Living in Joy and Sorrow as a Mortal

“I used to assume that God owed me a long life—to pursue a vocation and family with full strength, to live long enough to become a grandparent,” says Dr. J. Todd Billings, Gordon H. Girod Research Professor of Reformed Theology. “Then, at the age of 39, married with two kids ages one and three, I was diagnosed with incurable cancer. I realized I had unwittingly embraced a form of the prosperity gospel, and my expectations had to change.”

Many readers of The Commons will recall the Bald Guy Challenge of 2013 when 17 people—the seminary’s president, his son, a former president, three professors, one staff member, nine students, and Todd’s own father out in Kansas—shaved their heads in solidarity with Todd, who had gone through five rounds of chemotherapy and was about to receive a stem cell transplant. They also raised $3,100 in the process for the Multiple Myeloma Research Foundation.

Dr. Billings received his stem cell transplant in March of 2013 and spent several months in quarantine (something we are more familiar with these days!). It was successful, and that summer he was told his cancer had gone into partial remission. Since the cancer is incurable, the future remains uncertain, but he is grateful for these years, even as he continues chemotherapy to keep the cancer levels as low as possible. The chemo and other cancer treatments have taken a toll on his physical health, giving him daily pain and intense fatigue. Yet, he has also discovered that this process of coming to terms with our limits as dying creatures can be a life-giving path.

It has also been a theological journey. “There are beliefs I express now that I would not have expressed this way before,” Todd says. “When I was first diagnosed, I had a lot of new questions that became urgent in regard to providence, lament, and prayer. I turned my attention to those ‘why’ questions, and soon a book came out of that.”
The questions didn’t end there. In 2016, with the help of a grant from The Louisville Institute, Todd started studying how congregations deal with death and dying. He enlisted pastors, current students, scholars, and medical personnel to engage in colloquies and discussion groups. He also became immersed in the cancer community, where dying and death are daily realities. The result of this exploration and research was his new book, *The End of the Christian Life: How Embracing our Mortality Frees Us to Truly Live* (Brazos Press, 2020).

“Technology, medicine, and religion train us to think of ourselves as immortal, as if death is something that applies to other people,” says Todd. “But death can teach us about life. Our mortality can be a gift to us.”

In the past when he has asked seminary graduates about their greatest challenge in ministry, the most common response has been “death and dying”—advising families on medical decisions, funerals, comforting parents who have lost a child, etc. He is hopeful that his latest book will help pastors and congregations in “the lifelong task of learning to live in the joy and sorrow of mortals, held in hope by the Triune God who will come again in Christ to make all things new.”

Strengthened by the prayerful solidarity of the WTS community when he entered the hospital in 2013 for his stem cell transplant, Todd has been given a gracious extension of his life. His children, Nathaniel and Neti, are now nine and eleven and bring great joy to him and his wife, Rachel.

“I know that my cancer is incurable and stubborn,” he says. “Others face stubbornness in their circumstances, as well. I have learned that we don’t hope in our own ability to keep on hoping. We hope in God, who can make dry bones of hopelessness live again (Ezekiel 37)—the God who raised Jesus Christ from the dead can surely resurrect my hope from the ashes, for we have something better to trust in than ourselves and our own heroic ‘faith.’ We have a God who does not forsake His work in us, because it is, after all, His work and His covenantal promise to be our God.”

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**Classes during the pandemic**

Spring semester in-residence courses began on January 25. Students have the option of attending class in person or on Zoom (as pictured). Professors teach from behind a plexiglass shield.

Michigan State guidelines require that employees work from home unless it is not feasible to complete their work. These guidelines remain in effect until April 14.
We had just hiked over 12 miles. In the excited rush of having finally arrived on the Isle of Iona—a Scottish island laden with personal and spiritual significance—my wife Hannah and I had hiked the length of the island... three times over. We were exhausted, the type which prompts a heightened sense of attention to the way the seams of your jeans have been rubbing your legs the wrong way and informs you that the laces of your boots were given one pull too many when you put them on. As we neared our bed and breakfast, nothing sounded better than curling up with a book and slowly falling to sleep.

