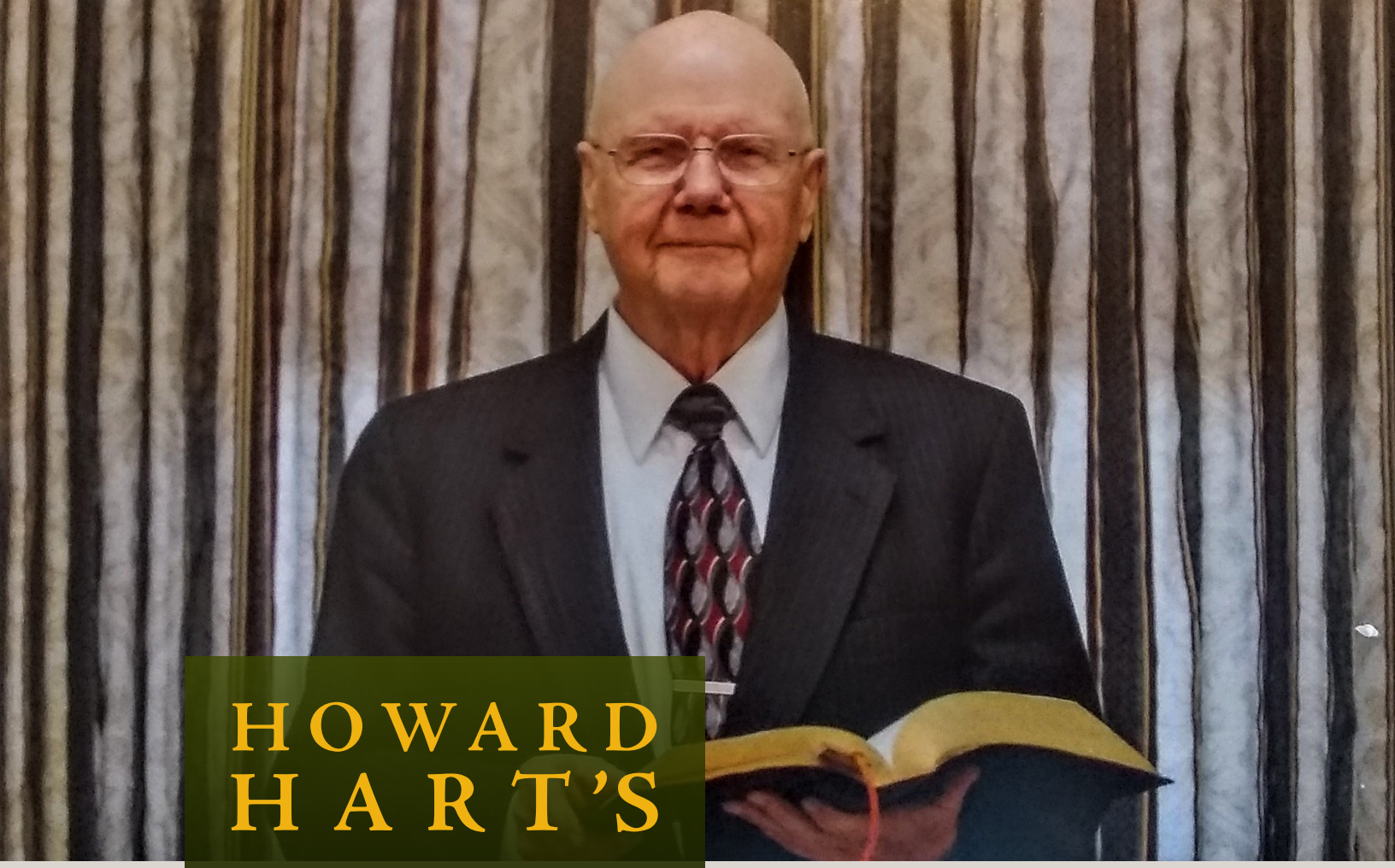
For death has not sting and you are no longer in bondage to sin.

Hear these words to the Church at Corinth:

"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by Go" (2 Cor.1).

Beloved, happy are those who mourn, for it is the Spirit in them that compels them to mourn, and that same Spirit is known by another name in Scripture, and that name is Comforter. rh

Rev. Chuck Muether



HOWARD HART'S

60th Anniversary of His Ordination

Howard Hart was born August 1st, 1933, in Fall River, Mass to Earnest and Minnie [Cross] Hart. He attended elementary and high school in Fall River. He later graduated from Barrington College RI, receiving a BA in philosophy. In 1961 he received a BD and M Div. degrees from Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, PA and at North American Baptist Seminary in 1968 and 1969. He had specialized training in Christian Education. He also later received a Doctor of Divinity Degree.

Howard was ordained to the Christian ministry in the Orthodox Presbyterian church on March 28th, 1962, in Bellmawr NJ. He served Orthodox Presbyterian churches in Bellmawr, NJ and Bridgewater, SD from 1961-1969. In 1969 he joined the RCUS and served RCUS churches in Eureka, SD and Sutton, NE from 1969-1982. The RCUS sent him as a missionary at Large in Cincinnati, OH from 1982-1985. While in Cincinnati he served Faith Presbyterian Church from 1985-1986 as interim pastor. Rev. Hart served RCUS churches in Garner, IA and Lincoln, NE from 1986-1998. He retired from active ministry in 1998 and moved to Mitchell, SD.

