

the messenger

Mid-America Reformed Seminary

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years

1981-2021

p. 7: The Lord Provides: Forty Years of God's Faithfulness

THE PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE:

“A TIME OF REMEMBRANCE AND ANTICIPATION”



“Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us, and establish the work of our hands upon us; yes, establish the work of our hands!” (Psalm 90:17)

This issue of *The Messenger* includes a feature article on the 40th anniversary of Mid-America Reformed Seminary. Within God’s providence, anniversaries provide a unique opportunity to reflect upon the past, to consider the challenges of the present, and to anticipate the future. We need to remember our past, particularly the occasion of the Seminary’s founding. But we also need to be reflective about our present; where do we find ourselves at this moment? And we need to ponder what our future might be by God’s leading. To put the matter prosaically, our anniversary calls for a retrospective, introspective, and a prospective view of the Seminary’s history and ministry.

When we consider Mid-America’s past, especially its founding and early years, it is tempting to focus upon the ecclesiastical controversy out of which the Seminary emerged. Though there is a proper place and time for such a focus, I believe our primary focus should be upon the founders’ *vision* for Mid-America. That vision included the following components: a whole-hearted commitment to the inspiration, infallibility, and authority of the Word of God; a similar commitment to the riches of the Reformed faith as these are set forth in the confessions; a classical theological curriculum, including the study of the original languages, the history of the church’s engagement with Scripture, doctrinal studies, and ministerial studies; a close relationship between the Seminary and the churches; an integration of academic study and ministerial practice by means of a Ministerial Apprenticeship Program; and special attention to preparing students to be faithful expositors of the Word of God.

The aim of the Seminary’s founders was to establish a school that would serve the church of Jesus Christ by a course of training that combined biblical-confessional fidelity with a pastoral-ministerial emphasis. Because the work of the ministry is pastoral in nature and finds its principal expression in the preaching of the Word of God, Mid-America was founded to be an academy that would provide its students with the tools—academic and practical—that are required for the task. Undoubtedly, Mid-America has not always lived up to this vision. But the vision of the founders was a good one, and we can be thankful that the Lord has provided for and enabled it to be carried out—for forty years!

When we consider Mid-America’s present circumstance, we can be grateful that the original vision still lives. That in itself is no small thing. Early on in my teaching at Mid-America, I read that the “half-life” of a seminary is approximately fifty years. If that were true, we would only be good for another decade, like the grass that withers and the flower that fades! However, as I look at the Seminary today, the original vision continues to shape our work. No doubt, some significant changes have occurred: the Seminary relocated from Northwest Iowa to Northwest Indiana and the greater Chicago area; new faculty and staff members have been appointed; the circle of churches—Reformed and Presbyterian—that look to the Seminary for the training of their future ministers has enlarged; the student body has grown and become more diverse; and the Board of Trustees recently approved an initiative to establish a Mission Training Institute at the Seminary in order to better prepare our students for the ministry in an increasingly secular world. But the most important things remain the same: our biblical and confessional commitments, our academic and vocational focus; our desire to serve the churches with whom we are partnered; and the continued generosity and loyalty of a faithful constituency.

As to the future, we must be careful not to presume upon the Lord’s continued favor. Even if we remain steadfast in our work and commitment, even if we redouble our efforts to do our best in the ministry to which we are called—even then our future lies entirely in the Lord’s hands. Our best efforts do not guarantee His blessing (cf. Psalm 127). Nor, certainly, do they “merit” His favor. Like Moses, the man of God—as he remembered God’s dealings with His people, Israel, in the past and in the present—our anticipation for the future should lead us to pray: “Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us, and establish the work of our hands upon us; yes, establish the work of our hands!”

Dr. Cornelis P. Venema
President of Mid-America Reformed Seminary

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MESSAGE FROM THE EDITOR

Do you like looking back? Do you ever blow the dust off old family photo albums and settle into a few moments of “can you believe Dad used to wear that?” And “Wow, look how new the car was back then!” Not that you want to stay stuck in the past, but it’s nice to visit once in a while. In the pages that follow, you’ll be escorted back in time – 40 years ago to be precise. Back in 1981, Ronald Reagan was president. It was a time of leg warmers, spandex, and big – really big – permed hair. It was also the time Mid-America Reformed Seminary began. Glenda Mathes takes you on this journey in this edition’s feature article. The Lord provided for us then, and He continues to provide for us today. We are preparing to graduate another capable class, and welcome back last year’s class, who missed out on a commencement ceremony due to the newly discovered Coronavirus. This issue takes you from past to present, and we’ve enjoyed our Lord’s good providences all along the way. Thanks for reading!



Michael Deckinga
Vice President of Advancement

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Michael Deckinga, Vice-President of Advancement

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Our Mission

Mid-America Reformed Seminary seeks to serve Christ and His church by assisting in the formation and preparation of servants for the Kingdom of God. Our primary purpose is to train men for the gospel ministry of Jesus Christ. Guided by this focus, we are also committed to providing solid theological training for others among God’s people whose life calling may be enhanced by theological education.

