Dr. Suzanne McDonald has been studying and reflecting on the topic of dementia for 20 years. She has developed a two-part class for churches called “Dealing Faithfully with Dementia,” and this semester she began teaching a course for Western’s new Graduate Certificate in Disability and Ministry program entitled, “Ministry, Aging, and Dementia.”

Dr. McDonald first became interested in this topic in the late ‘90s when she was working for the Red Cross in Australia. Her boss, a retired army colonel, was not a Christian but began asking tough questions about God when his wife’s mind quickly deteriorated from dementia.

“What kind of a God do you believe in that could do this to my wife?” he would ask, or “Why is this happening?” and “Who is she and where has she gone?” It was very hard to watch and got Suzanne thinking about what it would mean to walk well with someone going through this.

Her colonel friend, Walt, eventually did become a believer in Christ, in no small part because of how Suzanne and others surrounded him and his wife, Pearl, with love during that time. It was such a powerful experience for Suzanne that she went on to complete Clinical Pastoral Education in a dementia ward in England.

Her series, “Dealing Faithfully with Dementia,” is for congregations and pastors who want to be faithful to God and the Gospel, and also faithful to the very difficult realities of the disease, as they walk beside those with dementia and their caregivers.

It is important to give people space to lament and not move too quickly to oh, it’s all ok because of Jesus.

“Dementia can be devastating,” she says, “but we have in the scriptures and in our theology ways of talking about it that acknowledge the pain and also the presence and work of God in the midst of it all.”

Her series for churches looks at Holy Saturday (the day between Good Friday and Easter Sunday) as a theological space that mirrors dementia. The disciples did not know on that day that the story would end in Christ’s resurrection.

Those walking the dementia road can say that in Christ all will be well in the end, she explains, but for now there is no cure and in the later stages, there are only occasional glimpses of who the person is.

Dr. McDonald calls these “resurrection moments” when there’s a flash of remembrance.

She recalls a woman who had been married to her husband for 50 years but didn’t recognize him at all. Then one day, he came to see her all dressed up in a suit and wearing a very strong aftershave.

As soon as she smelled it, she sat bolt upright and said, “Harry! Where are you taking me tonight?”
The Van Raalte Fellowship is a new partnership between Western Theological Seminary, 3sixty ministries (a community development non-profit), Pillar Church, and All Saints Anglican Church. The two-year fellowship allows students to earn internship credit, participate in a mentored peer group, and worship with Pillar Church and All Saints Anglican Church while helping to connect the church with opportunities for justice in the city of Holland.

Three of this year’s Van Raalte Fellows are first-year seminary students Alisha Riepma, Katie Alley, and Leah Wielenga. A week in the life of a Van Raalte Fellow involves attending classes at WTS, meeting in a peer group and individually with Rev. Jenna Brandsen ’15, pastor of formation for mission at Pillar Church, and having lots of conversations with community members and neighbors. At least once a week, the fellows eat at the Community Kitchen at WTS. On Sundays, they work as interns at Pillar Church, and Katie helps with the children’s ministry. They can also attend morning and evening prayers at All Saints Anglican Church throughout the week.

Every other Sunday, the fellows host dinner at Alisha’s house, inviting members of the Holland community to eat with them. Recently they were joined by two Holland police officers and got to hear about their experience in the city. Another evening, they invited a student who lives at the Friendship House to talk about intentional communities at the seminary. Soon they hope to invite a woman who has her MSW and is living in low-income housing doing grassroots social work in Holland.

Their goal is “to live outward-focused lives.” An important focus of the internship is living right in the neighborhood they serve. Each week they walk through the city and pray to have conversations with their neighbors.

“Something has changed within me to expect conversations with people, to seek out those conversations, and to find ways that I can really know my neighbors,” shares Leah.

One of these conversations happened when Leah noticed a neighbor sweeping up a broken bottle on the sidewalk. She stopped to chat and he explained that when underage drinkers don’t want to get caught with an open container, they throw it out of their car. In the past year, three neighborhood dogs had to be put down because of serious infections in their cut paws.