From 1999-2005 he was a writer for the RCUS and helped produce 1000 Sunday School Lessons. During this time he was also the Administrator of the Reformed Resource Center. He served various area churches by filling the pulpit for Sunday worship. Dr. Hart's real passion was teaching the Bible. He fulfilled this by teaching at Mitchell Christian High School from 2004-2010. He loved his students and they loved him. He was employed by the Prehistoric Indian Village in the summers as a tour host from 2001-2007.

Howard served in the National Guard from 1949-1958 and served in Korea. He was united in marriage to Barbara Monson on June 14th, 1958. To this union was born Deborah [Terry] VanZee of New Holland, SD. The Hart's have 2 grandchildren, Benjamin and Daniel VanZee.

Rev. Hart found a great deal of joy in meditating on the Persons of the Holy Trinity and teaching the Gospel of the love of Jesus in the classroom. His lectures in Church History, Philosophy and Apologetics were all based on Jesus, the Christ. His love for the folks in his congregations and the RCUS were only surpassed by the love for his wife, Barbara, his daughter, Deborah and his faithful savior Jesus Christ. rh

(The reports from the South Central and Northern Plains Classis are planned to be published in the next issue of the Reformed Herald)

REPORT ON THE 37TH MEETING OF THE

WESTERN CLASSIS

March 1-3, 2022, Sacramento, California

The 37th Meeting of the Western Classis convened at 1pm on Tuesday, March 1st, 2022, at Covenant Reformed Church of Sacramento, California. The hospitality of our host was immediately present in warm welcomes, and a light lunch for the delegates. This hospitality continued throughout in good fellowship, good meals, and much attention to our needs and wellbeing.

The roll showed ten ministers and eight elders present, a quorum. Rev. Tracy Gruggett was again elected President, Elder Jerry DeYoung was elected Vice President, Rev. Doug Schlegel was elected Stated Clerk, and Deacon Nathan Schlegel was elected Treasurer.

In addition to the delegates, we had three guests speak to us over the course of the meeting. Jose Fabila gave us an update on the work being done through Seminario Reformada de las Americas in Ecuador, in conjunction with City Seminary of Sacramento. The Seminary is run by Rev. Pablo Landazuri, with 20 students in attendance this year. In addition to Rev. Landazuri, classes are also taught remotely by Rev. Ruben Zartman and Rev. Valentin Alpuche. Please keep this work in your prayers as they seek to spread the word of the Lord in Latin America.

Jim Iwema with Reformed Missions Services also stayed three days with us, and spoke with us about the organization's programs, which seek to provide aid to NAPARC congregations, and specifically home mission works, with their community outreach and ministry development programs. They also offer disaster response services, as well as foreign mission support programs.

Elder Tom Lagomarsino from Sacramento gave a report on work he and others were recently able to engage in, in an attempt to aid the churches in Myanmar. Christians there are heavily oppressed, and any support is illegal. This makes the work not only very challenging, but dangerous. Please join us in praying for the Christians in Myanmar, as well as those attempting to help them.

Parochial reports this year showed several congregations thankful for receiving new members and young families, but an equal number who have not grown, or even lost members, and are greatly desirous of outreach opportunities and growth. We also received multiple reports of a need for officers in the congregations. We give thanks for the many blessings the Lord sends upon His church, but we also pray that He would continue to bring new members to Himself, and that He would equip those congregations to serve and shepherd their members rightly.

We also received reports of failing health, most notably on the part of Rev. Paul Treick of Modesto. While he continues to participate in Christian fellowship and the activities of the church as much as possible, this is becoming increasingly difficult. Though he desired to, he was not able to join us at the Classis meeting this year. Please keep Rev. Treick in your prayers.

Two examinations for the ministry were held this year. The first was Elder Tim Curtis, from Modesto, California. He was examined on Church History, RCUS History, Orthodoxy, and the RCUS Constitution. This exam was sustained. He will have one more examination, on the Heidelberg Catechism, after which he anticipates a call from Modesto.

The second examination was for Rev. Jeff Munive, seeking to transfer his credentials to the RCUS from the URC. Rev. Munive was examined on the Loci of Theology, Apologetics, and RCUS Standards. His examination was sustained. On completion of the examination, Classis also reviewed and approved his call from Grace Reformed Church in Lancaster, contingent on approval from Synod.

As two men seek to fill empty pulpits, we also had two retirements this year. Rev. Eric Bristley of Willows is retiring in order to move to Ohio to assist his mother with significant health concerns. Rev. Jonathan Merica of Stockton has also elected to retire, in order to address medical concerns that he has been putting off over the years. We thank the Lord for the many years of service these men have given to His church, and pray that He would uphold and bless them each in their trials to come. Please also pray for these congregations, as they now seek to know what the Lord would have them to do.

In one final notable move, Elder Larry Lynch will be moving his family to Sioux Falls, South Dakota, in order to attend Heidelberg Theological Seminary. His in-laws, Rev. Neale Riffert and his household, will be moving along with them. Please pray for the Lynch and Riffert households as these California desert natives move to colder climates, and as Elder Lynch's seminary education progresses.

Throughout the days, the regular business of the Classis was able to be attended to rightly, and in good order. We heard several good devotions, and were able to join together many times in song, and in prayers both of thanks and supplication, knowing that we have a Heavenly Father who delights to answer the prayers of His people. Classis adjourned on Thursday afternoon, to convene again on March 7, 2023, in Shafter. rh

PRESIDENT'S REPORT

37th Annual Meeting of the Western Classis

Esteemed Fathers and Brethren,

Our Lord calls us to faithfully shepherd his flock (1 Peter 5:1-4). I thank our Lord Jesus Christ for his abundant grace toward us. In the past year he has given us sufficient grace to face the many trials that he led us through. We have not lacked what we needed for each moment. Indeed, each moment was met with his abundant grace. Above all we have had grace and opportunity to sustain his flock, which he has committed to our care. I am thankful to him to be part of a denomination that is committed to biblical pastoral care.

