Student Stories

Students from Western Theological Seminary serve Christ in a variety of ways and in diverse locations each summer. Using their spiritual gifts and seminary training, they step into roles such as pastors, teachers, youth workers, hospital chaplains, mission coordinators, worship leaders, and camp directors, to name a few. Often placed out of their comfort zone, students experience growth they never anticipated...

Jennifer McAlpine
Christ's Community Church, Glendale, Arizona

I packed up my little red Saturn and as an afterthought tossed flip-flops and a pair of shorts into my trunk. I was headed to Seattle for the summer. My four day trip gave me time to reflect and pray, and as I passed through the mountains I began to cry. I had returned from the mission field the year before, and the transition back to the States had been stressful, along with my first year at seminary. I longed for change, and to pursue God's calling for my life I instinctively knew I had to change, but I was scared.

Dr. Matt Floding had tried to call attention to the change my life needed. He encouraged me to find a summer internship that would allow me to relax and be filled up while being challenged and mentored. Matt was envisioning change of a spiritual nature; I was looking for change of a vocational nature. I wanted to explore career opportunities. Matt graciously let me choose my own way, and so I headed to Seattle to get a taste of working with immigrants and refugees. Really, I was going there to beef up my resume.

It's funny, God doesn't care a lot about resumes. So when the Seattle gig turned out to be a total bust, I shouldn't have been surprised. The internship was a far cry from a good fit, and by the time I headed to Iowa for General Synod, I was ready to pack it in and go back to Michigan.

Turns out, when you're ready to give up on your plans, God is often waiting to reacquaint you with His. At General Synod, I "happened" to meet a guy named Randy, I had no idea what church he was from or even if he was a pastor, elder or Janitor. I jokingly asked him if his church needed any interns. He said he knew just who to ask.

Less than a week later, Randy—the Rev. Dr. Randy Wieland—took the risk of hiring me. I packed up my Saturn again and drove to Glendale, AZ. I couldn't believe I was doing it. Pastor Randy said I'd work with youth, and VBS would start in three days. I thought about that lonesome pair of flip-flops and shorts I had tossed into my trunk—I'd need them!

By mid-July it was more than clear I had made the right decision. I worked primarily with children and junior high students, taking part in many activities, a children's outreach event, and a junior work project. I was also able to preach. However, what I did all summer isn't what matters most. I thought I wanted practical experience without engaging people at a deep level, something to look good on a resume. What I got was an experience that restored me in every aspect. My time at Christ's Community Church in Glendale, AZ did more to prepare me for ministry than any previous experience. People like Pastor Randy and mentors Jay Van Gelder and Kelly DeVeaux invested in me, engaged my heart, and led me to emotional, spiritual, mental and vocational transformation. I was filled up and sent back to Michigan renewed and refreshed.

All in all, I had needed a change; I needed to be changed. I didn't expect such a mid-course correction in plans, but nonetheless, it was just the change I needed. Instead of hearing God say, "You are called to do x, y and z," I heard Him say, "I want you to be a part of what I'm doing in the world. Come with me and believe I know how to use you."

As part of Western’s dual track M.Div.-M.S.W. program, I need to find a good Master in Social Work program, and wouldn’t you know it? Arizona State University’s M.S.W. program is housed directly across from the church...
Last summer I had the privilege of being ministered to by the members of North Presbyterian Church in Kalamazoo, MI. It sounds strange—a seminary student going to a “teaching church” to be ministered to, but in many ways that is what I found in this old, small Presbyterian church on the urban corner of North and Burdick.

My first Sunday at what I call “North church” was unlike anything I had ever experienced. I soon realized North church is a uniquely embracing church, welcoming people from all backgrounds—from judges to persons living in adult foster homes, black and white, male and female, the mentally challenged and even the mentally ill. Everyone felt comfortable worshipping together.

I did not realize how close to God’s presence I was. God ministered to me through many of the members who lived with mental illness. My initial reaction to worshipping with them was apprehension. Sitting on the front pew that first Sunday, I began to second guess choosing North as a teaching church experience. My sense of fear was overwhelming. What was I afraid of? I was afraid of the other—people who seemed different than me.

Over the next ten weeks I slowly but surely came to love the members of North church. I entered into a community of Christian believers who through Christ’s love disarmed my fear of the other.