She quickly discovered that her new friend, Ed, was the neighborhood go-to-guy. He pointed out who lived where and...
shared that he used to make pots of coffee for the police officers and firemen in the area who would come and chat in his driveway. One time, he helped a woman who was being harassed. He already knew the police were looking for a suspect who had harassed other women, so he was able to put her in contact with them to help catch the guy.

“Community development is not about always having big plans and big goals,” explains Leah. “It’s about knowing what matters to people and knowing what people have to offer and care to invest.”

The fellows’ goal is to connect people to their communities and specifically to help the church connect to the city in a real, meaningful way.

“It’s like there are underground cords connecting people already, but they just don’t know they’re there. It’s our job to unearth them,” Leah shares.

One way Katie gets to know her neighborhood is by walking everywhere she goes and shopping at the stores closest to her home. That way she makes sure her mind is always focused on who the people are around her.

This internship has caused Katie to form friendships with neighbors like the greeters at her local Meijer store, the workers at Kilwins where she gets a weekly ice cream cone, and her mailman.

“Being in an internship that says, ‘your job is to notice’ has changed my mindset to recognize that these are members of my community who are often overlooked, they are my neighbors, and I benefit from their work, so I want to know them,” she explains.

Alisha has noticed that topics from her classes at WTS spill over into her life as a Van Raalte Fellow. Whether at church or in a conversation at the Community Kitchen, she has “a good theological framework.”

For Katie, the internship has stripped away a lot of preconceived notions about people and has caused her to ask different questions in class.

Because the fellowship is so new, there is a lot of openness and flexibility for the fellows to explore different passions. Katie has developed a passion for one-on-one connections that have led her to pursue chaplaincy. She is working with Jenna to visit shut-ins through Pillar Church. Leah is realizing that it is easy for her to connect with people who are more “rough around the edges.” She hopes to use her passion for drama and improv to plan some improv workshops in the community. Alisha is thinking deeply about what church could look like with a more community-oriented mindset.

Katie recommends the internship for students who feel called but don’t know what they want to do yet, because it allows the chance to converse with lots of different people and be involved in different types of ministry.

“The leadership has been really excellent. I feel like we are learning from people who genuinely care about us, and the city, and the church,” Katie shares.

Above all, the fellows are humbled by the work God is already doing in the city of Holland.

“It’s so easy to think I’m going to bring Jesus into the Community Kitchen, and then I’ve been so surprised and proven wrong that Jesus is already there,” shares Katie. “Every time we sit and eat with some new friends, I think, ‘maybe this person doesn’t know the Lord,’ but then we start having conversations and they know more about the Bible than we do! Or they invite us to church! It’s like a really beautiful un-learning of things, where God keeps showing me where I’ve been wrong the whole time. It’s been exciting and so humbling.”

“It’s not enjoyable in the moment to be wrong,” agrees Alisha, “But later it’s enjoyable to know that God is so much bigger than what I perceive things to be, and He’s at work everywhere and in ways more expansive than I imagine.”
Here at Western Theological Seminary we make a big deal out of our daily worship. It might surprise you to learn that we are one of the few seminaries left that still worships as a community every single day. We believe worship forms us over time in mysterious ways we can scarcely understand.

I want you to come with me to the two-story colonial home where Nancy and I live, just a few blocks south of the seminary. There we are having a dinner, hosting six of our best friends over the last 25 years. Come and get to know these good people; look into their faces, listen in on their conversations, and feel the texture of relationships that have kept us together through thick and thin since before Ronald Reagan was President. Just stand quietly in the corner of the dining room and take it all in, because it strikes me as a kind of living commentary on what worshipping the living God in a Reformed way can do for you.

Sitting directly across from me is Jack Smith (I won’t use any real names in this article). Jack and I graduated from college together and went off to different graduate schools. When I graduated from seminary with the right to be a minister of Word and Sacrament, Jack graduated with an MBA and what seemed to be a license to print money. He has become fabulously wealthy, not unlike many who made fortunes in the 80s and 90s. What singles Jack out is that somewhere along the line he stopped asking the question, “How much of my fortune should I give away to good causes?” and started asking, “How much of what God has given me do I have the right to keep?” If you asked where he learned to do this, he’ll tell you that it dawned on him after hearing—Sunday in and Sunday out!—“Let us return our tithes and offerings to the Lord!”