What follows is my state of the church report, beginning with a summary of the parochial reports.

Parochial reports

Retired Ministers

Retired ministers may submit a report to classis if they wish to do so. This year we received two such reports.

Rev. Paul Treick brings warm greetings to Classis. In his report he relates that his current health issues are affecting his ability to serve the church. Nevertheless, each week he puts together the bulletins, and he teaches the adult Sunday school and the Sunday night Bible studies as he is able. He and Karen greatly benefit from the warm fellowship of the congregation. In his report he also seeks to maintain a true Presbyterianism by sounding warnings against the dangers of creeping congregationalism on the one hand or a trend toward 'super committees' on the other.

Rev. Vern Pollema reports of his labors for the church. The Lord provided opportunity for him to preach each month at Grace Reformed Church of Lancaster, as well as occasionally filling in for Rev. Tracy Gruggett. He serves on two permanent committees, one of Classis, the other of Synod. And he also serves on the board of Heidelberg Theological Seminary. He remarks that his health is relatively good, and he and Betty are enjoying their children and grandchildren and the fellowship of the church. We can only thank God that he continues to bless us with the labors of his faithful servant.

Active Ministers

Though in the second year of the Pandemic, Rev. Sam Powell reports that the congregation of First Reformed Church in Yuba City is getting its health back after several extremely challenging years. He reports of faithful ministry in a difficult context and describes the Lord's grace in sustaining the congregation and meeting their financial needs. He encourages classis that in the midst of these changing times that we rely of the Rock who does not change. Moreover, new changes, he counsels, are "OK" so long as God is doing it.

Things are returning to normalcy at Grace Reformed Church in Bakersfield. The congregation worshipped outside at a local school in the beginning of the year but came back to their facilities in early Spring. The remodel project is both a source of joy and frustration. They're using it, but the work remains incomplete. Rev. Gruggett relates that they took the Lord's Supper only two times in 2021, due to a combination of Covid and the sanctuary not being ready. The congregation will be short one elder for 2022. The Spiritual Council will be comprised of the pastor and two elders. In addition, the congregation has a small number of children. But there is good number of young adults, and new families being started. Generally, the congregation is encouraged.

Rev. Valentine Alpuche lists his labors during the year. He relates that the congregation is comprised of four families, and visitors regularly attend. Among his labors Valentine also teaches at *Seminario Reformado de las Américas*. I will note that he carries out his labors while experiencing extreme, sometimes debilitating, lower back pain. Still the work goes on, and the Lord is blessing it.

Rev. Douglas Schlegel says that impact of Rev. Thomas Mayville's absence has been deeply felt by himself and by the congregation. He reports that the congregation, due to Covid-19 met only twice in 2021 through virtual means. On the use of this technology he writes, "I am pleased that those who need to use this technology can do so, when necessary, but I also continue to insist that while it is a good tool, it will never, ever replace the indispensable physical gathering for worship." The church was well served with faithful preaching, teaching, and shepherding. And I suppose it can be said that when you produce a handbook on church discipline, you become a sought-after-man. Rev. Schlegel thus finds himself serving the broader church as a consultant for pastors and councils on difficult cases of church discipline. We thank the Lord for his gifts.

Pastor Gil Baloy reports that for Covenant Reformed Church in San Diego 2021 was a better year than the previous one. Most importantly, they returned to in-person worship as well as to other in-person activities. One gets a sense that congregation values and enjoys loving fellowship with the members engaging in many activities to be with and to encourage one another. Some members moved out of state. But they have installed two men as church officers. Rev. Baloy continues his evangelism efforts; twice a week going out to make known the good news. The congregation is being sustained under solid teaching and wise leadership.

Rev. Frank Walker details his labors at Sacramento Covenant Reformed Church and is encouraged by the congregation's growing maturity. He reports that congregation has returned fully to their pre-Covid activities. They did lose members during Covid for various reasons, but things have stabilized. Indeed, new members have been received. He reports that the loss of his daughter has frequently left him feeling broken, and the several health issues have prevented him from preaching and from other forms of ministry. The ongoing work, the growing maturity of the members, and the addition of new members is a great delight to him. May our Lord continue to provide comfort for he and Christine.

Rev. Gary Mancilas relates his work and the state of Covenant Reformed Church of Chico. He describes his numerous pastoral labors in conjunction with the members of Consistory in what appears to be well functioning program of spiritual oversight and instruction. They are very diligent to maintain and exercise the three marks of the church along with catechetical instruction of the youth. In addition, they lead the congregation to observing Synodical days of prayer. We can see that the congregation is well served by these faithful under-shepherds. As we all know, Gary and Gloria lost their daughter, Melanie, this past August. They want to express their deeply felt thanks to everyone in Classis for all your prayers and words of encouragement.

Rev. Ruben Zartman relates what was a year of blessing for the congregation of Ebenezer Reformed Church. Along with regular preaching and teaching, he finds that "remaining in touch with the congregation remains a rewarding element of the work." The congregation's enthusiastic support of *Valle De Gracia* re-

mains unabated. Indeed, their involvement with the work has been beneficial to the health of ERC. During the year the Lord added to the number through transfers, public profession of faith, and baptisms. He is also encouraged by the ways members find ways to serve one another and show hospitality. In addition, to his inside labors with both congregations, his outside labors as the synodical clerk take a significant amount of time and energy as we might imagine. Rev. Zartman's hope for the coming year is that the congregation will remain faithful in doctrine as well as grow in prayer and in evangelism.

