How an Old Dog Learned New Tricks
A pastor reflects on a Bast Dwell Group

I have been preaching pretty much every Sunday since I graduated from Western in 1986. After so many years, preaching no longer scared me…and that scared me. Recently, two events—a cataclysmic automobile accident involving my son and an unexpected invitation to join a group of preachers—revived my passion for preaching.

In the summer of 2013, my son Andrew, a Hope College student, suffered a traumatic brain injury in an automobile accident that killed his friend, who was driving. Medics removed Andrew from the accident in critical condition. Initially, our prayer was that he would live. As that became likely, we prayed that he would open his eyes and wake up from a coma. Then we prayed for what would be behind his eyes when he opened them. The prognosis was bleak.

After emerging from a sixteen-day coma, Andrew learned how to breathe, speak, eat, walk and live again. It was a time of great challenge and amazing blessing. The church displayed all its glory as people prayed and loved and walked with us through the valley of the shadow of death. I had been on sabbatical at the time of the accident, and I returned to the pulpit with a new sense of the urgency of the gospel. I did not want anybody to live or to die without the hope of Jesus Christ.

My original call to ministry came in the early 1980s when I was working as a bartender in Colorado among some of the most lost and lonely people in the world. As I served and poured and listened, God called, and I entered seminary with a strong passion for evangelism, compelled to learn how to reach the lost and lonely. But something happened in twenty-nine years of church ministry. I became comfortable and lost some of that evangelistic drive. Andrew’s accident and a deep awareness of all who grieve without hope restored my passion.

About that time, Jon Brown and Brian Keepers, two of the great young preachers in the Reformed Church in America, invited me to join one of Western’s Bast Preaching Groups. I figured they wanted me to bring an older pastor’s perspective and experience. I had no idea what was in store for me: an opportunity to learn (and sometimes to unlearn) and get out of some deep ruts. As I gathered with pastor colleagues, I rediscovered the hopes and fears inherent when one steps into the pulpit. It was thrilling.

Our first focus as a group was to dwell in the word. Western, under the leadership of Dr. Timothy Brown, has become a place where the
interiorization of a biblical text is the beginning of sermon preparation. Our group committed to memorizing our texts each Sunday. I was preaching through a series titled, “Psalms in the Key of Life.” These were psalms that lifted me through my son’s automobile accident and were rooted in my soul. The work of memorization and speaking them from memory deepened their place in my heart.

For 29 years I approached preaching as a way to exegete culture and brought the Bible to front-page stories from the New York Times or prime-time television. Now, instead of bringing scripture to something, I dwell in the word of God first. This practice brings me to a place I knew I should have been all along. It was a gift to this old dog that congregants noticed right away. In fact, one trusted friend noted the shift and commented, “Something has happened in your preaching. You really seem to be tapping into the power of God.”

Next, the Dwell group focused on craft: how a sermon is developed and written. I have always resisted writing a sermon manuscript and never committed anything to paper until the last minute. Over the years I’ve had a lot of “Saturday night sweats” and sometimes gave Sunday morning messages that expressed great passion but lacked clarity. I remember seminary debates with Dr. James Cook, professor of New Testament, as I argued that I was better speaking my thoughts rather than writing them. He countered, “If you can’t write it, you aren’t thinking it,” and I disagreed with him for 29 years. Then our group met with Isaac Anderson, a preacher and writer from Kansas City and adjunct professor at Western. As Isaac illustrated his sermon preparation process, I recalled my debate with Dr. Cook. Isaac described a sign above his desk that says: I didn’t know I was going to write that. That simple phrase invited me into the wonder of manuscript writing, from the power of the first phrase to the clarity of its conclusion. I let the Holy Spirit work in me as my words began to flow. Again, a good friend noticed and said a sermon that opened with an attention-grabbing question had been well-crafted.

We recently welcomed twenty new members into the life of Hopewell Reformed Church. I was so pleased that some of the new members transitioned from an AA group in the fellowship hall to worship in the sanctuary. As I experienced the joy in their journeys, I remembered friends from my Colorado bartending days and why God called me to seminary in the first place. My son’s accident scared the life back into my preaching, and my Dwell Group experience refined my craft, teaching this old dog some new tricks.

For more information on Bast Preaching Groups, contact Rev. Lindsay Small at lindsay.small@westernsem.edu

BastPreaching.com

What are Bast Preaching Groups?

There are three different types of preaching groups:

**Discern Groups** for college students
**Discover Groups** for seminary students
**Dwell Groups** for pastors

**Discern Groups** can be found on the campuses of Hope College, Northwestern College, Central College, and Grand Valley State University. These groups meet to discern a call to ministry and investigate inklings for preaching. Each student gets an opportunity to preach in a local church, a campus worship service, or to the group. Students grow in their love for scripture, the church, and for the proclamation of God’s word.