But the light was calling to me. Light is a big deal on Iona. If you happen to wander your way into one of the few bookshops on the small island, you will find a variety of books about the essence of the light there. These books range from the respectably reverent to the magically mystical. Some marvel at the beauty God has bestowed upon the early morning light. Others speak of the light as a doorway into heaven itself and claim Iona as one of the few thin spaces on earth where heaven and earth are separated by the narrowest beam of light.

And that light was calling me. With Hannah making the wise choice to rest after a long day's hike, I set out to find the horizon. The sound of my tired feet dully testified to my eagerness to reach the hills in time to see the sunset, but my excitement turned to dismay as I realized I had farther to go than I thought. The sun was sinking, and fast. My pace quickened toward a hill and through a herd of sheep that seemed justifiably startled by this interloper moving a bit too quickly in the failing light.

My body cried out to me. Any rational person would have stopped miles ago. Why was I pushing myself so hard?

I needed this sunset. Having recently followed a call to attend seminary—a path I could not have predicted even six months prior—I found myself searching for a sign, a divine nod, an assurance that I was on the right path, that I had indeed received a call, and where I was going God would be with me.

I got to the top of the hill and looked toward the sea, only to see a larger hill just offshore, right in the way of the sunset... my heart sank. The light was fading, and there wasn't enough time to move to another of the many hills. Defeated, I turned around, looking for a place to sit for a moment and catch my breath.

As I turned, I saw eyes gazing back at me. A lamb had poked its head around the side of a grassy knoll a little way to the north, its white fleece bathed in ethereal sunset light. Hope kindled. My tired legs drove on once more as I stepped toward the lamb and into the light of the just setting sun.

The clouds didn't part, there was no angel chorus, and no ladder descended from the sky. But as I sat there tired in body and hungry in soul, I saw the air itself suffused with the sun's shimmering light, the hills of Iona aglow in dark purple silhouette, and the sea illuminated with a path to the horizon. Respectable reverence can call it what it wants. As for myself, I will say that as I sat there on a hill with the lamb, the thin place quickened, the veil opened, and I saw Iona cast in heaven's light. —JN
God’s Hand on Our Lives

Since childhood, my dream was to become a nurse. When I graduated with my BSN and passed my State Boards in 2014, I was convinced I was where God had called me to be. I certainly never planned to attend seminary.

I had no idea that the hours I spent singing “Jesus Loves Me” with a woman in the dementia unit would lead to receiving God’s call to pursue ministry. I didn’t realize God was preparing me for something more whenever I prayed with a resident or sat at the bedside of the dying. I didn’t know that the everyday tasks of my career would lead to a longing to provide more spiritual care…but God knew.

When I finally began the Master of Divinity program at Western the Fall of 2019, I had no idea I would need my classes and the encouragement of the WTS community to help me continue as a nurse during a pandemic.

As the world debated over the reality of COVID-19, the necessity of wearing masks, and the mandate to stay home, I found myself trying to balance working more hours, acclimating to a world on Zoom, and completing my coursework, while also navigating through a season of personal loss and grief.

I had to quickly learn how to show my residents they were loved, once smiles were hidden behind masks and physical touch became limited, and especially after the mandate came that visitors could only be allowed inside nursing facilities if their loved one was dying.

I can still hear the joy in a woman’s voice when she told me about her first outdoor visit with her husband a couple months after the pandemic started, but this was mixed with the grief of not being able to even touch his hand.

I can still see the panic on a resident’s face when I took her hand and told her that her COVID test had come back positive.

The painful realities of COVID-19 became personal when Gramma (my own grandmother) tested positive on November 23. Her symptoms started out mild, but by the following Saturday, I received a text saying she was being rushed to the nearest hospital.

I soon found myself flying down the highway, pleading with God to give me enough time to make it to the hospital. I wanted to be in the parking lot so I could be as close to Gramma as possible, and it was where I needed to be when I received the news that she passed. It was by God’s grace, and God’s grace alone, that I not only made it to the hospital, but I received a text stating that I could come inside.

In the last hours at Gramma’s bedside, I found myself leaning into my education at Western as well as my nursing profession. As I sat down beside my grandmother and took her hand in mine, I felt the overwhelming presence of the Holy Spirit. I prayed that the Lord would be near her during her hour of need and that she would know she was not alone. I spoke Psalm 23 over her and could sense the comfort it also brought my mom, my aunt, my uncle, and myself. I was then able to use my nursing skills to help prepare my family for the changes that would be coming, which helped ease the fear I saw on their faces.