Rev. Jonathon Merica states that, "The goal of the ministry of Calvary Reformed Chapel is to declare the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ to sinners and faithfully preach the Word of God to His people for His honor and glory." His report reflects his faithful and dedicated labors to this end. On a Weekly basis he preaches God's Word, teaches the adult Sunday school, and leads a midweek Bible study. The Lord's Supper was administered twelve times. He mentions various other endeavors, including an emphasis on prayer. As to numerical growth, one person has been taking membership class, and one couple in the congregation is expecting. He expresses his gratitude to the Western Classis and to the congregation of Trinity Reformed Church, Modesto, the overseeing congregation.

Rev. Eric Bristley relates that much of his ministry to Grace Reformed Church of Willows was complicated by his need to go to Ohio to attend to the care of his elderly mother, who is 91 and no longer able to care for herself on her own. It was a difficult year. Much of the first half the year he resided in Ohio, yet ministered to the congregation through virtual means. This was something they were accustomed to due to the pandemic. In the latter half of the year, he was able to intermittently minister in person to the congregation in a variety of ways. During all of this he kept in frequent contact with the Consistory and was able to preach all but three Sundays. That he may care for his mother full time, he made the decision to resign from Willows and to retire from ministry. In November, he submitted to the consistory his request to resign and retire, and the consistory accepted both, and the congregation voted to make him Pastor Emeritus.

Elder's Reports

Elder Tim Curtis presented the parochial report for Trinity Reformed Church of Modesto. The church returned to in-person worship services for most of 2021. He reports that he preached 50 times, and the Lord's Supper was served once. They broadcasted their worship services online, and this has been a source of ministry to the hospice patients he serves as a chaplain. The Congregation engages in an adult Sunday school and a Sunday evening Bible study. The congregation enjoys close fellowship and is blessed by their corporate prayer.

One feels a sense of excitement in reading the report from the elders Grace Reformed Church in Lancaster. Elders Larry Lynch and Mark Reyna write that for six years now the Lord has sustained the congregation through the work of the elders and through no small contribution from Rev. Neale Riffert and Rev. Vern Pollema. Now at last they have called a man to serve as their pastor, Rev. Jeff Munive. They have prayed that the Lord will send a laborer, and it appears that He is doing so. In addition, the congregation has grown in their faith and in numbers with addition of six new members. These men express their joy, saying, "Our hope for the future of this congregation grows day by day."

Evaluation

Statistics

I hate to bear bad news, but as with all classis delegates I am concerned with continuing decrease in membership, especially communicate members. The overall total of our communicant membership decreased by 66 members. Most of these loses were sustained by Sacramento and Yuba City congregations, and in measure reflect the impact of the pandemic. Such losses have leveled off and both churches are in a rebuilding phase. The remainder of the churches of classis either remained the same or took in or lost a new family or two. Some of these losses were due to folks moving away. We should also be aware that eleven members of Rehoboth Reformed Church remain in the Western Classis until they are dismissed or erased. It is reasonable that these members will move to other churches in the Los Angeles area where there are no other RCUS churches.

No doubt this trend is concerning to all of us, perhaps even discouraging. The ministers and Consistories put in a lot of effort to serve and grow the churches. Even so, last year, we again saw deceases, and sadly another church closed. In past meetings and in numerous conversations, we have sought various explanations

for this trend. To be sure, coming off two difficult years of Covid has a contributed to our lower numbers. Perhaps our Lord has been purifying our churches during this season (John 15).

It seems to me that the reports reflect what we can call seasonal ministry. Coming out of the pandemic I see efforts to resume and renew in-person worship and fellowship. Several reports relate a closeness among the members with a desire to serve each other. Others reveal an emphasis on prayer. And one report exhorts us to be more open to change where in fact God is leading it. Though our numbers have not increased as we would desire, there is heath in our midst. And this is no small thing. Let us be committed to health first. This calls for pastoral wisdom. In the end we must echo the words of Paul: May we grow with the increase that is from God (Col. 2:19).

Ministry in Season

As stated above, ministry must take regard the seasons that churches find themselves in. To this end, I want to mention three areas to think about in the current season. I am sure you could think of more.

1. I think that we would all agree that the current season calls for emphasis on in-person worship, bible studies, *et al*. Virtual technologies are a wonderful medium, but they cannot replace in person activities. As John says, *Having many things to write to you, I did not wish to do so with paper and ink; but I hope to come to you and speak face to face, that our joy may be full* (2 John 1:12).
2. At the current time and probably from here on, we need to take stock of the powerful influences upon our people coming from the news media. By news media I include all media iterations of *both* the left and right. These media and the personalities coming through them are having a powerful, formative, indeed, catechetical influence upon our people yet many are biblically ignorant and know little to nothing of the kingdom of Christ and the way of the cross.
3. The current season calls for instruction in the upcoming elections both of 2022 and in 2024. I've never been a doomsayer and I usually ignore alarmists. But the political climate of the nation does not bode well for the upcoming elections. Maybe these will be normal election cycles; I do not know. But if they are as tumultuous as the previous one, then our people will need instruction and guidance on how to think biblically about political matters and be taught how to trust in our ascended Lord rather than the princes of men (Psalm 2; Is. 30).