Sitting next to Nancy is Lynn. While giving birth to her third child—right in the very act of offering life—she was stricken with a debilitating stroke. The baby survived and so did she, but her life would never be the same. She would never change that baby’s diapers or dance with her husband again. At one point in the evening while we were discussing “the good old days at Christ Memorial Church,” Lynn said to me, “You know, Tim, my favorite moment in our worship services was always right at the beginning when you would lift your arms in the air and say, ‘Grace to you and peace in the name of the Lord Jesus!’ When I hear those words my heart almost stops and I know that while I may never understand why all of this happened to me, I do know that our gracious God does know and, frankly, that’s all I need.”

Sitting opposite of each other are the Holts and the Newhouses. Dr. Holt teaches at Hope College and had an Obama/Biden bumper sticker on his car a few presidential elections ago. Mr. Newhouse is a successful realtor in Holland, and he and his wife had TWO Bush/Cheney posters in their front yard during the same election. At one point the conversation turned to politics and heated up a little bit—and I thought, “Oh no! My party is going to tank!”—but then, mysteriously, the Holts and the Newhouses shifted effortlessly from American politics and their striking differences to their heavenly citizenship and the one thing that will join them together forever.

At the end of the night, Nancy read several Psalms from Eugene Peterson’s The Message and we all held hands and prayed—prayed for our kids and grandkids, prayed for one another, and prayed for our world. We ended with the Lord’s Prayer and tears!

That’s why we make a big fuss over daily worship here!
Each time *The Commons* comes out, I read it with great interest. What an extensive program the seminary has now with a variety of faculty and students! When I graduated from seminary in 1946, we had 30 students and six male faculty, and that was the entire school.

I recall when I was a student pastor for a summer on the western prairies of Alberta, Canada, during World War II, gasoline and cars were scarce, so I was provided with a horse to do my church work. Is there another pastor in the RCA who had to use a horse to do visitation? I first had to catch the horse in a 40 acre pasture and saddle it!

During my three years at seminary, tuition was free to students, as well as our single dorm rooms in Zwemer Hall. My expenses for my last year amounted to $200-300, and I graduated debt free.

However, my first salary in a small western New York church was only $1,700 for the year. Newly married, Dorothy and I discovered what poverty was like. We were so poor that I took the janitor’s job also at $200 per year. At the parsonage I shoveled coal to keep the furnace warm and there were about 30 grass snakes in the very damp basement, plus rats and lots of mice. There were even mice living in the piano, eating the glue.

Our 1.5 volt battery phone had to be cranked to use, and we had eleven families on the same line. All of our phones rang any time one of us got a phone call. No privacy!

We celebrated the 100th anniversary of the church when we were there. One hundred years old and still no inside bathroom. You had to wade through three feet of snow to use the outhouse.

I begged to have a sign with the name of the church on the outside of the building, and the response was, “What for? Everyone knows what church it is.”

Unlike today, at that time the church had no interest in missions, benevolences or social problems. When I suggested we support some, the response was, “We take care of ourselves. Let others take care of themselves.”

Back then, churches were not always so accepting of differences. A young man from the church wanted to marry a girl who came from a non-Christian, broken home. His parents were against it and refused to come to the wedding, as did the rest of the congregation. Dorothy and I made the service as meaningful as possible and had them over to the parsonage for wedding cake. Regardless of their treatment at the hands of the congregation, both of them came to church faithfully, and the wife took several leadership roles. They have been married 60 years now and still write us every Christmas.

Dorothy recalls several weddings I performed over the years that were especially memorable. In one, the wedding party came late and the organist never did show up, so Dorothy had to leave our small children in the pew and fill in. Afterward, there was a police car waiting outside. Turns out the organist was in trouble with the law... which explains why she didn’t show up!

At another, the bride was already pregnant. Some of you may not know this song, but she wanted it sung in the sanctuary at their wedding: “You Made Me Love You. I Didn’t Want to Do it.” I talked her out of that.