Seminary students can choose from two **Discover Groups**. “Fearless Feedback” offers students encouragement and inspiration from their peers in the vocation of preaching. “The Pulpit” is specifically for female students to encourage and explore vocation and preaching.

Local and regional **Dwell Groups** made up of pastors with all levels of experience meet regularly to engage in the beautifully complicated task of living the sermon: dwelling in scripture, knowing it deeply, and proclaiming it boldly.

All groups begin at the Bast Preaching Festival in November, meet during the year, and conclude at the next year’s festival.

**Upcoming Bast Preaching Festival speakers:**
2016: Rev. Dr. Frank Thomas, Christian Theological Seminary
2017: Rev. Dr. Richard Mouw, Fuller Theological Seminary

**What inspired you to write this book?**
When I was working at Hope College, one day I met with three students in a row who wanted to move to Africa to serve and seek justice. When I was their age I had never heard justice connected to the Christian faith. I have wanted to probe this topic for some time. Also, something so easy to be passionate about when you’re 20—what does it look like when you’re 40 with a mortgage and kids? Can we sustain this commitment to justice with deep enough roots and vision for it to become part of everyday life?

**What do you hope readers will take away?**
It is a gift to receive the calling of justice and righteousness, but it’s not all up to us. The world is not on our shoulders, and we don’t need to do the saving. Christ is doing the redeeming and reconciling, and we’re called to join in, but it’s ultimately God’s work through the spirit.

**What was the benefit of co-writing with Bethany?**
It was a huge gift to write with someone who has been involved in justice work for a decade, who knows the heart-breaking stories, has seen the burnout and is still persevering. Bethany wants to see others both embrace the darkness and rely on the light of Christ. Her perspective makes up big themes of the book—to find in Christ the persevering hope we need to sustain this calling. I think co-writing with Bethany gives the book a lot of integrity and less of an “ivory tower” feel.

**Anything else you’d like your readers to know?**
Part of what I’m trying to do is say that what we do flows from who we are. The justice movement is a lot about what we do, and it’s rooted in who we are in union with Christ—this deep communion that we’ve been invited into that claims us and shapes us and forms us to live the way of God in this world. So it’s an invitation really into this life in Christ, which flows out into how we live with justice and righteousness in the world.


**What inspired you to write this book?**
Charles Spurgeon, a 19th century Reformed Baptist preacher in London, preached a sermon called “The Divided Heart,” and I remember reading it and thinking that we all live with dividedness and fragmentation. I saw this in my pastoral care work as I heard people say, “I feel myself being pulled in a thousand different directions.” I wanted to explore it theologically and psychologically. I spent about a decade thinking about it.

**What is the premise of the book?**
People experience life as divided, fragmented. They experience a lack of wholeness. I offer a biblical, theological, and psychological vision for shalom, wholeness, and flourishing.

**Why is this topic important to you personally?**
I’m concerned about people living out of a core of integrity and not out of what the apostle Paul would call “the old self.” In his sermon, Charles Spurgeon gave this famous line: “Tear off your masks. The church was never meant to be a masquerade.” I think as I’ve interacted with skeptics, the number one problem they have with Christianity is not doctrinal; it’s our hypocrisy. So I long to see people live with a greater sense of wholeness.

**How do you feel now that the book is finished?**
This is my third book. I was more anxious about how the first two would sell. Now I’m just grateful to have the opportunity to write and to offer a book to the church.

**What do you hope readers will take away?**
I’d like for them to emerge with not only a vision for a life of wholeheartedness and a longing to live into that, but with a pathway to wholeheartedness in and through the Christian tradition of spiritual practices. The last three chapters offer paths to wholeheartedness, integrating our theological and spiritual tradition with some psychological insights as well.
Traveling to the Arizona/Mexico border for an intercultural immersion trip in January hit close to home for M.Div. student Sergio Reyes.

Sergio escaped to the United States when he was 11 years old. Taking nothing but a change of clothes and his favorite toy, he fled his home in Mexico City with his mother, brother and sister soon after his father, a journalist, was murdered.

“Reporters are a threat to corruption because they stand up to it,” Sergio explains.

Stories like Sergio’s are not uncommon among immigrant families—something dramatic happens, causing an urgent need to move away from their home to find a safer one somewhere.

Sergio’s family was able to get visitor visas fairly easily, especially since his mother was a career nurse. Eventually they received permanent status as resident aliens, meaning they had all the rights of a citizen except the right to vote.