Presbyterian church government

The esteemed fathers of our denomination–men that I have served alongside for my 20 years of ministry have passed onto us a legacy of faithfulness to the Reformed faith, with a strong devotion to presbyterian church government. We do well to carry on these principles and heed this legacy. We do well to heed warnings against encroachments that violate norms of sound church government. To be sure, classis governs as a body while in session or in circularized recommendations. It is not governed by any committee, nor are its delegated powers to be usurped by any one person, church, or group of congregations. To that end, I believe we are quite careful to keep the constitution and polities that are meant to govern the Western Classis. Nevertheless, we can make mistakes, or we can fail to see that a trend in a bad direction is underway. Therefore, let us be careful and humble to maintain sound ecclesiastical governance and submission.

I close this report with a citation from the Apostle Peter:

The elders who are among you I exhort, I who am a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that will be revealed: [2] Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; [3] nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock; [4] and when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that does not fade away (1 Peter 5:1-4).

In 2022, may our exalted Lord be pleased to supply grace to sow and to water the seed of his Word. And may he grant much fruit.

Respectfully submitted,
Rev. Tracy Gruggett

(This article is authored by Megan Gross, whose article published in the previous issue of the RH was inadvertently (apologies) attributed to Megan Fox. Megan and her husband Ty, the great nephew of the late RCUS minister Lloyd Gross, are members of Emmanuel Reformed Fellowship, Pella, IA)

THE GREAT SURGEON

God as the Great Physician is a comforting picture, binding up our wounds and healing our diseases, but like many images in the Bible, our own experiences sometimes limit our understanding and appreciation of their full meaning. What many of us picture is the role of the kindly family doctor. He gently checks on our health, offers advice, and prescribes medicines. Or perhaps we see him as the emergency room doctor, the one to call on only in a crisis.

In the last ten years since our daughter was born, we've had those views radically altered. Our Evie was born with multiple birth defects that eventually led to a diagnosis of CHARGE syndrome (a rare genetic syndrome that can affect nearly every possible system in the body in any possible way!!) and receiving a tracheotomy and a surgically implanted feeding tube before coming home from the NICU at two months old. From there, we had years of simply trying to discover health issues faster than they could kill her. That sounds rather dramatic, but unfortunately is no exaggeration. We are incredibly grateful that her various issues took turns trying to take her life and did so slowly enough that we could find them and fix them in time. We pray that they continue to be so considerate.

But over these years, we interacted with countless doctors in various fields in multiple cities in different states. And God gave us a deeper view into His role as our Physician.

It is our natural sinful tendency to see our souls as generally healthy, even in the reformed world. We know that we used to be dead, but surely now, born again, we are plump and pink and healthy newborns! We might have that sinful nature causing a few problems, but nothing too big, nothing that a quick trip to our Doctor's office and a prescription won't cure!

So when our Doctor comes at us with a knife, we're scared, we're confused, we're angry. How DARE He! Why would He hurt us like that?

But we're not healthy babies. Our souls are filled with the birth defects of sin.

And they're working to kill us.

Good doctors know when to perform surgery, when the only way to save a patient is to cut into them, removing damage and stitching everything up again. They know it will cause pain, maybe even more pain than the original problem caused, but they also know that without drastic measures, their patient will die.

We've stood in a room with doctors over and over as they told us they would need to cut into our daughter again. And the reaction we gave them is, I'm ashamed to say, much better than the reaction we have given to our Great Surgeon when He has wheeled us down to surgery. With our daughter, we can see the damage. We know she'll die or have her life severely limited without the necessary surgeries. But with ourselves...we kick and scream and

accuse. Why would God DO this to us? Aren't we His children? Why would He cause us pain like this?

Our reaction is closer to that of our daughter's in her younger years. She couldn't understand what was going on, why we would hand her off to strangers again or why she would wake up in pain. Why would we DO this? Isn't she our child? Aren't we supposed to protect her? Why would we cause her pain like this?

She didn't know she'd die without it.

We're slowly learning that our souls are just as damaged. They're in just as much need of a knife and stitches. But it's our own blindness and arrogance and immaturity that tells us we would be okay without it. We want the gentle doctor, the one we see only once in a while, the one we rarely need.

We also don't want to see that our lives will be so much harder if we leave the damage. For Evie's first four years, she was tiny. VERY tiny. We fought for every ounce of weight on her small frame. We thought her stunted growth was just due to her syndrome, but when a hidden defect in her small intestine took its turn trying to claim her life, the doctors went in and removed it. We thought we were solving one single problem, but after surgery, her growth took off. She gained weight and grew taller and caught up to her peers in size (and now has passed many up!!). Watching her struggle through the pain and misery leading up to the surgery felt pointless. What was God doing? WHY would He do this to her? It wasn't until later that we realized that this bowel defect had been the main source of her growth issues. How often do we see God's actions as pointless and cruel, only to realize later that He cut out exactly what was needed to allow us to grow and thrive in our Christian walk?

But often, it's not that simple. It's not a single surgery that cures all our troubles. Instead, it's a process. Evie's airway was kind of a wreck when she was born. She got her trach which made her safe, but then it was a journey of years and years (one we're still on!) to fix all the various issues. We would do a surgery, let her recover, and then it would reveal another problem we hadn't been able to see before. Every fix seemed to just show us more things to fix! It was hard to feel optimistic in those years, hard to feel God had a plan that truly was for our good. But of course, He DID (and DOES) have a plan, and ever so slowly, we've made improvements on her airway to where now it is in really good shape! God's work on our spiritual lives often feels closer to those experiences, where every sin uncovered leaves more sins bare in our hearts.

