

An Extraordinary Award

What are the chances? One of only twelve awards given worldwide is going to Western's very own Dr. J. Todd Billings. The 2009 John Templeton Award for Theological Promise recognizes the most promising young theologians in the world on the basis of their doctoral dissertations or first books related to God and spirituality.

"The faculty of Western Seminary is delighted to celebrate this important achievement of our colleague," says Dr. Leanne Van Dyk, Vice President for Academic Affairs. "Todd Billings' passion for the faith,

the church, and our students is such a valuable contribution to our community."

Dr. Billings won the award based on *Calvin, Participation, and the Gift: The Activity of Believers in Union with Christ*, a work revised from his Harvard doctoral dissertation and published in 2007.

"Many think Calvin so contrasts a holy God with unworthy sinners that he ends up viewing humanity very negatively," says

Billings. "To the contrary, I seek to show that Calvin has a very positive view of human

beings as made for communion with God." Billings argues that the Holy Spirit activates and empowers believers to pursue communion with God and other members of Christ's body, practicing love and justice in both church and society.

Dr. Billings' award includes a \$10,000 prize and an additional \$10,000 for travel costs to deliver public lectures



Dr. J. Todd Billings
Assistant Professor of Reformed Theology

at universities around the world. He will travel to Heidelberg, Germany in May to receive the Templeton Award, along with 11 other winners coming from Norway, the U.K., Germany, and the U.S.A. Remarkably, another scholar from Holland, Michigan is also a worldwide winner: Assistant Professor of Religion Alyssa Lyra H. Pitstick of Hope College. The winners will participate in a colloquium with senior scholars and will give presentations of their next major research projects.

The Templeton Award for Theological Promise is the largest academic prize designated for junior scholars of religion. A board of 25 scholars from all major faith traditions evaluates whether the submitted works are of international significance in the field. Funding comes from the John Templeton Foundation, established in 1987 by Sir John Mark Templeton as a financial catalyst for discovery in areas engaging life's greatest questions.

To read articles by J. Todd Billings, go to: www.jtoddbillings.com

We live in a generation that seeks "spirituality." Todd Billings' book is a wonderful resource to help pastors and Christian leaders fully understand just how rich Reformed spirituality actually is! For years to come, both in sermons and in communion meditations, I will be drawing from insights I gained from this book, from the pastoral to the apologetic.

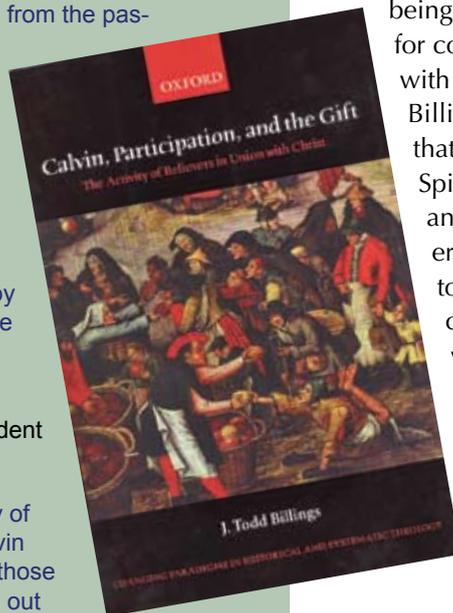
— Rev. Scot Sherman, Teaching Pastor
City Church of San Francisco

This book, as well as Dr. Billings' teaching on Calvin, has greatly broadened my understanding of Calvin's theology. For me, understanding how we are united to God in Christ by the Spirit and participate in the life of the triune God has been one of the greatest gifts of my seminary experience.

— Ann Conklin, seminary student

In this 500th year of John Calvin's birth, many of us are delighted that Billings has brought Calvin back for a theological conversation with both those who follow his lead and those who find Calvin out of sync with the modern mind and soul... Both the academy and the church need to read this book in order to be reminded that Calvin's voice remains amazingly relevant and important, even after 500 years.