I am now 95, and my wife is 94. We are both quite well and live in our own home. In fact, my eyesight is excellent and I feel so good that I bought a brand new car in 2015. A friend of my son said that was the biggest act of optimism he had heard of in a long time.
After nearly 24 years of service, Pat Dykhuis retired in January from her position as registrar and financial aid administrator. Pat began working in 1993 supporting the Christian Ministry Field, Placement and Recruitment. In 1995, she became the registrar and assistant to the Dean of Faculty. During Pat’s early years at WTS, enrollment hovered in the low 100s (today it is 275). Responding to tremendous growth and change has been a continuous thread woven into her work.

Tiffany Nordé takes Pat’s place as registrar and financial aid administrator. Her experience ranges from Spanish teacher, financial aid representative, mentor specialist and program coordinator. She was an urban cohort mentor and tutor at Grand Rapids Theological Seminary. Tiffany has an MA in intercultural ministry and is currently enrolled in our Doctor of Ministry program.

Kindred Youth Ministry has named Amplifying Our Witness by Ben Conner, associate professor of Christian discipleship, as one of the 11 books every youth leader should read. “With almost 20% of adolescents having some sort of developmental disability...Conner helps us re-imagine what it could mean to be a church that offers hospitality and friendship to every kid out there.”

Robert Van Voorst, professor of New Testament, was interviewed by the Dutch scientific website Scientias on the question, “Did Jesus really exist?” An article by Caroline Kraaijvanger drawing on this interview was published in Scientias’ online magazine in December 2016 and can be read at Scientias.nl/jezus-echt-bestaan/.

Chuck DeGroat, professor of counseling and pastoral care, has written Falling into Goodness, six weeks of daily readings for Lent. Find it at: createspace.com/6805899

J. Todd Billings, the Gordon H. Girod research professor of Reformed theology, offers a new video series on interpreting scripture in the Reformed tradition. It is designed for three-part discussions on a congregational or class level. Go to rca.org and search for “A Light to My Path: Interpreting Scripture as Reformed Christians.”

The seminary community mourns the loss of Jim Piersma, manager of the Community Kitchen at WTS for the last 12 years. Jim passed away unexpectedly on February 23. Our prayers are with his wife, Amy, and their five children and seven grandchildren, as well as the Community Action House staff, patrons and volunteers.

Congratulations!

Western Theological Seminary is proud to announce that Kristen Deede Johnson’s book was chosen for Christianity Today’s 2017 Book Awards, given to the books most likely to shape evangelical life, thought and culture. In the category of Politics/Public Life, The Justice Calling: Where Passion Meets Perseverance by Bethany Hanke Hoang and Kristen Deede Johnson was praised for being “part manifesto, part theology, part call to action.” The book “paints a beautiful portrait of justice and righteousness as inextricably woven into the life of a faithful Christian.” Dr. Johnson is associate professor of theology and Christian formation at WTS.

On March 9-10, Dr. Johnson got the opportunity to speak about her book and various aspects of justice at several events spanning a two day visit to Whitworth University in Spokane, WA. She was also one of three keynote speakers at “Hope for Restoration: Radical Hospitality and Prison Reform,” a day-long conference on restorative justice on March 4 at Hope College. The conference was conceived and organized by inmates from the Richard A. Handlon Correctional Facility in Ionia, MI, who were able to watch recordings of it later.

Speaking Engagements:

March 19 & 26 Suzanne McDonald, "Dealing Faithfully With Dementia," Second Christian Reformed Church, Grand Haven, MI
March 24-25 Ben Conner, Accessibility Summit, McLean Bible Church, Washington, DC
March 26 Chuck DeGroat, Christ Community Church, Chicago, IL
April 2 Tim Brown, Lost Tree Chapel, North Palm Beach, FL
April 20 J. Todd Billings (and panel) “Resurrection Hope in Difficult Funerals,” WTS, Holland, MI
April 21-22 Chuck DeGroat, Retreat for 2200Arch Counseling and Liberti Church, Philadelphia, PA
April 27 Ben Conner, Grove City College, Chapel and Lecture, “Fostering Conversations about Disability and the Church”
April 30 Tim Brown & Chuck DeGroat, Twin Falls Reformed, ID
June 5-8 Ben Conner, Summer Institute on Theology and Disability, Azusa Pacific University, “Youth Ministry and Disability”
June 15-18 Ben Conner, Luther Theological Seminary, “Disability Medicine and Youth” Lecture Series with John Swintons
Generous Grant will Further Work in Disability and Ministry