We can see God as our Great Surgeon now, see the wisdom and skill with which He wields a scalpel to heal us. Our new struggle is to see God in OUR place, the weeping parent who wishes the surgery wasn't necessary, but is grateful it can save our child. Our relationships with the various surgeons who have saved our child are interesting ones. There is a deep appreciation and trust with them. But we never trust them to not HURT our daughter. On the contrary, we expect it. We even pay them for it! But we have confidence that the hurt they cause will better Evie's life, that it will allow her to thrive on the path God has for her.

These experiences have also helped us as we look at others in their own suffering. Too often, we think we know why God has performed a surgery on a fellow believer. We think we can safely judge someone's guilt by the type of surgery performed. But it's rarely that simple. If all we know is that someone had a heart surgery, how are we to know if it was because of a birth defect, because they trusted the wrong advice, because they didn't care for their body well, or because someone stabbed them with a knife?! God knows the reasons why He needed to perform that surgery, but we will never have the full picture this side of glory.

Once this view seeps in, it dramatically changes how you see your walk with God.

I pray we can someday trust God fully, even without every detail of WHY He does what He does. We have His qualifications, after all, and they are far superior to any of the fallen humans with whom we have entrusted our daughter. He hasn't just studied our souls and what they most need to become whole and healthy and reflecting Christ, He created them. He knows perfectly where best to cut and which techniques will be most effective. And we hold firmly to the truth that He will never sever any part of us that will not lead to our healing.

He is our Great Physician, our Great Surgeon, our Great Healer, and our souls desperately need his care and skill. I pray someday, we may have the grace to handle the surgeries of our soul as our daughter does now at age ten. There is trust that comforts her fears and there is anticipation for what the surgery is designed to do. She knows there will be pain, but she holds firm to hope, a childlike faith that we should strive for as we trust our Father and Physician. rh

NEWS FROM COVENANT EAST CLASSIS

The delegates of Covenant East Classis convened in Rogers, Arkansas at Grace Reformed Church February 28-March 2. Many years ago, Covenant East Classis established a practice of holding a pre-classis meeting in which we take up some subject touching on a current challenge for pastoral care. This year Rev. Steven Carr led the delegates in a review of Dr. Carl Trueman's book, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self.* In his book, Dr. Trueman explores the historical roots of "Expressive Individualism" and how it manifests itself in our times, and also how expressive individualism influences Christians as well. Delegates spent some time discussing how expressive individualism poses challenges to each of us in the churches, as well as ways in which we might address it. I came away from this discussion challenged and encouraged to be more mindful of this influence and to be more aware of how to address it in preaching and pastoral work.

In many respects, this classis meeting was fairly routine. We dealt with the matters of a typical classis meeting: pastors reported on their charges, their joys and their hardships, reviewed the work of Interchurch Relations with Fraternal churches, Youth Camp, Home Mission endeavors, financial reports. We spent time praying for each church after pastors and elders reported on and answered questions from delegates about matters that caught our attention. Classis approved the resignation of the Reverend Doctor Mark Larson from Peace Reformed Church, Garner, Iowa. Rev. Larson is retiring from the ministry for health reasons. Rev. Larson has served in the pastoral ministry in both the OPC and RCUS for over 30 years. Larson was elected Pastor Emeritus of Peace Reformed Church, which action the classis approved. A letter of dismission for retired minister Rev. Jay Fluck to the South Central Classis was approved. Consent was given to Rev. Win Groseclose to labor outside the bounds of Classis in Light of the Resurrection Reformed Church in Zelienople, PA with the intent of starting the process of bringing this group into Covenant East Classis. A committee was appointed to serve as advisors to Light of the Resurrection Reformed Church and schedule a visit as they look forward to the process of affiliating with the RCUS. Classis ratified the Constitutional changes adopted by Synod 2021.

One fraternal delegate was present among us for our meeting. Rev. Paul Mourreale represented the Midwest Presbytery of the OPC. This brother was a wonderful encouragement and participant among us, and was commended with the "hair shirt award" for staying with us to adjournment.

In another respect, this meeting was not "routine." One pastor's report required going into Executive Session. After a lengthy time of dealing with this report, and a time of prayer, classis ultimately appointed a special committee comprised of two ministers and two elders to advise the Consistory of the church this pastor serves. Sadly, two churches of classis, Peace Reformed Church in Garner, Iowa and Covenant Reformed Church in Gettysburg, PA, have experienced considerable inner turmoil over the past year. Both churches are now also vacant. Classis approved specific counsel for both churches for the year ahead.

The hospitality of the members of Grace Reformed Church was delivered with excellence, generosity and love. Thank you again, sisters and brothers! In the atmosphere of that hospitality the delegates freely mingled, catching up on each other's labors and lives. There is a remarkable camaraderie, respect and affection among the ministers and elders of Covenant East Classis. There is a true fellowship and unity in the Spirit. Such unity is a special favor of our Lord, for which we give Him all praise and glory. rh

Submitted by, Rev. Jim Sawtelle

PRESIDENT'S REPORT

to the 2022 Meeting of Covenant East Classis March 1-2, 2022
Held at Grace RCUS, Rogers, AR

It has been an honor to serve as your president over the last year. As this was my first year on the job, I was forced to "hit the ground running" as the baton was passed to me. I wish to express my heartfelt gratitude to all who assisted me in my first year as president through emails and phone calls, especially outgoing president Rev. Kyle Sorensen, who provided me with what I needed to make a successful transition into this role, and Rev. Steve Carr and Elder Andy Gilman, who refined my thinking and encouraged me in the work.