When I delivered my first sermon, I was not sure how to share the Word of God in a context where a good portion of the members were mentally challenged or living with mental illness. I had witnessed Pastor Linda MacDonald lovingly interact with the congregation during morning worship. Abrupt interruptions were not uncommon. She would graciously hold a conversation with a member right in the middle of a sermon. I could only think, “What am I going to do if the same thing happens while I’m preaching?” Sure enough, it did. God was right there helping me embrace a faith experience over which I had no control.

Yet, after preaching that first sermon, one of the women in the back of the church yelled, “Amen, sister!” At that moment, I knew God was smiling down on me.

A few times I joined North’s Togetherness Group—a ministry that fosters social activities for persons living with mental illness. We attended baseball games and played bingo. We sat at the table talking about family and friends. We talked about things that frustrated us, and sometimes we didn’t talk at all. Issues like finding a place to live or disagreeing with family about medications greatly impacted their everyday lives. We all shared the same space and time during the Prayers of God’s People. During those times of vulnerability brothers and sisters expressed thanksgiving and requested prayer just as I did. We all needed God in our lives, and that made us the same. The fear I once had was disarmed by God’s love.
munity. They are incredibly honest about what God has delivered them from and what they still struggle with. Some people who attend the church don’t believe in God and, perhaps, don’t ever intend to. They come because they are made to feel that they belong and are loved.

The Journey “strives to create a barrier-free environment for people to meet Jesus.” While removing barriers can be uncomfortable, tricky and messy, it allows people to come to love the God who deeply loves them without having to walk into a church building—which often can be a scary experience. People who at one time felt opposed to church and who often assume the church is opposed to them, quickly come to realize that the people who love Jesus also love them, and more importantly, Jesus loves them, too. Many of these folks would never come to understand this often obfuscated truth if there wasn’t an informal place like The Journey to encounter it.

Whether Kristin and I plant a church or not, time will tell, but my summer experience leads me to believe God is moving in RCA church plants to bring God’s lost children home, where they belong.

shared from heart to heart during prayer.

The Bible says, “There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear…” (1 John 4:18, NIV). After I left North church I realized how influential the members of all. We embrace God’s kingdom by valuing community of believers who embrace the life experience. My experience at North Presbyterian taught me that whether Kristin and I plant a church or not, time will tell, but my summer experience leads me to believe God is moving in RCA church plants to bring God’s lost children home, where they belong.

Though my husband and I are content and happy here, we feel we must always be open to the possibility that God may be calling us to new horizons. Therefore, we occasionally test the waters, as in this case. Your ad caught my attention as possibly being a good fit.

This was the explanation I gave in my cover letter responding to an ad in the Church Herald. It was the truth. The ministry in my little upstate New York church was going well. No one was pushing me out. I loved the people there. So, although the ad had sparked my interest, it didn’t really matter to me if things didn’t go any further than sending in the resume.

Unlike my first time dating for a position as Minister of Word and Sacrament, I did not widely distribute my profile and did not broadcast that I was looking. It was imperative that my congregation did not have to wonder if their pastor was staying or going. I did not want to undermine their trust that as long as I was there I would be fully invested in them.

From that first inquiry, however, an interview was generated that led eventually to a new call. Once it was finalized, my concern turned to how to leave gracefully. When should I leave? How much time did the congregation and I need to make arrangements, bring some closure, and say “good-bye” properly? On the other end was a congregation who was anxious to receive me. They had already begun placing me in their midst. How long could I keep them waiting? I wanted to acknowledge and respect all the emotions that come with a change such as this: the disappointment, grief, anxiety, and excitement. On my last Sunday leading worship, we had communion together and used a Liturgy of Farewell. Using that liturgy helped us all to express thanksgiving and forgiveness, to recognize there were things left undone, and to release each other from promises made at my installation.

I have arrived in Michigan and started in a new ministry. There is so much to get used to… new faces, new ministry, new roads, even new computer formats.

At times I find my thoughts drifting back to my “other” congregation, and I shoot a prayer of thanksgiving and intercession heavenward. I wonder how they are getting along. But, I do not wonder about God’s call. I firmly believe in His call upon our lives no matter what the vocation. Like so many in the Bible, we are sometimes called to move to leave behind people and ministry in order to be used by Him in another setting.

I “tested the waters.” He paved the way. I know as long as I keep my focus on Him I will not sink.