After finishing school, Sergio started a small business making tacos. In 2001, he got married and started a family. He then joined the Army, serving in a peacekeeping mission in Kosovo before taking part in one of the first units deployed to the Iraq War. He earned his full American citizenship in 2003.

In 2008, tragedy struck. Sergio’s wife was in a terrible auto accident, putting her in a coma. She was permanently brain damaged and remains at a long care facility with little hope of recovery.

Because of the difficulty of being a single parent in the Army, Sergio completed his 9 1/2 year enlistment and got out. Knowing he needed help processing both the psychological trauma of war and the complete incapacitation of his wife led him into the church.

“That’s where you go when you want to get your life straight, right?” he says.

Sergio found that volunteering, serving God and studying the Bible gave meaning to his life again. He decided to enter seminary, earning a Graduate Certificate in Urban Pastoral Ministry in 2015. Feeling the call of God to be a pastor, he returned last fall to enroll in the Master of Divinity program.

Part of the formation process at WTS is an intercultural immersion trip for all M.Div. students. Sergio chose to go on the BorderLinks trip, which allows students to meet with pastors and non-profits who are serving undocumented immigrants and their families on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border. Students also meet detainees at a detention center and hear their stories.

“What’s going on at the border is horrible right now,” Sergio says. “Putting names and faces to the problem impacted me very much.”

He met a young man named Dario who was attending the University of Arizona as an undocumented immigrant. There is no federal aid for people like Dario, and yet somehow he managed to find some fringe scholarships.

“Dario lives in a world where he doesn’t know what’s going to happen next week or next year,” Sergio says. “He has parents who are educated, pushing him to go through college and supporting him, but he realizes other people don’t have that.”

As a result, Dario and some friends created an organization to put together scholarships for other students like themselves.

Learning about Dario’s story and the stories of others made Sergio realize his own privilege and what responsibility he has to help others.

As Sergio interacted with people at the border, he was taken aback to hear the hostility expressed on the issue of immigration and the rhetoric used.

“People at the detention center see those crossing...
the border as criminals, terrorists, drug dealers,” he says. “Yet, on the flipside, I was encouraged to witness the work God is doing. In spite of the big wall, there is a circle of community around it.”

There are people working to put water in the desert so those crossing don’t die from dehydration. Others have set up a tent with medical supplies. Churches have declared themselves sanctuaries and have housed people in their buildings to protect them.

“At the border you have people who are the most vulnerable in this situation—people like myself who have left home for safety or who just want a better life and want to work,” Sergio explains. “Around those you have the drug dealers and cartels, and on this side of the border our justice system has an industry of jailing and deporting immigrants. A town in Arizona called Florence has three big detention centers, and that’s all the town is.”

For Sergio, the hardest part about the trip is what to do with it now that he’s home.

“When I am a pastor, I would love to be in a church where people understand what it means to stand by someone as a sanctuary.”

“I would tell everyone to go on a trip like this,” he says. “It’s necessary whether you’re white, black, or Mexican. Latinos are everywhere, but we don’t understand the issues they face, and this is a fundamental piece for a pastor to go through.”

Sergio is already working towards reconciliation in the Holland Latino community. Because “Latino” is a broad term that covers different countries, generations, and documented vs. undocumented, there can be a lack of unity. Sergio has created an organization called Uno en Cristo (One in Christ) to help unify these groups.

He is also working to reconcile Latinos with the majority culture in Holland by empowering and connecting the Latino community through jobs and education in a non-profit called Cultivate Holland.

Sergio sees himself as an asset to the Latino community. He knows he doesn’t have all the answers, but he will do whatever he can to connect people to the things they need and to point them to the ultimate sanctuary: faith in Jesus Christ.
It was the first Sunday in Advent, and I was waiting. Waiting for my plane from Budapest to Beauvais, France. Waiting for my bus to take me from Beauvais to Paris. Waiting for the metros and shuttles to take me to the venue where I could pick up my credentials. Waiting for my train to the village north of Paris where I could finally drop off my luggage and unpack.

It was the first Sunday in Advent, and I spent the whole day waiting. I was on my way to the COP21 Climate Summit in Paris, where representatives and heads of state from 190 countries would gather to reach consensus on a way to address the challenge of global climate change. I was going there wearing two hats. The first was as a representative of an organization called Young Evangelicals for Climate Action (YECA), for which I sit on the steering committee. The second was in my official capacity as a staff member of the Office of Social Justice of the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRCNA).

I have served as Creation Care Coordinator at the CRCNA for almost three years and have continued on a part-time basis while I take a full-time course load at Western. It has been a wonderful fit, enabling me to apply my biblical and theological learning to the tasks of empowering CRC congregations to incorporate an appreciation for creation into their worship, of educating them to be stewards of creation in their everyday lives, and of equipping them to turn their worship and appreciation outward by advocating for environmental stewardship at the local, regional, and national level.