In the last moments before death we shared messages and love from family who could not be present, and we shared how God had answered so many of Gramma’s prayers. The room was filled with grief, but there was also overwhelming peace because
On to glory...

We are sad to report that our oldest living alumnus, Ellsworth Ten Clay ’50, has passed away. Rev. Ten Clay came from a family of 15 children growing up on a farm in North Dakota. He was a WWII veteran and served for 37 years in churches in Michigan and Illinois. The honor of the oldest living alumnus now falls to Silvio Scorza ’53 of Orange City, IA.

Ellsworth Ten Clay ’50
b. 1/16/1922 Westfield, ND
d. 12/5/2020 Holland, MI
Central ’47, WTS ’50
(1950-56) North Holland, Holland, MI
(1956-65) First, Muskegon, MI
(1965-70) Fellowship, Lombard, IL
(1970-80) Bethel, Holland, MI
(1980-87) First, Portage, MI

Richard VanderVoet ’58
b. 1/12/1923 Oak Harbor, WA
d. 2/16/2021 Mt. Vernon, WA
Central ’55, WTS ’58, WMU ’72 (MS)
(1958-61) Bethel, Bellflower, CA
(1962-67) Church in the Valley, Rowland Heights, CA
(1967-74) Second, Kalamazoo, MI
(1974-80) dir., Lincoln Mall Ministry, Matteson, IL
(1980-92) secretary for the Americas, RCA
(1993-95) dir., mission service unit, GSC, RCA
(1995-98) coord., volunteer serv, RCWS

Harlan Nyhof ’59
b. 10/24/1933 Marrian, ND
d. 1/11/2021 Warwick, NY
Central ’55, WTS ’59
(1959-63) First, Monroe, SD
(1963-68) First, Wilmar, SD
(1968-76) Grace, Waterloo, IA
(1976-90) Grahamsville, NY (+below)
(1976-99) Woodbourne & Claryville, NY

Donald Den Hartog ’59
b. 9/4/1933 Hoppers, IA
d. 12/16/2020 Orange City, IA
NWJIC ’53; Hope ’56, WTS ’59
(1959-64) Rockford, MI
(1964-68) Standale, Grand Rapids, MI
(1968-73) Calvary, Chicago, IL
(1973-83) Calvary, Orland Park, IL
(1983-96) Fellowship, Lombard, IL

John Helmus ’60
b. 9/24/1931 Middlestum, The Netherlands
d. 12/6/2020 Jefferson, IA
NWJIC ’55; Hope ’57; WTS ’60
(1960-62) Calgary, Alta, Canada
(1962-65) Hamlin, Castlewood, SD
(1966-68) Melvin, IA
(1968-77) Aurora Reformed & Plankinton Presbyterian, Stickney, SD
(1977-87) First Reformed of Bristow, IA & Presbyterian Church of Kesley, IA
(1987-92) First, Macy, NE
(1987-92) adjunct prof., Cook Theological School, Tempe, AZ
(1992-96) Williamson, NY
(1997-ret) First, Bristow, IA

Merwin “Mike” Van Doornik ’60
b. 7/15/1935 Holland, MI
d. 12/15/2020 Holland, MI
Hope ’57, WTS ’60
(1960-62) Cuyrertown, NY & Spachers, NY
(1962-66) Second, Little Falls, NJ
(1966-73) Bethany Memorial, NYC, NY
(1973-79) New Hurley, NY
(1979-89) Trinity, Holland, MI
(1989-90) int, Second, Kalamazoo, MI
(1991-92) int, Hope, South Haven, MI
(1992-95) Faith, Midland Park, NJ
(1995-96) int, Trinity, Grand Haven, MI
Also interim at Fifth, Muskegon, MI

George Magee ’62
b. 11/9/1936 Detroit, MI
d. 10/30/2020 Holland, MI
Wheaton ’59, WTS ’62
(1963-2005) Missionary to Japan
(2007-10) American, DeMotte, IN