In November of 2016, Western Theological Seminary was awarded a $425,000 grant from the Henry Luce Foundation. Established by Henry R. Luce, co-founder and editor-in-chief of Time Inc., the Luce Foundation offers grants in eight program areas including one whose focus is theology. WTS was among six institutions selected from a large field of competitors to receive an inaugural grant from the Luce Fund for Theological Education.

The seminary's approved project—Enabling Theological Education: Preparing the Next Generation of Christian Leaders—Presence, Intention, and Dimension for Ministry to, with, and by People with Disabilities—will expand Western Theological Seminary's pioneering work in disability and ministry.

The seminary's efforts in disability and ministry began a decade ago with the addition of the Ralph & Cheryl Schregardus Friendship House, the on-campus residence where seminary students live with young adults from the community who have cognitive impairments. It has yielded such positive effects that interest grew to extend the impact of the Friendship House into the seminary curriculum.

In the fall of 2016, WTS launched a Graduate Certificate in Disability and Ministry (GCDM) program—the first of its kind in theological education. The GCDM provides students the knowledge and skills to lead congregations and ministries in ways that are attuned to and inclusive of the gifts and perspectives of people with disabilities.

Last May, the seminary also partnered with Hope College in serving as a co-host of the Summer Institute on Theology and Disability. The grant from the Henry Luce Foundation provides opportunity for the momentum around disability and ministry to grow.

Initial activity will focus on readying the seminary for future aspects of the project. An accessibility audit will determine what additions or changes are needed to our physical and educational environment so that we are hospitable to persons with disabilities. The audit will not only examine our physical classrooms but also review our learning management system and distance learning platforms. Once the support structures are in place, we can launch the key activities of the project.

In the fall of 2018, Western Theological Seminary will inaugurate an annual symposium and lectureship focused on disability and ministry. The two-day event will feature a keynote speaker and workshops for attendees.

Additionally, the seminary intends to spend a portion of the grant to hire visiting professors, preferably people with disabilities, to strengthen both faculty competency in disability studies and the GCDM program. WTS will also develop an adjunct professor base of instructors who have expertise in disability and ministry.

Dr. Ben Conner, associate professor of Christian discipleship and director of the GCDM program, will assume leadership for the implementation of the grant. He is eager to move the seminary forward in its commitment to disability and ministry.

Conner, an experienced scholar and leader in theology and disability, believes this is a necessary and often-neglected ministry focus in both the seminary and the greater church. As he noted in the grant’s proposal, “People with disabilities are the largest minority group in the United States. It is an open group which most people enter against their will; a group that includes people from every class, ethnicity, and economic circumstance.”

WTS looks forward to the opportunities the Luce Foundation Grant will provide to expand this important ministry focus at the seminary.

News of Another Grant

Melissa Conner, director of the Ralph & Cheryl Schregardus Friendship House at WTS, also directs Renew Therapeutic Riding Center in Holland. The center provides equine assisted activities and therapies to children and adults with physical, cognitive and emotional disabilities. Four of the six friends living at Friendship House take lessons there.

Last December, Renew Therapeutic Riding Center was awarded $20,000 from the local Women Who Care group. The money will fund public school special education students to participate in activities at Renew.

WTS students enrolled in Dr. Ben Conner’s “Ministry and Margins” course take a field trip to Renew to observe lessons. Also, several WTS students volunteer at Renew and one of them aspires to earn instructor certification.