— The Rev. Gregg A. Mast, Ph.D., President
New Brunswick Theological Seminary





For 10 days in early January, I was in a group of nine students and two leaders traveling around Southern India. The trip is a required class—part of the curriculum at Western Theological Seminary and required for all second year students. The Intercultural Immersion trip is meant to stir questions and to give students an expanded picture of what God is doing in places and cultures very different than their own.

India is a “developing” country. Parts of India are very poor. When I was there, I found myself asking questions like, “What is poverty? How does one define rich and poor?” Americans tend to define poverty as lack of material possessions. Other cultures



define poverty as a lack of community and personal relationships. Mother Teresa has her own definition. In her book, *No Greater Love*, she writes,

Poverty doesn't only consist of being hungry for bread, but rather it is a tremendous hunger for human dignity...

In every country there are poor. On certain continents poverty is more spiritual than material, a poverty that consists of loneliness, discouragement, and the lack of meaning in life. (93-94)

In terms of defining poverty as “loneliness, discouragement, and the lack of meaning in life,” Jean M. Twenge, Ph.D. has written a book called, *Generation Me—Why Today's Young Americans are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled—and More Miserable Than Ever Before*. In this study, she identifies some major themes of the up and coming generation, which she calls “Generation Me.” Twenge notes,

More than four times as many Americans describe themselves as lonely now than in 1957. It's almost as if we are starving for affection. “There is a kind of famine of warm interpersonal relations, of easy-to-reach neighbors, of encircling inclusive memberships, and of solid family life,” argues political scientist Robert Lane. To take the analogy a little further, we're malnourished from eating a junk-food diet of instant messages, email, and phone calls, rather than the healthy food of live, in-person interaction. (110)

Could it be that the United States is both one of the richest and poorest nations in the world? When I was India, I was confused. Who is rich and who is poor? When driving through the countless towns and villages, I found myself wanting to “save” the people I saw from my van window. Then I asked the question: “Saved from what and into what?”

Drive Through

I drove through your village today...

Tin siding
Mud brick
Palm leaf

Licorice black hair
Gold from the throne room of the gods
Cloth dipped in jewel

Sweeping the porch
Conversing in Community
Washing in the river

From this
I wanted to save you
To this
I wanted to be saved

-- Sam Gutierrez

WTS and RCA Global Mission

Over the years, WTS groups have visited Reformed Church in America mission programs in Chiapas, Mexico, India, Israel and Palestine, Oman, Kenya, and Central Europe. RCA missionaries lead and coordinate the experiences of the groups. Often the RCA mission supervisor for that area of the world participates in the experience.

Since many of these sites are in distant locations, RCA Global Mission provides a financial subsidy to allow WTS to consider these sites and still remain within the seminary budget.

From RCA Global Mission's perspective, the primary goals of the experience are:

1. To provide students with a rich intercultural immersion experience that will help equip them for ministry and mission in an increasingly multicultural society
2. To expose students to the RCA's global mission program, thereby instilling within them an appreciation for the principles and priorities that shape the global mission program.

RCA Global Mission collaborates with the planning team at WTS to choose mission sites that provide students and faculty with a rich and rewarding experience, meeting both organizations' goals for the experience.



Ken Neevel

Yes, We Can!

It's no secret that the current state of the U.S. economy has left most of us with less retirement or investment income than we had just one year ago, and perhaps less current income as well. Conditions in Michigan are some of the worst in the country. (I read where Ottawa County, home of Western Seminary, had the second highest home foreclosure rate in the country during 2008, and the state now has an unemployment rate of over 11%.)

Despite this, I'd like to adopt President Obama's campaign mantra for us. *Yes, we can.*

Western's endowment lost roughly 30% of its value in 2008, and as such, we along with many others are tightening our belts. We are holding off on filling faculty and staff vacancies, every member of the seminary community is being prudent in spending, and we are considering other budget reductions. We will continue to be the best stewards possible with the resources we have been given. *Yes, we can.*

I realize you may not be able to give at the same level this year as you have in the past. That's OK. A gift of any size is a blessing and makes a difference. Of course, if you are able to give more this year, or when you are able, I hope you will. *Yes, we can.*

Every Tuesday morning at 8:30 a small group of people gather in my office to pray for the seminary community, which includes students, staff, faculty, donors, churches, and the like. God has been incredibly faithful in honoring these prayers, and Western has been blessed. I invite you to join us on Tuesday mornings. Maybe you will be in your house, office, car, or school. Or maybe you will be at the seminary and can join us in person. Wherever you are, please join us in praying that God will continue to provide whatever we stand in need of. God always answers the prayers of His children.