James Stevens ’62
b. 11/17/1936 Hart, MI
d. 10/22/2020 Muskegon, MI
Hope ’59, WTS ’62
(1962-68) Bethany, St. Petersburg, FL
(1968-81) Fifth, Muskegon, MI
(1981-84) Bayshore Gardens, Bradenton, FL
(1984-88) First, Fremont, MI
(1989-94) Word of Hope, Fruitport, MI
(1994-96) First, Muskegon, MI

Harold E. “Shorty” Brown ’66
b. 8/25/1939 Canton Township, MI
d. 11/3/2020 Kimberly, ID
Hope ’62, WTS ’66
(1966-71) Trinity, Brown Deer, Milwaukee, WI
(1971-73) Parkview, Santa Ana, CA
(1973-79) secretary, RCA American Indian Min.
(1979-89) Servants of Christ, Federal Way, WA
(1989-96) Westwood, Corin, Omaha, NE
(1996-98) Palm Grove, Holiday, FL
Also Minister of Church Development, Synod of Great Lakes

Robert Dahl ’70
b. 11/14/1944 Chicago, IL
d. 1/25/2021 Holland, MI
Hope ’66, WTS ’70; Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary ’85 (DMin)
(1970-73) chaplain, Western Kentucky University, Bowling Green, KY
(1973-77) Presbyterian churches in Rapids & Franklin, KY
(1977-87) First Presbyterian, Elizabethtown, KY
(1987-95) Second, Zeeland, MI
(1995-96) interim, Bethel, Holland, MI
(1996-2000) chaplain, Hospice of Michigan, Grand Rapids, MI
(2000) interim, McGriff Congregational, Muskegon, MI

(continued on next page)

my grandmother was now whole and reunited with so many of her loved ones.

It’s easy to focus on the high survival rate of COVID-19. By doing this, however, we overlook the 500,000+ deaths in the United States, as well as the 2.3 million deaths worldwide. We can forget that each of these numbers represents a life that has ended, and that an even greater number grieve from the losses. Some of these deaths represent older adults who had to spend their last weeks without their loved ones. One of those statistics represents my Gramma.

We have all suffered from the effects of COVID-19, and yet we are the ones who have been called and are being shaped to aid in God’s restorative work once this pandemic ends. We are the ones that Christ calls “the light of the world,” and no matter where our ministries take us, we are the ones who will bring Christ’s light into even the most broken and darkest of places.

Although I had no idea God’s plan was to blend ministry with my passion for nursing, I am grateful for the opportunity to live out my faith and training in a way that blesses others during this difficult time.

—AG
News

Wes Granberg-Michaelson ’84 announces his tenth book: Without Oars: Casting Off into a Life of Pilgrimage. Wes focuses on how faith has to be expressed in embodied practices and shares from his time on pilgrim sites, including walking the Camino de Santiago with WTS professor Kyle Small. He says, “Faith grows best when we understand it is a pilgrimage, calling us to leave things behind as we take steps forward in following our Lord. That journey happens even as we shelter in place.” Wes will be doing a course on the book at Calvin University, as well as giving congregational presentations. More info at wesgm.com

This semester, Robert Van Voorst ’77, WTS Professor Emeritus of New Testament, is teaching an online course, “Leadership in New Testament Perspective,” to high school students at the Presbyterian Pan American School in Kingsville, TX. Sponsored by the PC(USA), Pan-Am is a boarding academy begun 110 years ago with a gift from the owners of the King Ranch. Dr. Van Voorst’s students are mostly from Mexico and other Latin American nations, with a few from South Korea and Africa. His course examines leadership in the church, in education, and in business, all from a biblical perspective. Most of the students are heading to colleges in the United States. He reports that “this is the first time I am teaching high school students, and I am enjoying it!”


The Board of Trustees of Cornerstone University (Grand Rapids, MI) has appointed Julián Guzmán ’20 (DMin) as its newest member. Throughout his years in ministry, Dr. Guzmán has held numerous leadership positions, including as an elected bishop for the Council of Missionary Churches of Christ, Inc., overseeing Hispanic congregations in four states. He has directed the Urban Church Leadership Center (UCLC) in Grand Rapids since 2017. He is currently the lead pastor at Iglesia Vena Plena in Wyoming, MI.