Melissa’s work at Renew wonderfully complements the efforts of WTS in disability and ministry.
We were halfway around the world sitting at a conference table listening to stories and concerns that sounded so familiar, it was as if we were sitting at grandma’s kitchen table having similar conversations. I found this to be the case many times on our intercultural immersion trip to Oman. Over and over again we had moments when we realized that we have far more in common with the people of Oman and with Muslim/Arab Culture than differences.

I was blessed to travel to Oman with thirteen other students from Western, along with our professor, Dr. John Brogan. For a majority of our trip we stayed at the Al Amana Centre in Muscat, Oman. The center is in an older area of Muscat known as Mutrah. It was a great neighborhood to call home. It was just a short walk from the corniche, the road that winds along the harbor, which gave us a great view of the Gulf of Oman. We were also just a short stroll from the souq, which is a traditional market filled with many shops.

The Reformed Church in America has had a missionary presence in Oman since the late 1800s. The RCA built hospitals and schools in the Middle East before oil was discovered, and the RCA is still beloved in Oman. The country of Oman presents a unique missionary scenario in that proselytizing is illegal for all religions, including Islam. The Al Amana Centre, led by Acting Director Justin Meyers ’03 and newly appointed Director Aaro Rytkönen, continues the work of the RCA by trying to bring together religions and cultures to further the common good and create open and peaceful dialogue.

We spent much of our time traveling to different locations throughout Oman, which is a stunningly beautiful country. We hiked in the mountains, visited an ancient village, swam at the Wadi Shab, and even stayed overnight in a Bedouin camp in the desert. We were able to see the national museum, tour an historic fort in Nizwa, and visit two mosques. One of the mosques was built in the 1500s, and the other was the stunning Grand Mosque in Muscat. Oman is an easy place to fall in love with.

Despite all the great places we were able to experience and the unique bits of culture we took part in, it was the Omani people who will remain forever in my memory. It was the hospitality of Shah, who owns a shop in the souq filled with the most beautiful cashmere scarves you have ever laid eyes on and woven carpets that are stunning works of art. Shah greeted us warmly every time we stepped into his shop, ran to get us chai (sweetened tea), and made sure we were all comfortable. We spent several of our evenings just relaxing in Shah’s shop and processing the day. If any of us wanted to buy from another shop in the souq, he would accompany us to make sure we were getting the best deal possible. Shah could not have been more generous with his own prices. We bought many scarves and other gifts from him, and I would be surprised if he made any profit from us. Shah’s generosity and hospitality with be forever etched in my memory.

Saba was one of the last people we had a chance to meet. She runs an organization that helps young children with mental and physical disabilities in Muscat. She is a native Omani who grew up in Muscat and went to college and graduate school in the United
States. She had great perspectives about her faith—and her passion for helping those with disabilities was contagious—but it was her wisdom about the concerns the Omani people have for their quickly changing culture that hit me. It was at this moment that I felt as if I was at my grandmother’s table. I was made more aware that so much of what we desire and fear as humans is the same, no matter if we are from the U.S. or Oman.

The number of people who made an impact on me is far too great to describe here, but I quickly realized on our trip that we have far more in common individually and societally than one could ever imagine. Yes, many of us have different theologies and political views, but when it comes down to it, we celebrate many of the same joys in life and we share many of the same concerns. We want our friends and family to be safe. We want a roof over our heads and clothes on our back. We want our societies to thrive. I learned that we must celebrate the 99% of life that we agree on instead of the 1% where we disagree.

Our current moment in history is full of contention and disagreement. This is especially true when it come to dialogue about Christian/Muslim relations and cultural differences between the U.S. and the Arab world. Our trip to Oman humanized this dialogue for me and made me realize our first instinct in these discussions and conflicts should be to recognize that the “others” we are talking about are human just like us. These humans are children of God just like you and I are. This is a lesson I will never forget. We truly are all the same.