I can do all things through Him who strengthens me. Philippians 4:13
God, you and me – together – *Yes, we can!*

Ken Neevel
Vice President of Advancement & Communications

Donor Highlight

Did you know there are people who have given to the work of Western Theological Seminary for over 30 years? In our annual report, we publicly thank those who have faithfully given 10, 20, and 30 years in a row. That's commitment!

Jon and Marla Lunderberg have supported the work of WTS every year since 1989.



Jon & Marla Lunderberg

God's blessings are deep and constant, and we are called to remember that none of God's many gifts is our own. We are happy to support Western Theological Seminary as one way of returning these gifts and helping further God's work in our world today.

--Jon & Marla

20 year givers

Spring 2009 Events at Journey

- March 31-April 1:** Osterhaven Lecture on Reformed Theology with DJ Smit
- April 20-22:** 1 3 5 Gathering
- April 27-28:** Advocacy Forum - Women in RCA Leadership
- May 8-9:** Annual Youth Leaders Conference with Kenda Dean
- May 29:** Practices, Traditions, and Congregational Transformation with Diana Butler Bass
- June 17-19:** Children and Worship

journey.westernsem.edu
1-800-392-8554, x167

Thanks for your commitment to life-long learning!

Special Gifts to Western Theological Seminary

Gifts received
October 24, 2008 - February 28, 2009

In Memory of:

Minnie Dirkse

Norman & Sheryl Veldhoff

Harold Grissen

Ivan Compagner

Stuart Post

Delores Post

Sonja Stewart

Paul & Nancy Clodfelder

Henry TenClay

Lucile TenClay

Rev. & Mrs.

H.M. VeenSchoten

Abe & Elin Moerland

Reflections of Ministry

Unexpected

by Karsten Voskuil '99, '02

Pastor of Trinity Reformed Church, Grand Rapids, MI

The machine guns, Zapatista signs, and colorful indigenous attire quickly ushered us into a radically different reality. It was January 1996, and at the time I was finishing my last class at Hope College and had already applied to study at Western Seminary. In a mixture of creativity and graciousness from both institutions, this January immersion with Western was to be my final undergraduate course as well as my entry into the life of the seminary.

At the time I was far from convinced God was directing me towards parish ministry. The academy, non-profit work, or law school seemed more likely. While raised in a wonderful church environment with a congregation that truly honored their baptismal vows, I still thought of the organized church as disconnected from the earnest workings of reconciliation in the world. In no way was I convinced, as I am now, that the local church is the very locus of God's saving activity within this world.

True to expectations, this initial trip to Chiapas, Mexico offered plenty of opportunities to engage the turbulent political scene where Zapatista supporters

debated government officials; the left with the right; Catholics with Presbyterians. The blood that spilled through the brief but violent acts of 1994 was still very fresh.

Despite all of this hopelessness, I experienced the hope of the gospel. Into this divisive political environment God was especially using the work of RCA missionaries like Vern and Carla Sterk. Instead of stoking the fires of revenge, Vern and Carla used their built-up reservoirs of graciousness and selflessness to bring conflicting Christians together.

Here, for the first time, I tasted the potential power of the church to live out a reconciliation modeled by and empowered through Jesus Christ. I learned that peace pursued through gospel-oriented reconciliation was far deeper and truer than anything machine guns or political compromises could create. My heart beat with excitement as the local church became the hinge of deeper reconciliation within villages, cities, and families torn apart by this conflict. The Holy Spirit opened my eyes to the work of prayer and the perseverance of the saints.

I witnessed the pure power and beautiful poten-

tial of the local church to be God's active agent for change within life—all of life. This included interacting with Presbyterian elders who, with the RCA's support, were trained as paramedics and sent to remote villages

English speaking Reformed Church on the west side of Grand Rapids "planted" nearly 100 years ago as a mission church for the growing west side population.