Alumni, have you written a new book?
The WTS Alumni News is sent out three times a year, and special announcements are emailed as needed.

Sign up to receive Alumni News via email!
send your request to: advancement@westernsem.edu

Commencement and Alumni Day:
May 10, 2021

Last year because of the pandemic Commencement and Alumni Day were canceled. This year Alumni Day will be virtual and held on Zoom.

Commencement will be a combination of limited in-person seating and livestreaming. Members of the Class of 2020 will also be participating.


Email annie.valkema@westernsem.edu to reserve your space. An invitation packet will arrive by mail in April.

PLEASE NOTE:
• There is no afternoon presentation by the Commencement Speaker.
• There is no Alumni/ae Dinner this year.

7:00pm Class of 2021 Commencement livestreamed and held in Dimnent Chapel, Hope College. The Commencement speaker is Rev. Dr. Denise Kingdom Grier. Check westernsem.edu for livestream link. Very limited seating (more details to come); doors open at 6:45pm.

Contact: Cherri Westhouse 616-392-8555, x150 or cherri.westhouse@westernsem.edu

Subject to change due to public health developments.
Dear Friends,

It's not about the money. That may be a strange thing for someone who works in development to say, but it is true! If you’re a giver to WTS, it’s not about the money; it’s really only ever about raising up faithful ministry leaders for your church, your community, and the world.

When you decide to give to WTS, you’ve been convinced to take what is entrusted to your care (but is really God’s—like everything in this life and the next) and put it to use in raising up more leaders for God’s church. And we are so grateful you choose to do this.

You likely already know and care about someone who has graduated (your pastor or youth leader or a family member or you). You want to know how WTS is stepping into the continuing need for well-formed and educated ministry leaders going forward.

And so I hope you enjoy reading the stories of Amelia, Jackson, and Patrick—just three of many students who have said “yes, Lord, I will follow you” in different ways. I hope you are encouraged by the update about Dr. J. Todd Billings—a truly world-class theologian—who has chosen to pour his care and knowledge into a new generation of disciples of Jesus.

Thank you for continuing to make this happen. We can’t do it without you!

Yours in Christ,

Andy Bast
Director of Development

A special thank-you for these gifts:

Received in fiscal year 2020-21 (as of 3/1/21):

78 total gifts in memory of:
William Barnhart
Connie Boersma
George Brown
Ardith Fikse
Don Lenderink
Harlan Nyhof
Dorothy Stoopker
Ellsworth Ten Clay
Tom VanderKuy
Jim VanRoekel
Daryl Vetter
Samuel Williams

6 total gifts in honor of:
Winn Collier
Tim & Brenda Dieffenbach
The Rock Group
Felix & Esther Theonugraha
Annie Valkema

Grand total of all gifts: $146,267

Thank you for honoring your loved one with donations to further the work of Western Theological Seminary.

President’s Club and the Zwemer Society

So many WTS gatherings have had to be canceled or postponed in the last year. Public lectures, worshipping together in person, the annual scholarship luncheon, special guests on campus, and community lunches are just a few examples. We look at pictures like the one here and long for those days (that we took for granted!) to return.

Meanwhile, for this year’s President’s Club / Zwemer Society gathering, we are moving the event to a virtual program on Thursday, April 22, 2021, from 7-8:30pm EST. Because this program is virtual, we have a greater opportunity to hear from students, alumni, faculty, and friends from around the country.

Current members of the President’s Club and The Zwemer Society have been invited and will receive instructions for registering and attending the event.

Are you interested in becoming a member? President’s Club members pledge to give at least $1,000 a year to the work of WTS. The Zwemer Society is for those who have included WTS in their estate plans and have informed the seminary. Please contact Andy Bast if you are interested in supporting WTS at this level and would like to attend the virtual event in April (616-392-8555, x185 or andy@westernsem.edu).
Two percent of the world’s population is deaf, and 98% of those have never been told about the Gospel. The Caribbean Christian Center for the Deaf (CCCD) in Jamaica has been working for years to change that statistic, and in 2020, WTS graduate Patrick Bloemendaal, his wife Kara, and their four-month old son, Silas, (pictured at right) moved from their home in Michigan to join the organization.