It’s no secret that the conversation around climate change in the U.S. has become deeply polarized, but I’m convinced that, as Christians, this cannot be a good excuse to opt out of it altogether. As predictions of the earth’s future get more and more precise, and as the most vulnerable around the world suffer the effects of a changing climate most acutely, our dual divine mandate to be caretakers of God’s creation and lovers of our neighbor demands that we stand up and participate in the global conversation.

That’s exactly what we were doing in Paris. We had worked for months to organize over 200 CRC members in 35 congregations in the U.S. and Canada to get plugged in to what was happening in Paris. We sent a small delegation of CRC staff and lay members (led by myself and my colleague) to participate in the negotiations, to communicate back to our churches, and to provide a public witness to the watching world that the Christian church does care about climate change and was ready to do something about it.

Our days at the conference were full: writing daily newsletters to our 200+ supporters back home, meeting with other Christian and faith-based groups to discuss strategy, sitting in on negotiating sessions, meeting with U.S. and Canadian negotiating teams, maintaining a social media presence and writing for various blogs.

In the end, the world walked away with a relatively ambitious agreement on a common path forward for addressing a changing climate and protecting those around the world whose livelihoods are most threatened.

I’ve often reflected upon the symbolism and fittingness of COP21 taking place during Advent, and my experience on that first Sunday underscored this. I was in Paris because I am waiting; because the world is waiting. Young people are waiting for effective, global steps that will protect the future of our generation and of those to come. Poor and vulnerable nations are waiting for collective action that can help ensure the survival of their people and their land. And while important progress was made in Paris, the church steadfastly proclaims that the ultimate hope of the world’s waiting is not rooted in bureaucratic legalese or governmental announcements; it is in the incarnate Lord of all creation. Precisely because Christ took on the suffering of the world in order to redeem it, the world has hope in the midst of its waiting. This is why the church waits, during Advent and from now until the new creation. We wait because there is something coming worth waiting for. We wait in hope and we wait in action.

We wait in hope for the return of the One in whom all our waiting rests.

Student Story:

Kyle Meynard-Schaap

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Friendship House Director Melissa Conner has been intentionally ministering to and with people with disabilities for many years, along with her husband, Dr. Ben Conner, associate professor of Christian discipleship at WTS.

Melissa’s passion for those with special needs began early in their marriage. While Ben worked as a youth pastor and later as a staff member with Young Life in Williamsburg, VA, Melissa worked alongside him as a partner in ministry.

“In Ben’s first job 25 years ago, we had a boy in our youth group with a cognitive impairment,” she recalls. “We loved him as best we could, but we really had no clue how to include him or involve him. There was no training.”

As she got involved in the Mothers of Preschoolers (MOPS) ministry at her church, Melissa heard more about the struggles of kids with disabilities. When her own son needed therapy for a special need, her eyes opened further.

In 2005, Melissa earned therapeutic riding certification through PATH International (Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship). Therapeutic riding combined her care for people with disabilities with her lifelong love of horses.

“I began to see horses as a partner in serving people. I had never seen them in that light before,” she says.

While Melissa worked at the riding center, Ben worked on the staff of Young Life Capernaum—the branch of Young Life specifically catered towards youth with disabilities.

“He volunteered at the riding center and I volunteered with Capernaum, doing things together as much as possible,” she explains. “We tried to create a community and encourage friendships to extend beyond the isolation felt by a lot of families with special needs.”

As they interacted with families, Melissa learned that as children with special needs grow to be adults, often there are fewer avenues for recreation and for friendship. Even churches were not meeting needs of that community.

“That’s when I was compelled to purposely reach out to that population,” she says. “They have the same needs to be cared for in the context of a relationship, with someone they trust, with someone who takes the time to get to know them. They deserve the same chance to be a part of the church, the community of believers, and to grow in their faith. But they need to be reached in a way they can understand and that makes them feel safe.”

The Conners also realized that communities and churches were missing out by not including those with special needs.