Those Chiapas trips during seminary as well as a



Karsten and his family watch the running of the bulls during a festival in Chumula, February 2008

to share Christ's larger vision of health and wholeness. It included literacy programs and local churches' confrontation of alcoholism and spousal abuse, as well as a steady diet of good theology, amazing hospitality, and the centrality of faithful worship. At one ordination service, people packed a large church and were literally hanging from the concrete windows for the nearly four-hour Sunday afternoon service.

Turns out, God did direct me toward parish ministry. I now have the privilege of leading the first

sabbatical there last winter opened my eyes to the power and potential of the local church and the huge need for reconciliation. This is important, because machine guns still greet too many visitors in too many places in our world, just as hopelessness, injustice and conflict touch too much of life's vulnerability on our very doorsteps.

It is my hope and prayer that Trinity Reformed Church will be God's active agent for change within the life of our community, joining in spirit with the Body of Christ I tasted so vibrantly on that initial trip to Chiapas in 1996.

Distance Learning Gets Thumbs Up



Nancy Boote
Columbia, MO
At first I had fears about returning to school after 25 years. I also wondered about keeping up with the

technical requirements of a program like this. Once I began the program, my fears were dispelled. The high quality of classes and the ease of learning online surprised me.



Chad Farrand
Ionia, MI
Being "distant" gave me the idea I would be going at it alone and remotely. Far from it! By the

end of my first intensive, I'd built up deep friendships that transcend the classroom.



Ann Bilbrew
Homewood, IL
I transferred from a residential, non-Reformed seminary which had no sense of community. There were

no study groups or conversations, nor were the professors available for discussion. Western's DL program is so very different. The online posting board allows for constant, genuine conversation between students and teachers. The professors provide several ways for students to communicate with them, and they respond in a fast manner. I have bonded with several of my classmates. I am thankful for the DL program.

Western Theological Seminary is celebrating! The Association of Theological Schools gave high praise to our school in February, granting ongoing approval to Western's distance learning Master of Divinity program. The Accrediting Commission commended WTS for "thoughtful attention to the pertinent issues of distance education." The petition for approval itself was declared to be "one of the most complete petitions regarding distance education to be reviewed in recent years."

"WTS is on the leading edge of excellence in distance learning," says Dr. Meri MacLeod, Director of the Distance Learning M.Div. program. "Other seminaries are looking to learn from the high standards we are setting."

Western started its distance learning program in 2003 in response to the needs of students who could not uproot their lives and move to Holland, MI for the three year residential program. In 2008 the seminary celebrated its first nine graduates of the 5-year distance learning program.

Students are taught face-to-face and online. The curriculum is the same as the in-residence M.Div., taught by the same dedicated faculty. Half the learning is done online, and students attend intensive classes on campus in Holland for two weeks each January and May.

There are real and unique differences in distance vs. residential education, but the faculty and administration of Western have held onto program values and learning outcomes while making modifications to sync with the unique challenges of part-time working adults living at a distance from the seminary.

In 2008 the Frost Research Center evaluated Western's distance learning program and identified spiritual and pastoral formation as one of its greatest impacts. 100% of the students surveyed felt their expectations were met for a high quality graduate theological program.

There are currently 57 students working toward their degree via distance learning and 173 students attending school in residence at the Holland campus.



Wes Tillett
Lafayette, IN
It takes an incredible amount of time, energy, discipline, thought, and motivation

to stay on top of all the classwork, but Western's DL program has been the perfect fit for my learning style, my family life, and my goals as I'm simultaneously gaining full

time church experience. This program has brought a lot of stability, authenticity, and richness to both my church work and my learning. It's been a win-win all the way.



Brad Nelson
Grandville, MI
I was previously enrolled in another school's distance learning program, but the situation didn't

work well. Western's DL program doesn't feel disconnected at all. Peer groups are helpful in processing the very human side of pastoral formation such as fears and life circumstances. I'm so impressed.



Cory VanSloten
Maurice, IA
Thank you to those brave pioneers, the initial DL class that graduated last spring, for paving

the way for the rest of us to experience the joy that the program is now to us! *Soli Deo Gloria!*

News

Carl Schroeder '56 announces the publication of his book, *Heaven: Rainbow after the Storm*, Dec. 30, 2008.