I feel the call of Jesus more strongly than ever to fight against injustice and to join God in the work of reconciliation. Our trip was brief and I am not going to pretend I am an expert in the Muslim faith or in Arab culture, but I will be quick to share the stories of the people we met and the great lessons I learned from them. —MS

Western’s M.Div. students travel to other cultural contexts to experience the diverse character of the church’s witness and mission. These trips present students with problems and opportunities posed by cultural differences, secularism, social fragmentation, religious pluralism, and ecumenism. This year’s trips included Oman, the U.S.-Mexico border, and Israel.
Renewing Resurrection Hope in a Medical Age

Dr. J. Todd Billings has noticed a major theme as he talks with recent graduates and young pastors: they are uncertain how to address death and dying within their congregations.

This is a topic close to Dr. Billings, as he lives with multiple myeloma, a rare and incurable form of blood cancer.

Last year, Dr. Billings, the Gordon H. Girod research professor of Reformed theology at WTS, received a $25,000 grant from the Louisville Institute to research “Congregational Life and the Dying: Renewing Resurrection Hope in a Medical Age.”

“Pastors encounter a lot of pastoral and theological conundrums,” he explains. “For example, people often want the memorial service to focus on the life of the person, almost making that person a hero. Sometimes they even request that the pastor not use the word ‘death.’”

Theologically, a funeral is meant as a witness to Christ’s resurrection, and it relates to the whole Christian life. “Are we living as mortal creatures before God? Or are we always pushing death to the sidelines, both in our culture and in our church and worship?” Dr. Billings asks.

The one year grant includes three learning colloquies with pastors participating in the project. Two have taken place and the third will be in Holland on April 20. Part of it involves a panel discussion which will be open to the public: “Resurrection Hope in Difficult Funerals.”

The pastors participating in the grant complete readings and meet with hospice workers, theologians and biblical scholars. They discuss and apply these findings to pastoral ministry, and each writes an article on his or her research.

Co-pastors Noah and Kristen Livingston ’11 of Abbe Reformed Church in Clymer, NY are participating in the study, and Noah has published “Saving the Funeral from an Untimely Death” in the CTPastors section of Christianity Today online. Rev. Ann Conklin ’09 of Eastminster Presbyterian Church in Grand Rapids, MI wrote “Dying Alone” in the February 2017 issue of Presbyterian Outlook.

Dr. Billings plans to write his next book on the topic, hoping that by learning together with pastors, his writing can speak into the congregational and theological challenges they face.

The October colloquy was on Ars Moriendi or the “Art of Dying,” and featured a panel of Dr. J. Todd Billings, Rev. Ann Conklin, Rev. Richard Brooks of Allegiance Health Hospice, and John Sikorski, a Roman Catholic doctoral student. They discussed the medieval Christian set of practices to prepare for death—which, in our day, has been replaced with medical decisions.

As death nears, family members become overly concerned with making sure everything is being tried. They realize too late that this was their final chapter to share with their loved one.

A study done by the highly regarded Dana-Farber Cancer Institute shows that people who identified themselves as “highly religious” were over three times more likely to seek aggressive end of life care. They found that people wanted to hold on as long as possible to give God every opportunity to grant a miracle and save them. Anything less felt like giving up on God before he had given up on them. However, the study found that those who sought extreme measures did not live any longer than those who didn’t.

“These are assumptions about the way God works,” Dr. Billings says. “Part of my motivation for this research is that the whole problem is one of Christian formation, not just the final weeks of life.”

Dr. Billings’s own cancer diagnosis has led him to question how people are being formed spiritually to think through their mortality. The daily pain and fatigue associated with his ongoing chemotherapy treatments are a constant reminder of that mortality.

“We tend to live as if we have no end, and that can short-circuit our accountability to God and others,” he says. “Psalm 90 says, Teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom. A part of gaining a heart of wisdom is realizing how small we are and that we are mortal.”

For the pastors studying this topic, it’s not a question of whether they will have an experience around death and dying—they will. This grant is providing a community to process alongside them in the context of their faith and of scripture.

“If dying to our own sinful impulses is a part of our daily life, then we can see how the whole Christian life is about both dying and tasting life in Christ,” Dr. Billings says. “The whole Christian life involves both lament and hope. The greatest need is for pastors and the Christian community to integrate our mortality into the Gospel message that we proclaim.”