Rev. Mary Wisner ’01 is Minister of Church Life, First Reformed Church, Holland, MI

A Journey worship service

Reflections of Ministry

Goodbye... and Hello

by Mary Wisner ’01

A few of the members of North Church

A PUBLICATION OF WESTERN THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

NOVEMBER 2007
Western Theological Seminary unveiled its one-of-a-kind residence hall on Friday, September 14 with a ribbon-cutting ceremony, an open house, a lecture, and a panel discussion by disability experts.

Over 200 people came for the dedication and to tour the facilities where seminary students are sharing living space with cognitively impaired young adults.


Audience questions were taken at the panel discussion featuring Nella Uitvlugt, executive director of Friendship Ministries Int’l, Mark Stephenson, director of disability concerns of the Christian Reformed Church, and Ruth Stegeman, executive director of Disability Network.

The idea for Friendship House sprang from a seed planted in 1989 on African soil, when Dr. Jaco Hamman’s homiletics professor at Stellenbosch Seminary invited some students to live with his adult autistic son. Years later, Jaco and his next door neighbors in Holland started dreaming of a housing complex where seminarians and adults with special needs could live together and discover the face of God in the other.

The seed was watered and nurtured by Western Seminary and many others in the community, and the Ralph and Cheryl Schregardus Friendship House has become a beautiful reality.

The ribbon is officially cut by President Dennis Voskuil, benefactors Ralph and Cheryl Schregardus, Friend resident Amanda Kragt, and WTS resident David Veldt.

Disability experts answer questions.
Dennis and Betty Voskuil Chair in Old Testament

Since 1994, Rev. Dr. Dennis Voskuil, a former pastor and professor of Religion at Hope College, has guided Western Theological Seminary through an unprecedented period of growth and change. During his tenure, new facilities were added and old ones renovated, old programs were redesigned and new ones developed, but most significantly, enrollment rose from 139 to 237. Dennis has kept the seminary centered on “Preparing Christians called by God to lead the Church in Mission.” His focus and leadership have placed the seminary in a vibrant, strong position to serve Christ’s church for years to come.

In response to Dr. Voskuil’s leadership and because of the support and personal encouragement of his wife, Betty, Western’s Board of Trustees is honoring this couple by establishing the Dennis and Betty Voskuil Chair in Old Testament.

More than 120 years after the first faculty chair was endowed for $30,000, in 2007 the cost for endowment has risen to two million, but the purpose remains the same: financial stability and the assurance that grounded theological education will continue.

If you wish to honor the Voskuils and help establish the faculty chair, send your donation clearly earmarked for Dennis and Betty Voskuil Chair in Old Testament to Western Theological Seminary.

Racial Ethnic Partnerships for Ministry

Did you know that 39% of RCA congregations started in the last three years are racial ethnic in composition, and 47% planned for the future are too? There is a need for 100 more ethnic church plant leaders in the next five years.

Western Theological Seminary is preparing leadership for racial ethnic congregations, and the following initiatives will strengthen our efforts:

1) Two full-tuition scholarships for Master of Divinity candidates intending to lead racial-ethnic congregations.

2) Ten scholarships for the Certificate in Urban Pastoral Ministry (CUPM) program—this 2-year program is for people called to serve the church in urban settings.

3) Two scholars nurtured by racial-ethnic Christian communities to teach part-time at Western while completing their Ph.D. studies.

To contribute to any of these vital projects or to request additional information, please contact the Advancement Office at 800-392-8554 or advancement@westernsem.edu.
Faculty Interview

with Todd Billings

J. Todd Billings
Assistant Professor of Reformed Theology

Uganda was also very sobering. The deep problems of poverty and other struggles crashed any idealism I had about Christian ministry, yet I realized that the complexities are precisely why we need good Christian thinkers. Where is the gospel and where is God in the midst of these conundrums?

Did Uganda change you in other ways?
As the only Westerner in a little grass thatched hut, I faced not only culture shock but the end of the rope for my Arminian, Baptist theology. I realized that the gospel is much more powerful than what I can do in my own decision. I can’t even be in charge of my spiritual life; the Spirit is. Coming into the Reformed tradition, I could truly experience that the fruit of the Spirit was not anxiety and self-righteousness, but love, joy, peace, and the things we can’t produce on our own.

How did your work at a homeless shelter shape you?
It was good to be in an environment where academic credentials didn’t matter. I grew and learned from the homeless guests. Working there also shot through the romanticized notions of sin so common in American Christianity. Everybody at the shelter was messed up and they knew it. To deny it is folly. And they also knew that sin has no Hollywood glamour in real life—it is fundamentally self-destructive.