“CCCD operates four campuses across the island,” says Pat. “One is Jamaica Deaf Village and three are schools.” The organization’s mission is to “reach, teach, and nurture the Deaf of Jamaica so that they can experience the joy of knowing Jesus and serving within their community.”

Pat and Kara were introduced to CCCD when Pat was working as a youth minister at Community Reformed Church in Zeeland, MI and attending WTS through the distance-learning program. The church asked them to lead a short-term team to the island, and they felt such a strong connection with the ministry that they wanted to return full-time.

These days Pat and his family work, play, and worship all in Jamaican Deaf culture. Although they had learned some American Sign Language before they arrived, now they are learning Jamaican Sign Language.

“Every country around the world has their own unique sign language,” Pat explains. “Silas is learning too; most of his signs revolve around going outside and food.”

Although the Deaf do not consider themselves disabled, many in mainstream Jamaican society look down on them, and they have a very high unemployment rate. CCCD empowers the Deaf community and models Deaf leadership through pastors, staff, and a CEO who are all deaf themselves.

“The ability to provide a way to communicate opens the door to the gospel and a ton of other resources,” Pat shares.

Recently, he and Kara put together classes to help the Deaf residents transition into their next phases of life—working and/or living away from the Deaf Village if they choose. Once a month they offer classes on topics like marriage and family, computer skills, resume building, banking, conflict resolution, and more. Pat and Kara bring in Jamaican leaders to teach the classes and paint a picture of what is available across the island.

Patrick completed the Graduate Certificate in Disability and Ministry (GCDM) while he was at seminary, and he says that helped to broaden his perspectives and engage populations who are often overlooked.

“It live in a community that is for the Deaf, run by the Deaf,” he shares. “It’s changing my perspective and understanding. Deaf people can do anything hearing people can do when given language access, resources and knowledge. The GCDM program at

CCCD students lead in worship
Western came alongside the ministry I was already doing as a youth pastor and changed the lens with which I see people—we’re all made in the image of God and He has a story and journey for each one of us.”

The COVID-19 pandemic has created unique challenges for CCCD and some of Pat and Kara’s initial plans for ministry. Forty percent of the organization’s funding usually comes from the short-term teams who visit, and Pat was supposed to be in charge of those teams. Instead, he has designed a three-week virtual experience where small groups can sign up together to receive two emails per week with videos, testimonials, and resources to learn about Deaf communities around the world, raise awareness, and sponsor a project through CCCD.

Pat hopes the program will benefit the team members’ own personal spiritual lives as they discuss the content. He also tries to schedule one live event with people from the village so the team can interact in a more personal way.

Another challenge comes from schools in Jamaica being online since last March. Although sign language via Zoom is possible, the small squares on a screen are hard to see. Some families don’t have access to computers or tablets, or they have to share one device between multiple children.

Facial expressions are also an important part of sign language and can be difficult to convey behind a mask or over Zoom.

For now, Pat and Kara are focusing on building relationships with teachers and staff and continuing to learn the language and culture.

“We’re not here to make waves or start anything new,” Pat shares. “We’re here to partner with what the Deaf are already doing and support them. It’s my goal that we continue to find this place as home and earn credibility. We’re expanding our family and are excited about the roots we’re laying down.” They are expecting their second child in August.

“My life has always been about getting as much experience as I can,” he says. “Volunteer opportunities, everything I could get my hands on. That would be my advice [to students]—just go get experience. It’s the same with the GCDM or any of the other certifications that Western offers. If you have the opportunity and freedom to take part in those programs, do it. Experience is key, and you have no idea what God is going to call you into. I never thought I’d be running a transition program or preaching in sign language, but here I am.”