“We felt so blessed by them. Whether someone had a physical or cognitive impairment, they had a unique perspective, friendship and...” (cont.)
MAY 23-26 CONFERENCE SCHEDULE HIGHLIGHTS:

Monday, May 23 - COMMUNITY DAY, Public welcome!
8:00  Registration, Coffee, Exhibits in Maas Hall
8:45  Morning Meditation
9:00  “SI-TED Talks” by SITD faculty John Swinton, Erik Carter, Darla Schumm, Tom Reynolds, Bill Gaventa, Hans Reinders
1:45  Discussion sessions with SITD faculty
3:30  Interfaith Worship Service and Celebration

Tuesday, May 24
8:00  Registration open.
8:30  Opening Worship and Meditation
9:00  Plenary: “Integrating Disability into Seminary Life and Curriculum” by Dr. Benjamin Conner, WTS
10:45  Discussion sessions with presenters
11:30  Picnic Lunch at Friendship House
1:45  Five Workshops and Ph.D. Symposium
3:30  Five Workshops and Ph.D. Symposium
4:45  Afternoon Worship: WTS Faculty

Wednesday, May 25
8:30  Morning Meditation
9:00  Plenary: “Growing Up: Disability Ministry and Persons with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities” by Dr. Jeff McNair
10:45  The Ruderman Family Foundation Jewish Plenary, Speaker TBA. Moderated by Rabbi Julia Watts Belser
1:45  Five Workshops and Ph.D. Symposium
3:30  Five Workshops and Ph.D. Symposium
4:45  Afternoon Worship: Friendship House
Eve.  Optional Evening Excursions

Thursday, May 26
8:30  Opening Worship and Meditation:
9:00  Plenary: “Finding Accommodation: Exploring the Spiritual Experience of People with Profound Intellectual Disability” by Dr. Jill Hershaw
10:45  Plenary: Jean Vanier Emerging Scholar Lecture  TBA
1:45  Five Workshops and Ph.D. Symposium
3:30  Five Workshops and Ph.D. Symposium
4:45  Afternoon Worship: Calvin Institutes on Worship
6:30  Closing Celebration and Dinner

faithanddisability.org/projects/summer-institute/

Questions?  contact Bill Gaventa at 732-718-5875 or bill.gaventa@gmail.com

something to give,” Melissa explains. “We were greatly enriched by having people of different abilities in our lives and in our home.”

When the Conners moved to Holland in 2013 for Ben to teach at WTS, they immediately looked for ways to serve the special needs community.

Melissa began serving at Renew Therapeutic Riding center, conveniently located across the street from her home. During her time there, the number of riders has more than doubled, the volunteer base has grown, and a capital campaign was launched and successfully completed. They now have an indoor heated arena and barn for year-round riding, as well as a hydraulic lift for those in wheelchairs or in need of extra physical support.

She also serves on PATH International’s faculty as a lead evaluator and chairs the Riding Certification subcommittee.

In the fall of 2014, WTS hired Melissa to direct the Ralph and Cheryl Schregardus Friendship House, the on-campus residence where seminary students live in apartments with young adults with cognitive impairments.

Last fall, Melissa was invited to join the Friendship House Partners USA board of directors. The non-profit started by Western’s former Dean of Formation, Dr. Matt Floding, helps to spread and implement the model of Friendship House to other communities.

In the past year, Melissa has visited two new Friendship Houses, one at Vanderbilt Divinity School in Nashville, TN and the other at Duke Divinity School in Durham, NC.

The Friendship House at Vanderbilt is spearheaded by former WTS professor Jaco Hamman. The model of their Friendship House is a little different because the apartments are all one-bedroom and the complex is not on the campus of Vanderbilt. A married couple serves as resident directors to promote community and inclusive living within the house.

At Duke Divinity School, the model is similar to the Friendship House at Western. There are two duplexes, one for men and one for women. The apartments are set up so each friend has a personal room and bathroom, and the three roommates have their own bedrooms and a bathroom to share.

“There is interest in this type of model on many different levels,” Melissa shares. “I get phone calls from people quite regularly. It’s an innovative way of living.”

She is excited for the Ralph and Cheryl Schregardus Friendship House to be featured during this year’s Summer Institute on Theology & Disability in May, and she also plans to enroll in Western’s new Graduate Certificate in Disability and Ministry program.

“I love that Western is creating this new program. I think it is so important, and I want to be able to promote it and learn from it myself,” she says.
One of my favorite questions to ask new students is “Why Western?” I find it fascinating to hear how God has led people to us. I also love to ask our financial supporters that question. With so many good causes and so much need in our world, why do people give to our seminary?

Recently, I had a chance to ask “Why Western?” to Ruggles and Sandra Church. (What a great last name for people who support a seminary!) The Churches have taken a leadership role with us by becoming the co-chairs of the seminary’s President’s Club. The President’s Club is filled with our most faithful and loyal supporters, and the membership helps guarantee the seminary’s annual financial needs are met.

Here is my conversation with Ruggles and Sandra.

Tell us a bit about yourselves.

Sandra grew up in rural western Illinois. Ruggles came from Queens in New York City. We met at Hope College as freshman in 1960. Sandra became a nurse and Ruggles a physician.

We have three sons, one in Zeeland and two in California, and five wonderful grandchildren.