If you could preach one sermon to every congregation in the RCA, what would it be?
I would preach the gospel. The punch line of many sermons in America is that you should try to become passionate about ministry. The preaching itself is just the means to this end. The gospel is that God has bought the dead to life, and we are not our own but belong to Jesus Christ. We need detox from the idea that we are self-made persons. Our decisions are not at the center of the universe; God’s love is.

The good news is that your true life is life in Christ, in the Spirit—which is a gift from God. It’s bigger than you. By the Spirit, you are a child of God, and you are united to Christ’s body, the church. Living into this identity is an act of gratitude and worship rather than anxiety and guilt.

What do you want your students to learn from you?
I want my students to experience a new world. In a sense I want to give them a cultural immersion into the expansive world of the Christian tradition. The texts I use are meant as surprising and revealing stops along a journey—our journey of life in Christ. I use a lot of historical sources in my teaching, because I am confident the Spirit works through persons who received Scripture in the past. When students are exposed to the thought of Calvin, Gregory of Nyssa and classical theologians they are amazed. They see things they could never see if they were just reading Scripture from the perspective of 2007. I don’t lift up the historic Christian tradition as a hoop they have to jump through, but as a precious gem, without which they are going to be impoverished.

How do you see the church impacting our post-modern culture?
The decline of the Enlightenment’s influence is an opportunity for the church. I’m not saying the church should reinvent itself for a new culture or age. That itself is just another Enlightenment myth. The church does not reinvent itself; the church lives into its God-given identity, which is given in God’s Word and empowered through God’s Spirit. We need to start looking at our functional traditions and rediscover our much deeper, catholic identity. In a postmodern environment, some are finally starting to overcome our addiction to “the new.” There is a revival of interest in the way “tradition” can help open up biblical truth and change our preaching, worship, and celebration of the sacraments. This “tradition” is not a return to the 1950s but to the surprising and expansive biblical wisdom of the 250s and of the 1550s (and so on). This is not to reinstate everything that was present then. Rather, it’s a way of overcoming the idolatry of our own age by communing with our ancient brothers and sisters, shaped by God’s Word and Spirit.

Meeting with Muslim clerics and villagers in Uganda, 1994

Dr. Billings leads “The Confessions on Tap,” an opportunity for students to discuss the theological confessions of the Reformed Church in a relaxed setting.

LifeNotes
b. 1973, Hometown: McPherson, KS
B.A. Wheaton College, 1995; M.Div., Fuller Theological Seminary, 1999
Th.D. Harvard Divinity School, 2005
Married Rachel Castahedra in 2002
(2000-2005) Staff member, First Church Shelter (UCC), Cambridge, MA
(2005-present) Assistant Professor of Reformed Theology, WTS
Ordained in the RCA, November 11, 2007
Author of: Calvin, Participation, and the Gift: The Activity of Believers in Union with Christ
For Todd’s articles and book recommendations, visit: www.jtoddbillings.com

A PUBLICATION OF WESTERN THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

November 2007
Are you in the story?

Everyone has a story. This week I heard two students’ stories of being called into ministry. One is called to preach the gospel, and the other is called to change the lives of kids in the inner city. I wish each of you could hear these stories first hand.

Unfortunately, I heard two other stories this week as well. One of Western’s brightest first year students enrolled with debt of over $40,000, and another student declared bankruptcy as a result of loans taken out to pay for seminary. I am blessed to hear many of the first kind of stories, and it will be an honor to have one of these students as my pastor some day. But I hear far too many of the second kind of story as well, stories from students whose ministries are being compromised as a result of debt load.

Every dollar given to Western Seminary is one dollar that does not have to be raised through tuition, and it is a dollar that won’t be borrowed by a student to pay for seminary. Yes, it costs money to train our pastors and leaders. Our gifts, yours and mine, make this preparation possible. Will you join me in relieving some of the burden already assumed by those entering full-time Christian ministry? Will you be part of their story?

To learn how you can become a partner with Western Seminary, contact me at ken@westernsem.edu or (616) 392-8555, x111.