In keeping with RCUS practice, condolences were brought on behalf of Classis to the families of deceased RCUS ministers Gene Sawtelle (via a letter of condolence) and Wes Brice (via Rev. Kyle Sorensen, who preached Wes Brice's funeral).

The Heidelberg Catechism (Q. 28) teaches us to be "thankful in prosperity, and patient in adversity." As I reflect upon the churches within our Classis, I see the need for both, as the past year has been one of blessings and burdens. Let us give thanks to God for the blessings and look to God to sustain us under the burdens.

The blessings we have experienced as a Classis in the last year, as reported by the parochial reports of ministers and statistics reports are that our ministers have been faithful in preaching the word, in season and out of season. In doing so, many of our ministers report a joy in the simple week by week feeding of the flock and the resulting spiritual growth of their members. Along with the spiritual growth and maturity of our current members, God has been pleased to add new members to our congregations. Over the past year 33 covenant children were added by baptism—almost a 50% increase from 2020. Praise God for these little blessings! In addition to these, over half our churches reported receiving new members by either letter of dismission or profession of faith, with one congregation reporting an overall increase in membership of 27% (from 91 to 126 baptized members). I am also thankful to report that this year we have seen an increase in overall giving in our churches, which is remarkable given the struggles that some of our churches experienced.

Along with these blessings, we have also experienced many burdens. We have seen conflict and division within two congregations (with one congregation losing 47% of its communicant members over the past year and another seeing its entire consistory resign). We have also witnessed the closing of a mission work, the retirement of two pastors for health reasons, and another pastor take a leave of absence. And, although we have seen growth in certain congregations, there has been an overall reduction of the number of communicant members within our Classis by 7%.

As I reflect upon the needs of our Classis, and our denomina-

tion, one thing rises to the surface—our need to look to the future. Not only must we concentrate our efforts on missions outside the walls of our present churches, but we must also strengthen the ministries within our present churches (for if we do not have strong churches, there will be no churches to plant mission works). To do this, our local churches would be wise to develop, not only plans for external growth, but also plans for internal stability and succession. "Who will be the next pastor?" should be asked long before the present pastor desires to retire or, as we have seen this year, is forced to retire for health reasons. As a church we must be proactive as our ministers age. We also must consider pastoral burnout, which we have seen in our Classis this past year. One way both issues, an aging ministry and pastoral burnout, might be addressed is by our larger churches taking on a second pastor, who, in addition to gaining experience in the ministry and familiarity with the RCUS, would be prepared to take a call, either in a new mission work or in a church whose minister is retiring. This would also offset the labor of pastors in larger congregations in the hopes that they would not face periods of burnout.

The Interchurch Relations Committee made visits this year to two Classis meetings of the United Reformed Churches in North America (Classis Eastern U.S. and Classis Central U.S.) and Presbytery meetings of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (Presbytery of the Midwest and Presbytery of Ohio) and the Reformed Presbyterian Church in North America (Midwest Presbytery).

The Missions Committee was able to personally visit Rev. Chuck Muether and the work Immanuel Reformed Fellowship in Pella, Iowa, as well as conduct visits with Rev. Win Groseclose, and Rev. Steve Carr and Rev. Howard Sloan via Zoom.

The Church Camp Committee reports this year's camp was a huge success with record numbers. When the camp began in 1991, it did so with 16 campers from 2 churches. In 2021, 9 churches were represented by 78 campers. We are thankful to all those who labor so hard to put this camp together, especially the volunteers from our Manitowoc, Wisconsin congregation.

From west to east, a selective summary of the parochial reports follows.

In Kansas City, Rev. Campbell reports that the congregation is growing in love for one another and in size, reporting a record number of new members (32) which includes the birth of 10 new covenant children. Although the congregation has seen new faces, he also recounts the difficulty of saying goodbye to a young 36-year-old wife and mother who died of COVID. As they continue to surround this young husband and his two boys, he reports "we are learning what it means to comfort others with the comfort with which God has comforted us."

In Northwest Arkansas, Rev. Carr reports "As I think of the congregation here in NW Arkansas, I echo the sentiments of the Apostle Paul when he said, "I thank my God always concerning you for the grace of God which was given to you by Christ Jesus" (1 Cor. 1:4)" noting that "when Paul burst forth into thanksgiving, it wasn't because their budget was balanced and their pews were full. Rather, it was because God's grace was evident in the life of God's people." He reports that God's grace is indeed evident in the life of God's people in Northwest Arkansas.

In Hamburg, Rev. Schnabel reports that, although "there were many stresses in the church for all of us in the last couple years" it remains a "privilege to proclaim the Gospel which is the power of God to salvation (Romans 1:16)." He is "thankful that fellowship times were able to be started again as well as the elders visiting families in the church." He concludes reminding us that "Martin Luther rightfully said, "prayer, study and suffering makes a pastor" and that "God is reminding us through this we are strangers and pilgrims on the earth (Hebrews 11:13)."

In Garner, Rev. Larson reports that "this past November 2021 marked the seventh year of my ministry at Peace Reformed Church." His days and weeks have been filled with "study, prayer, sermon constructing, preaching, teaching, catechizing, administering the sacraments, counseling, comforting, encouraging, writing, and visiting the sick and shut-ins at hospitals and nursing facilities." He reports that "the time has come for me due to health issues to announce my retirement from the ministry."