Project Participants

J. Todd Billings Holland, MI
Ann Conklin Grand Rapids, MI
Katlyn DeVries Holland, MI
Travis Else Sioux Center, IA
Tyler Johnson Arizona
Phil Letizia Wilton Manors, FL
Noah & Kristen Livingston Clymer, NY

Video of Oct. ’16 event is available at: vimeo.com/187663200

THE COMMONS, MARCH 2017
News

Matthew Floding ’96 (DMin), director of ministerial formation at Duke Divinity School, announces the publication of Engage, a theological field education toolkit. Kyle Small, dean of formation at WTS, contributed a chapter to the book.

On October 8, 2016, Lindsey De Kruijf ’11, ’12 (ThM) married Stephen Dukenski. A month later she began serving as the minister of the Helderberg Reformed Church in Guilderland Center, NY.

Stephen ’13 and Olga ’13 Shaffer announce the birth of Moriah Lynn on November 7, 2016. She joins big brother, Elijah. The Shaffers are co-pastors at Reformed Church of Stout, Stout, IA.

Stacey Sterkenburg ’14 and Adam Bump were married in Hawaii on October 7, 2016. They are living in Owosso, MI, where Stacey is ordained as a specialized minister with SW Michigan Classis and working at Shiawassee County Community Mental Health.

Sarah Juist ’15 has begun serving as pastor of Hanover Presbyterian Church (PCUSA) in Hanover, OH.

On November 13, 2016 Barb Sanders ’15 was ordained at Fellowship Christian Reformed Church in Grandville, MI, where she serves as pastor of discipleship and education.

On January 29, Izzy Rhodes ’16 was ordained into her position as a crisis chaplain for Holland Hospital at Pillar Church in Holland, MI. Izzy also serves as Local Mission Program Specialist for the Reformed Church in America.

Alumni/alumnae Day: May 8, 2017

Contact: Tamara Buikema at 616-392-8555, x109 or tamara@westernsem.edu

11:45 Luncheons for 40th & 50th reunions (Classes of ’67 and ’77) Luncheons are $10/person. An invitation packet will arrive in April.

1:30 Presentation by Commencement Speaker Dr. Miroslav Volf, Director of the Yale Center for Faith and Culture at Yale University

5:00 Alumni/alumnae Banquet in the Western Theological Seminary Commons honoring Distinguished Alum Samuel Solvan ’76. Dinner is $20/person.

7:30 Class of 2017 Commencement held in Dimnent Chapel, Hope College No tickets are needed to attend; doors open at 6:45pm.

Alumni/alumnae Day: May 8, 2017

On November 13, 2016, a special graduation ceremony was held for David Randall “Randy” Gabrielse, who earned his Certificate in Urban Pastoral Ministry but will be unable to come to the commencement service in May due to a serious illness. Randy’s wife, Karen, was present, along with family, friends, and his pastor, Jay Blankespoor of Boston Square Christian Reformed Church, Grand Rapids, MI.

Pictured with Randy are WTS representatives: Dr. Sue Rozeboom, Glenn Swier (director of the GCUPM program) and Dr. Alvin Padilla.
President Brown’s regular column is a bit longer this issue and can be found on page 4. I’m pinch-hitting on the back page this time and am privileged to invite you into this issue of The Commons.

The breadth and depth of Western’s ministry is uniquely featured in these pages. You may start reading at the beginning, but I’d suggest you instead begin by reading from our oldest living alumnus, the Rev. Wallace Stoepker, on page 5. His account provides a wonderful lens to view the rest of this issue through—whether it is the stories about our recent Intercultural Immersion trip to Oman, the work Suzanne McDonald is doing educating the church about dementia, Ben Conner’s groundbreaking work in disability and ministry, the important research Todd Billings is doing with pastors around issues of death and dying, or a new neighborhood-focused internship for our students in Holland. The list goes on and on of fascinating aspects of our life at Western Theological Seminary.

The thread that ties this together is you. You make Western possible! I hope as you read these pages you’ll feel a sense of satisfaction—your gifts allow Western to prepare Christians called by God to lead the church in mission. The variety and challenge of that work is beautifully illustrated in these pages. Enjoy!

With gratitude,