If you’re interested in doing a virtual short-term experience with CCCD, check out cccdjamaica.org/serve-us/virtual-team

To keep up with Pat and Kara’s journey, follow them at pkbloemendaal.com/

To learn more about our Graduate Certificate in Disability and Ministry, go to westernsem.edu/gcmd

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A PUBLICATION OF WESTERN THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

NEW LIFE CHURCH OF THE DEAF
Everyone is Welcome
Worship Service: 11:00 am

Pat preaches to the New Life Church of the Deaf congregation and students from the Knockpatrick campus (pre-pandemic)

CCCD Student poses for a photo during Pat & Kara’s second trip to CCCD in 2019
At its February meeting, the Board of Trustees affirmed the appointment of Dr. Wesley Hill to become associate professor of New Testament beginning in the 2021-2022 academic year. He comes to us with years of teaching experience, an exceptional record of publications, and a nationally-respected voice. Wes is currently associate professor of biblical studies at Trinity School for Ministry in Ambridge, PA and an Episcopal priest serving at Trinity Episcopal Cathedral in Pittsburgh. Dr. Hill holds his doctorate in New Testament from Durham University in the UK and has authored several books. The WTS community looks forward to welcoming him to the seminary.

Professor of Church Leadership Kyle Small has accepted a position at Anderson University in Anderson, SC as professor of leadership and director of the newly established Center for Leadership and Organizations. While this is a tremendous opportunity for Kyle, it represents a significant loss for the community of Western Theological Seminary.

Kyle’s relationship with the seminary began in 2008 as a research consultant to help the seminary discern how well its graduates were being formed for ministry. He joined the faculty in 2012. Over the years, he has served as associate academic dean, assistant professor of Christian leadership, dean of Formation for Ministry, director of the D.Min. program, professor of church leadership, and research director of the Churches in Mission grant. He has invested deeply in Western and brought a number of visionary ideas to life. He will remain with Western through the Spring semester and start his new position in the Fall.

President Felix Theonugraha notes that “Dr. Kyle Small strengthened our commitment to formation, deepened our focus on the church, and served as a tireless advocate for our students. We pray for the Lord’s abundant blessings on him and his family as he embarks on this new opportunity.”

### Meet our faculty and staff!

**Carol Bechtel**
- March 21 (9:40-10:40am): “What Lockdown and Sabbath Do—and Don’t—Have in Common,” Hope Church, Holland, MI
- March 28 (9:40-10:40am): “The Migration Crisis in Southern Europe,” Hope Church, Holland, MI
- classes virtual; contact marevalo@hopechurchrca.org for link.

**Jim Brownson:**
- March 17 (6:30pm) & March 20 (10am): Q&A classes at First Congregational Church, St. Joseph, MI (virtual)
- May 16 (9:40am): “General Synod Overview & RCA Update,” Hope Church, Holland, MI

**Han-luen Kantzer Komline:**
- May 16: Preaching and teaching adult education, Central Reformed Church, Grand Rapids, MI

**Suzanne McDonald:**
- March 14, 21 (6:30-8:00pm): “In the End... What?! Thinking Well about Eschatology,” Haven Church, Zeeland, MI

**Keith Reynolds:**
- March 27 (9am-noon): Racial Healing Workshop, calvaryholland.com (virtual)

**Felix Theonugraha:**
- May 30: Preaching, Camp Geneva, Holland, MI

### Revised Curriculum Announced

After going through a long, careful process of discernment seeking God’s wisdom on how our current curriculum might be updated, the faculty approved a major curriculum revision for 2021. Beginning in the fall semester, incoming M.Div. students will be under this new program, and returning students will have the option to switch to the new curriculum.

Most notably, the revision decreases the number of required credits from 96 to 87 and will create more parity between distance-learning and in-residence learners.

The new curriculum ensures that classes build upon each other to meet educational and formational goals of the seminary. An intentional sequencing of courses will build on themes around cultural engagement, racial and ethnic diversity, and world Christianity throughout the program.

Biblical field requirements have increased, and faculty have added a new course to increase biblical literacy. Students will be required to take one year of biblical languages, either Hebrew or Greek, with the option to take a second year.

Other changes include moving the intercultural immersion trip to the summer to make it a more robust course. Also, the January Term will no longer be offered.

“Our hope through this revision process was to emerge with a curriculum that honors the deep commitments we have long had at Western Theological Seminary to academic excellence and whole person formation,” says Dr. Kristen Deede Johnson, Dean and Vice President of Academic Affairs.

westernsem.edu/curriculum-revision-announcement/

### Scholarship Showcase

On February 19, 25 prospective students from ten different states joined us for our annual Scholarship Showcase day. Participants were able to attend classes and chapel online, meet with faculty, and be interviewed in competition for our pool of full and partial-tuition scholarships.
Visiting Scholars

We are pleased to welcome Jeff and Karen Barker to WTS as Visiting Scholars this semester. Jeff and Karen retired from Northwestern College in NW Iowa last spring after 32 years on the faculty. During their time there, they invested deeply in the lives of students through teaching, mentoring, directing and writing plays, and acting.