Ken Neevel
Vice President of Advancement & Communications

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**Calls to the Class of 2007**

**Master of Divinity graduates:**

- **Jeff Roessling** of Holland, MI—House Church leadership and Walden Green Montessori School, Spring Lake, MI
- **Phil Rose** of Grandville, MI—Associate Pastor, Hardervyck Christian Reformed Church, Holland, MI
- **John Sanders** of Holland, MI—Pastor, Old Brick Reformed Church, Marboro, NJ
- **Deb Swanson** of Flushing, MI—Associate Pastor, Trinity Reformed Church, Grand Rapids, MI
- **Mark Swart** of Holland, MI—Pastor of Discipleship, North Branch Reformed Church, Bridgewater, NJ
- **Gill Beek** of Pittsford, MI and **Becky Town** of Kalamazoo, MI—Pastors, The Reformed Church of Prattsville and Jewett Presbyterian Church, Pratts ville, NY
- **Tim Truesdell** of Hesper, IA—Associate Pastor, Christ Community Church, Davenport, IA

**Master of Religious Education graduate:**

- **Amy Jo Trifan** of Kentwood, MI—Full-time mom

**Master of Theology graduates:**

- **Victor Darwin** of Trivandrum, Kerala, India—studying at Ashland Theological Seminary, Ashland, OH
- **Christie Dasaro** of Jos, Plateau, Nigeria—Teacher, ECWA Information and Computer Science Institute, Jos, Nigeria
- **Roxas Inoue** of Kawachiga, Osaka, Japan—Support staff, RCA Japanese Ministry in Southwest Michigan
- **Kevin Jean** of Grand Haven, MI—Vice President for Development, Geneva College, Beaver Falls, PA
- **David Kipro** of Eldoret, Kenya—Pastor, Reformed Church of East Africa, Eldoret, Kenya
- **Gemechis Mosa** of Addis Ababa, Ethiopia—unknown
- **Abram Khnata** of Ndola, Zambia—Pastor, Kabushi Uniting Presbyterian Church, Ndola, Zambia
- **Won Taekjin** of Seoul, South Korea—studying at Calvin Theological Seminary, Grand Rapids, MI

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**Diversity Grant**

The seminary has received a $20,000 grant from the Wabash Center to support and encourage our efforts to increase our racial-ethnic diversity. The grant will be used to fund faculty colloquia, community engagement and consultants to evaluate our community, and speakers who can help us learn to identify multi-cultural competencies for our curriculum. The grant will be administered by the newly-formed Diversity Committee, under the leadership of **Cynthia Holder Rich**, associate professor of continuing theological education.

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**Faculty News**

- **J. Todd Billings**, assistant professor of theology, was ordained as Minister of Word and Sacrament in the Reformed Church in America on November 11 at the seminary’s Muter Chapel.
- Last month he traveled to Cambridge, MA to present “The Lord’s Supper and Dissent” for the 20th anniversary celebration of First Church Shelter.
- This month Dr. Billings’ first book is out: Calvin, Participation, and the Gift: The Activity of Believers in Union with Christ, in the Changing Paradigms in Historical and Systematic Theology Series with Oxford University Press.

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**Associate Professor of Pastoral Care and Counseling**

**Jaco Hamman** co-lead a workshop in October called, “Listening to the Family under Fire,” at The Center for Children and Family Research in Grand Rapids. On Sunday mornings in January he will speak on “Essentials of the Reformed Faith” at Fifth Reformed Church in Grand Rapids.

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**Theresa Latini**, Assistant Professor of Pastoral Care and Congregational Life, will be leaving WTS for an opportunity to work with Ph.D. students at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, MN at the end of 2007.

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Missiology and Evangelism associate professor Vern Sterk and adjunct professor **Carla Sterk** accomplished significant tasks in Chiapas last summer. Vern finished the Concordance of the New Testament and Bible the Bible the Sterks helped translate. Carla completed revisions and formatting of the new Chiapalo Tzotzil Hymnbook. Both publications should be ready for distribution this month.

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Dean and Vice President for Academic Affairs **Leanne Van Dyk** represented the USA at the Worldwide Conference on Training Clergy for the 21st Century at Princeton Theological Seminary on June 27, 2007.

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This fall New Testament professor **Robert Van Voorst** began serving a term on the editorial council of the Church Herald. He also preached at Third and Trinity Reformed Churches in Holland, Fifth Reformed in Grand Rapids, and Trinity Park Reformed in Illinois, on Sunday mornings in January he will speak on “Essentials of the Reformed Faith” at Fifth Reformed Church in Grand Rapids.

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In September Wadsworth published the sixth edition of Dr. Van Voorst’s Anthology of World Scriptures, a college-level textbook. The Shanghai Publication Board has approved his introduction textbook, Reading the New Testament Today.