We lived in Traverse City, MI, for 32 years. Ruggles worked as a Diagnostic Radiologist at Munson Medical Center. After retirement we moved to Holland in 2007.

Everyone wants me to ask: How did you get the name Ruggles?

My great great great grandfather married a Miss Ruggles about 1840. Her family name became a popular middle name for sons of every generation since. William is my first name, but I prefer people know me by my middle name, Ruggles.

When and why did you start supporting Western?

We both grew up in the Reformed Church in America. We have known and been the beneficiaries of many great graduates of Western Theological Seminary. We’ll mention only one…and one of the best. Warren Burgess was our pastor for many years in Traverse City. He is a wonderful pastor and has been a lifetime friend and mentor to us. We wanted to support the educational institution that produced someone like him and many other wonderful spiritual mentors, theological teachers, and mission enthusiasts.

What are you most excited about at Western?

The seminary attracts exceptional faculty, staff, and students. The distance learning program has allowed students to engage in theological studies without having to move or even leave another area of work. Both the in-residence and distance learning programs bring students from a very diverse population reaching beyond the RCA. The end result is gifted, well-educated, spiritual leaders prepared to continue the transformative mission of God in the world.

WTS is a good story…a love story…a “blessed to be blessing” story…a success story. The seminary is bathed in prayer, Christ-focused, Bible-based, and Holy Spirit led.

Along the way, you decided to join the President’s Club. Why?

We wanted to do more to show that we heartily approve of what Western is doing. We want to support that work financially.

Now you are the chairs of the President’s Club. Who can join?

The stated requirements for membership is a contribution of at least $1,000 per year or making an outright gift of $25,000 or more to the seminary. The unstated requirements, of course, are prayer and advocacy for WTS. It is a joy and privilege to support Western. We encourage new folks to join the President’s Club and become more integral parts of the WTS community.

What led you to include Western in your estate plans?

Because we believe Western is an exceptional educational institution preparing lives for the ministry and mission of Jesus Christ, we want to support and encourage the “saved to be sent” legacy of WTS. It is reassuring to know that our support will continue beyond our lifetimes.

Thanks, Ruggles and Sandra.
J. Todd Billings, the Gordon H. Girod research professor of Reformed theology, has been awarded a Louisville Institute Grant to explore the topic: *What does it mean for congregations to hope in the bodily resurrection in a medicalized age?*

Many recent seminary graduates have expressed urgent questions about ministering to those who are dying. They find themselves walking with parishioners who are left to make complex medical and end of life decisions. These pastors are in a moment of significant cultural transition: while dying traditionally has taken place at home among family and communities of faith, today in the West dying usually occurs in medical institutions.

Pastors are asked to pray for patients not expected to live another week, yet the family often wants prayer for “miracles” rather than guidance about a Christian process of preparing for death. Rather than sharing words of confession, reconciliation, wisdom and blessing with family and faith community, many choose extreme treatments that isolate them in their final days. This can marginalize the Christian narrative of mortal creatures finding their resurrection hope in Jesus Christ alone.

This grant will allow Dr. Billings to gather a small group of Reformed pastors currently serving congregations across the nation for three colloquies in 2016-17 to explore and write about these issues.

In addition, with the help of WTS student Anna Radcliffe, Dr. Billings has produced a free study guide for *Rejoicing in Lament*. Each chapter has questions for discussion and an exercise to encounter God’s Word in scripture anew. You can download it at jtoddbillings.com.

Professor of New Testament Robert Van Voorst’s textbook on world religions, *RELG: World*, has been published by Cengage Learning in its third edition. His *Anthology of World Scriptures*, now the leading anthology in religious studies in U.S. higher education, has been published in its ninth edition, in print and for the first time in all-digital format. Dr. Van Voorst also serves this year as an adjunct professor of Greek at Hope College.

Ben Conner, associate professor of Christian discipleship, is on sabbatical developing courses for the new Graduate Certificate in Disability and Ministry (GCDM). He will also travel to develop partnerships and recruit students for the new GCDM.

Dr. Conner is working with Hope College to host the Summer Institute on Theology and Disability (see pg 8). WTS is leading a session on how working with people with disabilities is transforming our understanding of theological education.

Finally, Dr. Conner is writing a book that brings together his interests in disability and mission studies, entitled *Enabling Witness*.

Suzanne McDonald, professor of historical and systematic theology, is also spending her sabbatical developing new courses: one on aging and dementia for the GCDM and the other on the doctrine of creation and “creation care.” She is also writing on the doctrine of election and John Owen’s doctrine of the Holy Spirit.