Karen and Jeff have also invested in the life of Western over the years, giving workshops for students on public speaking, working with Old Testament Professor Emeritus Tom Boogaart on scripture enactment, and (Karen) serving on Western’s Board of Trustees.

While part of the WTS community, the Barkers will participate in chapels and offer workshops for students to support both Greek and Hebrew scripture enactment.

Jeff recently completed his third book about Arlene Schuiteman, an RCA missionary who spent 33 years as a nurse in Africa. In 2014, when Schuiteman turned 90 years old, she entrusted Barker with complete access to her journals, in which she recorded the events, relationships, spiritual questions, and insights she experienced. Jeff began work on her biography in 2016, publishing the first book of the trilogy in 2018 and the second in 2019. Zambia Home will be available March 15.

Seminary Book Clubs

WTS is committed to engaging the work of racial reconciliation and justice in our institution, churches, and communities. With that goal in mind, the diversity committee led campus-wide reading and discussion groups for staff, faculty and students around three books:

1. Esau McCaulley’s Reading While Black: African American Biblical Interpretation as an Exercise in Hope,
2. Isabel Wilkerson’s Caste: The Origins of our Discontents, and
3. Jemar Tisby’s The Color of Compromise: The Truth about the American Church’s Complicity in Racism.

The Board of Trustees also read The Color of Compromise and discussed it during their February meeting.

“The way that the thoughtful people in our discussion group grappled with Reading While Black pointed me to aspects and implications of McCaulley’s work that I would not have come up with on my own.”
—Suzanne McDonald, Professor of Systematic and Historical Theology

“Reading and discussing Caste was a reminder that the work of antiracism, justice, and conciliation is hard, and we have barely scratched the surface. Wilkerson, in naming the complexity of systemic injustice and the depth of our historical depravity, encouraged and challenged us to dismantle oppression wherever we encounter it—in ourselves and in the world around us.”
—Shari Oosting, Associate Director of Formation for Ministry

Upcoming Event:

The 10th Annual Leonard F. Stoutemire Lecture in Multicultural Ministry


- Public lecture livestreamed at 1:30pm, check the WTS website for the link at westernsem.edu
- The in-person event will be limited to WTS students and employees due to COVID-19 building restrictions
- The lecture will not be available later in video format per contractual obligations

“I really like that the author offers hope. He talks about how we should have acted at different times, but he says ‘we can still act.’ We can still be a part of change, the way God might want us to be.”
—Gail Ebersole, Board of Trustees Chair

“Engaging this book within a community of fellow believers was powerful. The history and stories presented were not easy to read or digest. That being said, I am thankful that Western provided the space to process, share, and lament together.”
—Anna Christians, M.Div. student
A Note from

PRESIDENT FELIX THEONUGRAHA

Last Fall, the Board of Trustees approved a new mission statement for the seminary.

By God’s grace, Western Theological Seminary forms women and men for faithful Christian ministry and participation in the Triune God’s ongoing redemptive work in the world.

Two things to note about this new mission statement:

First, as a seminary, our ultimate goal is to form our students. Our goal is not only to increase our students’ intellectual knowledge, as important as it is. Our aim is not only to teach our students the practical aspects of ministry, as critical as they are. Our objective is to form students to love God and to love their neighbors, with all of who they are and in all aspects of their lives.

Second, we desire to form students who will be faithful. We want our students to be faithful to the God who has called them. We also want our students to faithfully and sacrificially love the people who God has entrusted into their care. It is our prayer that our students point others toward Jesus, the one who loves them so much that he died on the cross so that we may be redeemed from the penalty of our sin, be reconciled to God, and have eternal life.

This Spring, we are celebrating a record enrollment of 382 students. Will you join us in praying that each and every one of these students will be formed into faithful followers of Jesus?

Blessings,

Dr. Felix Theonugraha
President