Nevin Webster '57 began bicycle riding in 1994. After putting 20,000 miles on his Cannondale bike, he bought a Felt 21-speed, and he and his wife Dot embarked on a very long trip. They left May 23, 2007 and returned Oct. 31, 2008. (Nevin was hit by a car in Boise, ID on Oct. 4, 2007, which almost ended his biking.) Nevin and Dot went through 36 states and 11 Canadian provinces, traveling 52,450 miles (4,600 on bike). They visited hundreds of churches, encouraging them to reach out with the Good News.

After 24 years as their pastor, **Miriam "Mimi" Bush '84** was awarded a "Pastor Emerita" from Covenant Community Church in Muskegon, MI during her farewell gathering on Dec 13, 2008. In the process of discerning her next call, she has joined Women

Touched by Grace, a spiritual renewal program of 20 women pastors from across the country who meet periodically at the Benedict Inn Retreat in Beech Grove, IN.

Steve Petroelje '99 became the Lead Pastor of Woodhaven Reformed Church, Byron Center, MI in August of 2008. Steve previously served as pastor of Trinity Reformed Church in Allison, IA.

After earning an MBA in Organizational Management, **Reggie Padin '04** began doctoral studies in Organizational Leadership at Nova Southeastern University (Ft. Lauderdale, FL) in January. Reggie is an adjunct professor in the Business Department at Carlos Albizu University in Doral, FL. He works as Training and Development Manager for one of the largest retailers in the United States and serves as a half-time Lead Pastor at Pioneer Community Church in Ft. Lauderdale.

Stephanie Huisman '06 relocated to Omaha, NE last fall to become the Minister of Children and Families at Dundee Presby-

terian Church. Previously she was the associate pastor at Bismarck Community Church in Bismarck, ND. **Nathan Huisman '06** is currently caring for their son full-time and pursuing a Master of Worship Arts at Nebraska Christian College.

Toby Gruppen '07 is pastor of Life-Quest, a new community of people on the north side of Holland who began following Jesus together with a launch worship service on January 18, 2009.

on to Glory...

Arnold John van Lummel '46
b. Prospect Park, NJ 9/3/21
d. Warsaw, NJ 2/4/09
Hope '45, WTS '46
PrincetonTheoSem '51 & '76 (ThM)
Reformed Churches served:
1947-58 Clover Hill, Flemington, NJ
1959-89 Grand Ave, Asbury Park, NJ

Wesley Dykstra '47
b. Platte, SD 9/16/22
d. Alma, MI 12/16/08
Hope '46, WTS '47
Reformed Churches served:
1948-48 First, Astoria, NY

dismissed to the Presbyterian Church, 1950

Also served as:
Professor, Westminster College (PA) and Muskingum College (OH)
Professor of Philosophy, Alma College, Alma, MI until 1987

John James Arnold '52
b. Paterson, NJ 4/13/28
d. Zanesville, OH 12/11/08
Rutgers University '49; WTS '52
Hartford Seminary '59 (STM, PhD)
Capital Univ School of Law '75
Reformed Churches served:
1952-53 Owasco, NY
1956-58 Rhinebeck, NY
1960-68 Trinity, Grand Rapids, MI
Also served as:
1953-55 Chaplain, US Navy
1968-2001 Professor of Philosophy, Ohio University, Zanesville, OH
Stated supply for Dresden Presbyterian and Adam Mills Presbyterian

Barbara Pekich '92
b. South Amboy, NJ 3/23/50
d. Grand Rapids, MI 12/29/08
Alma College '72,
Southern IL U '73 (MA), WTS '92
1992-2008 Heartside Ministries,
Grand Rapids, MI

An Invitation

Classes of '59, '69, and '84: Please come to your Alumni/ae Day reunion on May 11, 2009. Luncheons will be offered for \$10/person for the 25th, 40th, and 50th reunion classes. A special event in the afternoon will be followed by the Alumni/ae Banquet at 5:00 in the Maas Center of Hope College (\$20/person). Please hold the date. An invitation packet will arrive in the mail in April. For questions or to reserve your spot at the luncheons and/or banquet, call LuAnne VanSlooten at 616-392-8555, x109 or email luanne@westernsem.edu.