In South Central Iowa, Rev. Chuck Muether reports that "the make-up of Immanuel Reformed Fellowship presently is three committed families, three considering families, and about six curious families." He reports the recent ordination and installation of Elder Matthew Dudley as well as the beginning of the framing of a local constitution. The work is "expanding our WEBS (Wednesday Evening Bible Study) and moving toward a Sunday Evening Worship." Additionally, he reports "our East-Des Moines Bible study is thriving, and we are developing after-school programs."

In Minnetonka, Rev. Kron notes "the year 2021 marked ten years since we began to meet together for corporate worship at Emmaus Road Reformed Church." He reports thanksgiving for the corporate worship, leadership, times of prayer, discipleship, missions, and fellowship of the congregation. Financially the congregation is strong, and "missions giving went up this year, and also our mercy ministry (benevolence fund is healthy). In closing he remarks, "As we look back on the past ten years of life at Emmaus Road, may we not be proud, presumptuous, or discouraged. But instead, may the family of God at Emmaus be encouraged by looking back in thankfulness and looking forward in hope."

In Minneapolis, Rev. Sawtelle expresses his "heartfelt gratitude to the classis for your stated concerns and prayers for me" as he went on sabbatical leave from March to June 2021. He thanks God "for giving me healing and renewal mentally, emotionally and spiritually in this time of rest." He reports that the congregation has "experienced a substantial decrease in membership in the last year and a half" but that of those who remain "all save one returned to in person worship by the end of 2021." Financially, the church was able to "send funds to numerous mission works, Mid America Reformed Seminary, and to Heidelberg Seminary for their instruction efforts in the Philippines."

In Manitowoc, Rev. Sorensen reports that weekly worship services, Bible studies and church functions are regularly taking place and that the church continues to have regular visitors, including a few new families who came as recently as December and January. He also reports that the Consistory of Salem-Ebenezer has graciously granted him a leave of absence through April 30, 2022.

In Napoleon, Rev. Altman reports "we have been blessed to have added to our covenant community two more beautiful children through the sacrament of baptism" and that "in them, we have the next generation of worshippers here in Napoleon each Lord's Day morning." Although they have "rejoiced at the additions to our congregation this past year, through both baptisms, and visitors who have been returning regularly, three of our members were erased from our roles" and "we also had to say goodbye to two dear sisters of our congregation, Esther Bockelman and Gay Grant." He notes that "It has been wonderful to see the faith of some of our members who have been called to suffer difficulties this past year. Their hold of Christ during the storms of life encourages me more than they will ever know."

In Gettysburg, Elder Luquette reports that "Rev. Jay Fluck, who served the first five years of our existence as a congregation of the RCUS, and six years prior to during our transitional state, retired for health reasons on May 24, 2021." He reports that "in 2021 we experienced a 47% loss, having now 24 communicant members, which is less than when we first started." Elder Luquette reports that he exhorted from the word 15 times and Rev. Terry Gorden of the RPCNA has preached 13 times. Elder Luquette is hopeful that in 2022 Covenant Reformed Church will be able to secure a new pastor, provide officer training to men suited for office, and bring reconciliation where needed regardless of church affiliations.

In Waymart, Rev. Potter takes comfort in the fact that "God is the author, agent and end of all things" which he states is "the definition of the Reformed faith in a nutshell and an essential truth to give meaning and purpose to life and ministry." He reports "our Spiritual Council terminated our relationship with Blue Bell upon the advice of Classis and with the counsel of the Executive Committee." Financially "we continue to hold our own though our finances are steadily declining. Members are committed to giving, to using their gifts and abilities and are co-operating together to do what needs to be done especially since we do not have a deacon." He rejoices that they have had "9 regular visitors, some of whom we expect to see entering the membership process this year."

In Fombell, PA, Rev. Groseclose continues to labor bi-vocationally and reports "God has been providing for our needs through a combination of my carpet installation, occasional freelance writing jobs, and also the generosity of LORR (which pays for our medical insurance)." He rejoices that at Light of the Resurrection "we are growing."

Rev. Richard Stetler reports that he "was able, by the grace of God, to work with various churches in different ways to reach out to not only their members with Lord's Day services, but also reach out to the broader communities." Rev. Stetler filled the pulpit 27 times at various churches and continues his on-going evangelism work, laboring under the banner of Reformation Gospel Ministries (RGM). rh

Respectfully Submitted,
Rev. Christopher Campbell (President)

Congratulations to Travis and Charity Grassmid! The Zion congregation surprised them with a special coffee/cake commemoration of their 10 year anniversary as pastoral family serving Menno, SD.

Zion Reformed in Menno is celebrating again!! Mitch and Amy Mehlhaf presented their first child, Hutch Weston Mehlhaf, for baptism January 30th, 2022. We rejoice as God builds His church!!

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Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. "Honor your father and mother," which is the first commandment with promise: "that it may be well with you and you may live long on the earth." And you, fathers, do not provoke your children to wrath, but bring them up in the training and admonition of the Lord.

Bondservants, be obedient to those who are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in sincerity of heart, as to Christ; 6 not with eyeservice, as men-pleasers, but as bondservants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart, with goodwill doing service, as to the Lord, and not to men, knowing that whatever good anyone does, he will receive the same from the Lord, whether he is a slave or free.

And you, masters, do the same things to them, giving up threatening, knowing thatyour own Master also is in heaven, and there is no partiality with Him.

Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the [b]wiles of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of [c]the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand.

Stand therefore, having girded your waist with truth, having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and having shod your feet with the preparation of the gospel of peace; above all, taking the shield of faith with which you will be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked one. And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God; praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, being watchful to this end with all perseverance and supplication for all the saints

Ephesians 6:1-18, NKJV