Dr. McDonald has speaking engagements at the Reformed Institute of Metropolitan Washington, Calvin College, and Covenant College in Georgia. She will also present at several churches on “Dealing Faithfully with Dementia.”

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**Two “don’t miss” events:**

### March 11-12, 2016

**Friday 1:00 - Saturday 1:00**

Western Theological Seminary

**2nd Annual Celebrating Women in Church Leadership**

We invite all women in ministry—ordained and laity alike—to this 1½ day event at Western Theological Seminary. Join like-minded women from across the region for an inspiring, retreat-like gathering where we will celebrate, honor and explore our stories, gain new wisdom and insights, and be encouraged, equipped and empowered to live fully into our God-given callings and become agents for change.

To register ($60) or for more information, go to: journey.westernsem.edu/events/list/

### March 22, 2016

**Tuesday, 7:00pm**

Mulder Chapel

Marilyn Chandler McEntyre

**Poetry on the Paintings of the Dutch Masters**

Join us for an evening of poetry and rich discussion focusing on Dr. McEntyre’s books: *In Quiet Light, Drawn to the Light*, and *The Color of Light*. Her poems are inspired by paintings by Vermeer, Rembrandt, and Van Gogh.

Vermeer invites us into an environment rich with unspoken feeling. Rembrandt restores us to a sense of the sacramentality of daily life. Van Gogh calls for our consent—to relinquish, reorganize, reimagine, see into, and see through.

Dr. McEntyre has written over a dozen books, including *A Faithful Farewell*, *What’s in a Phrase?*, and *Caring for Words in a Culture of Lies*. She has a Ph.D. in comparative literature and teaches medical humanities at the UC Berkeley-UCSF Joint Medical Program.
News

In honor of her husband, Pierce Maasen ’53, who passed away in 1967 after faithfully serving churches in Michigan and directing “Temple Time” for Words of Hope, Edith Maasen has established a scholarship in his name. She was honored to be his helpmeet in the churches he served and hopes this scholarship will help an earnest student with a call from God to serve a parish ministry.

Harmen Heeg ’65 of Orange Park, Fl. has served as clergy leader in eleven Kairos prison ministry weekends at a minimum security prison, sharing the love of Christ with those who are incarcerated. Each month he leads several Sunday afternoon worship services at Oakview Rehabilitation Center in Orange Park. He also enjoys teaching an adult Sunday School class. He and his wife, Grace, enjoy camping in Florida State Parks.

Last summer, after 12 years as chaplain at Northwestern College in Orange City, IA, Harlan VanOort ’86 accepted a call to City Church Denver. In August of 2015 he began serving as senior pastor alongside pastors Rob and Izzy Sackett ’16, who will receive their diplomas from WTS in May.

George Montanari ’90 has started his 14th year serving as pastor of Middlebush Reformed Church in Somerset, NJ. He also serves as a fire police officer and chaplain of the Middlebush Volunteer Fire Department. The department recognized George with the First Chief Elmer T. Smith Memorial Award, its highest honor to be awarded annually to a member who has demonstrated outstanding service to the department.

In May of 2015 Dorothy Yoder Nyce ’97 (DMin) published the book, Mennonites Encounter Hinduism: An Annotated Bibliography. Contact her at dyodnyce@bnin.net for purchasing information.

Instructor of Biblical Hebrew Travis West ’08, ’09 (ThM) and his wife, Mariah, are spending 8-12 months in Arizona in hopes of Mariah’s recovery from CIRS (Chronic Inflammatory Response Syndrome), a chronic illness that has plagued her for 12 years. To effectively recover from CIRS, a severe reaction to mold, water-damage and chemicals, they had to leave behind their home in Holland and all their possessions. Visit Mariah’s blog at mariashhealthjourney.wordpress.com/

Steven DeVries ’14 and his wife, M.Div. student Katlyn DeVries, announce the birth of their first child, Adriana Kay DeVries, on November 23, 2015. 5 lbs, 18” long

From a field of 110 submissions, “Remember the Deeds of Our God” by Steven Rodriguez ’14 rose to win the 2015 Church of the Servant New Psalm Contest. The song is a profound musical exegesis of Psalm 78, and it premiers in worship services at Church of the Servant in Grand Rapids, MI on Sunday, January 31, 2016.

CORRECTION: The Fall 2015 Commons incorrectly listed Carole Barber ’15 as “Principal, Crystal Cathedral Academy, Garden Grove, CA.” That academy has not existed for several years. She is now the principal of Trinity Christian Schools in Garden Grove. Carole also co-pastors Church of Grace in Garden Grove, CA with her husband, Larry Barber ’15. They were both ordained to the office of Minister of Word and Sacrament on Sept. 17, 2015 in the City Classis.

On to glory...