Dr. George Brown, Jr., CERCA President
Kathleen Schellenberg ('02 M.R.E.), and Desiree
Albizu (CERCA's 2009 Educator of the Year)

On January 28 Professor of Christian Education **George Brown, Jr.** was honored with CERCA's Lifetime Achievement Award at the annual gathering of CERCA (Christian Educators Reformed Church in America) in San Antonio, TX. Dr. Brown has distinguished himself in the field of Christian Education throughout his lifetime, especially in his faithful and

Faculty News

effective service to the RCA's educational ministry.

For example, in February Dr. Brown gave a presentation for teachers at Third Reformed Church (Holland) exploring teachers' images of learners. He showed teachers how to become "detectives", "researchers" and "puzzle masters".

The RCA Historical Series published its 59th volume in December under Professor Emeritus of Church History **Don Bruggink's** guidance as general editor. **George Brown, Jr.** edited *Herman J. Ridder: Contextual Preacher and President*, a collection of more than 40 sermons, most

preached at Central Reformed Church in Grand Rapids. Norman Kansfield wrote a chapter on Ridder's presidency (he was president of WTS 1963-1969 and of both WTS and NBTS from 1969-1971), and the book includes chapters on Ridder's life and preaching.

Professor of Reformed Theology **Leanne Van Dyk** wrote a chapter, "Learning and the Life of the Pastor," in the just-published book, *Best Advice; Wisdom on Ministry from 30 Leading Pastors and Preachers*, edited by William Carl III.

In January Formation for Ministry Director **Matt Floding** was elected chair of the Association for Theological Field Education at their biennial consultation in Atlanta.

A Note from President Tim Brown

In the name of the Lord Jesus, welcome to the March *Commons*!



You'll notice this issue is looking quite different than the format you've enjoyed for the last twelve years. Part of the change is owing to our hope to make the life God has given us here even more accessible to you, and another part of the change is to help us reduce production costs. We, like everyone, are doing our level best to respond to the economic realities confronting us!

While the size is smaller, the good news we are sharing is big. We are especially excited about the Templeton award given to Dr. J. Todd Billings (see front page) and the wonderful notice from the Association of Theological Schools that our distance learning Master of Divinity degree has received full ongoing approval with commendations. We are all so proud of the stellar work done by Dr. Meri MacLeod and her team. These remarkable accomplishments really are big news!

I'm sure you will be encouraged, as I am, by the lifelong impact our intercultural immersion trips have on our students. Sam Guterrez and Nancy Claus write about their recent experiences in India, and Karsten Voskuil reflects on his initial trip to Chiapas, Mexico thirteen years ago. These trips are a critical part of our pastoral formation efforts at Western Theological Seminary.

I couldn't be more pleased with the deep and wide theological learning and pastoral formation my colleagues on the faculty provide and the stunning way every member of the staff supports that effort. It is a gift from God to watch men and women grow spiritually and intellectually during their time here. The only thing better is graduation day, when I know that soon they will be sharing their gifts with the whole church.

Enjoy this new edition of *The Commons* and keep us all in your prayers!

A handwritten signature in orange ink that reads "Tim Brown". The signature is fluid and cursive.

March 2009, Vol. 12, No. 2 Editor and Graphic Designer: Carla Plumert Editorial Council: Dr. Timothy Brown, Dr. George Brown, Dr. Matt Floding, Rev. Dawn Boelkins, Ken Neevel. *The Commons* is published three times a year for alumni/ae and friends of Western Theological Seminary by the Office of Advancement and Communications, Ken Neevel, vice president, 101 E. 13th Street, Holland, MI 49423. 616-392-8555; fax 616-392-7717. Reproduction in whole or in part by permission only. advancement@westernsem.edu

Non-Profit Org.
US Postage
PAID
Holland, MI
Permit No. 120

WESTERN THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY
101 E. 13th St., Holland, Michigan 49423