Chester Droog ’50
WTS Distinguished Alum 2003
b. 12/16/1921 Hull, IA
d. 2/5/2016 Artesia, CA
Northwestern JC ’42; Hope ’47; WTS ’50; CA Grad School of Theology ’76
PhD Churches served:
(1950-53) Hope, Spencer, IA
(1953-65) Fifth, Grand Rapids, MI
(1965-73) Bethel, Bellflower, CA
Other service:
(1973-88) RCA exec. secretary pas. of admin. & calling, El Dorado Park Church, Long Beach, CA

Donald Butelyn ’51
b. 11/10/1924 Fond du Lac, WI
d. 11/30/2015 Holland, MI
Hope ’48; WTS ’51 Churches served:
(1951-54) Jamestown, MI
(1954-58) Midland, MI
(1958-64) First, Kalamazoo, MI
(1964-69) assoc., First Presbyterian, Berkeley, CA
(1973-79) assoc., First Presbyterian, Hollywood, CA
(1986-95) First Presbyterian, Bakersfield, CA
Other service:
(1969) exec. of the Seattle Presbytery & Synod of Alaska-Northwest
(1973) chaplain to the L.A. Police Dept.
(1979-86) prof. & dean, San Francisco Theological Seminary

Virgil Dykstra ’70
b. 9/4/1934 Leighton, IA
d. 1/23/2016 Des Moines, IA
Central Coll ’67; WTS ’70 Churches served:
(1970-81) Zion, Sheffield, IA
(1981-91) Carmel, Rock Valley, IA
(1991-98) Trinity, Allison, IA
Other service:
(2005-2015) vol., Wycliffe Bible Translators
(2005-2015) RCA Retiree Chaplain, IA & MN

Judyth Thomas ’93 MRE
b. 1943
d. 1/28/2016 Holland, MI
Hope ’66; WTS ’93 MRE Other service:
founder of Ladder Homes (for the mentally ill) exec. asst., Theater Dept, Hope College

David Vander Laan ’94
b. 7/21/1956 Greeley, CO
d. 10/7/2015 George, IA
Northwestern Coll ’78; WTS ’94 Churches served:
(2001-2010) Hope, George, IA
(2010-2013) mod., Salem, Little Rock, IA
(2013-2015) First, Melvin, IA
Other service:
(2013-15) rep., Words of Hope

Demissew Kassaye ’09 ThM
b. Ethiopia
d. 9/12/2015 Dallas, TX
WTS ’09 ThM No other information known.

Alumni/ae Day: May 9, 2016
Contact LuAnne VanSlooten at 616-392-8555, x109 or luanne@westernsem.edu

11:45 Luncheons for 40th & 50th reunions (Classes of ’76 and ’66) Luncheons are $10/person. An invitation packet will arrive in April.  
1:30 Presentation by Commencement Speaker Rev. Dr. Dennis Voskuil, Professor Emeritus of Church History, public invited.
5:00 Alumni/ae Banquet in the Western Theological Seminary Commons honoring Distinguished Alum Mel DeVries ’56. Dinner is $20/person.
7:30 Class of 2016 Commencement held in Dimnent Chapel, Hope College
No tickets are needed to attend; doors open at 6:45pm.

Alumni/ae Banquet in the W estern Theological Seminary Commons

Attn: Classes of 2011-2015
Please plan to attend the 2016 Transition into Ministry Summit!
April 19-21: This year’s Transition into Ministry Summit is a Faithwalking Retreat—www.faithwalking.us/what-is-faithwalking/
Move beyond personal obstacles to an impactful life.

Register at journey.westernsem.edu by April 11

Questions? contact shanna@westernsem.edu or 616.392.8555, x133

11
Nobody likes a braggart, but as the old baseball pitcher Dizzy Dean used to say, “It ain’t bragging if you can back it up.” I am bragging (and I can back it up!) about two members of our faculty today. I’m so proud of Dr. Kristen Johnson and Dr. Chuck DeGroat. Each has written a brand new book that is going to help the church tremendously (see pg 3).

Even though I have now spent more years in the seminary (21) then as the pastor of a church (19), my heart will always be in the church. Because of that I thrill to see the work that Kristen and Chuck are doing. I predict Kristen’s book on justice will be the standard evangelical work on this topic, and Chuck’s book on wholeheartedness is something every Christian simply must read. These are books that can reach out and touch your soul. They are specifically for the church.

Hiring faculty members is a bit like naming Supreme Court Justices. They tend to stay in place many years and chart both the immediate and long-term future. Western is in great hands because of the young faculty we’ve added in the past few years. Pray with me, please, for their continued energy, vitality, and gospel passion. What a gift to our school!

Grace and peace,

Timothy Brown