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DEVELOPMENT REPORT: “THE GLASS IS HALF FULL”

I do not suppose I have to spend much time explaining that we operate on a fiscal year from July – June. We have been over that many times. I thought about naming my article “The Half-Time Report,” but alas, I did that in 2019. I have written on the importance of supporting our work. I have written with incredible urgency when we have been in periods of deficit, and with overwhelming thanks when we have experienced times of surplus. Is this development report so different from the others I have written? The short answer is no, it is not. I must believe though, that since so many of you are invested in this institution, since so many of you have partnered with us in this important work, you want to know how it is all adding up. I suppose the only way to avoid such an update is to provide the Seminary with a gift of \$1,800,000. There would not be much progress to report on if that were the case, and you could turn the pages forward to more interesting material.

To be frank though, I enjoy updating you on what could seem like redundant information. To be in my position – to hear the stories, to hear how our work encourages you, and to see the generous responses come through the mail and our website – let’s just say I could not imagine a better line of work. To build more charts and to talk about the numbers associated with them is a real joy, a tremendous privilege. Let’s get started.

December 2020 realized the largest amount ever given at year-end since I have been working at

the Seminary. The best yet. Think about that – a global economic recession, businesses shut down all over the place, a tumultuous political landscape, and an alarming and significant pandemic – all these things could not stand in the way of our Lord moving so many generous hearts to supply for our needs. It is enough to sing the doxology. Praise God!

You will see from chart 1 that the Seminary is operating just about at budget for the first half of our fiscal year.

You may also recall from previous reports that our contributions budget is comprised of US General Fund contributions combined with monies from the Mid-America Reformed Seminary Foundation in Ontario, Canada. To show this in further detail, please consider chart 2.

A quick reminder on how the Mid-America Reformed Foundation cost share works – each month, if available, the Seminary receives \$44,000 (USD) from the Foundation. Again, that is if it is available. You can see that in the months of July, and September, it was not. The Seminary does receive less than the budgeted amount at times, but we also receive more than the budgeted \$44,000 if it is available. For example, look at December – there was enough available to draw \$88,000, making up some lost ground from earlier in the year. The Lord knows just when to provide for our needs – sometimes now, and sometimes later – but He always provides. God is so good.

Chart 1: Actual vs. Budgeted Contributions

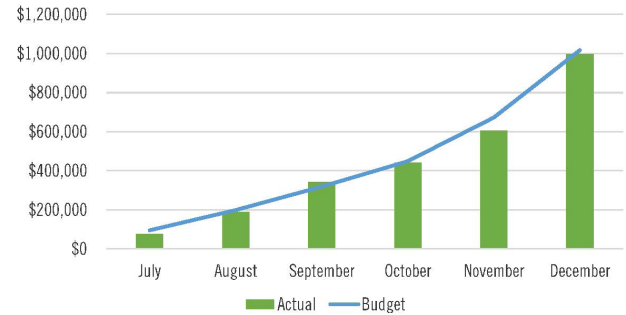


Chart 2: US General Fund Donations + Canadian Foundation Cost Share

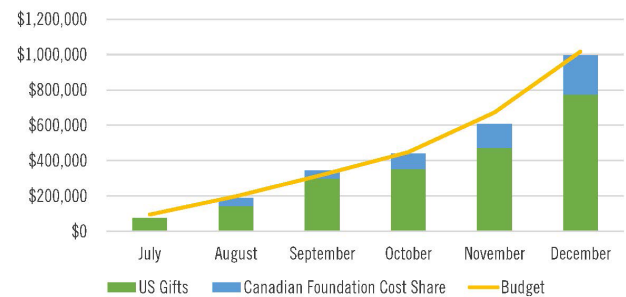
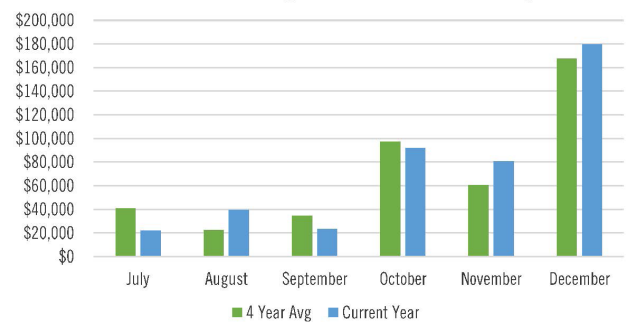


Chart 3: Canadian Giving (CAD) Current Year vs 4 Year Avg



To see our actual Canadian giving (CAD) compared to our four-year average see chart 3.

A quick synopsis of what we see here – your faithfulness and continued generosity towards us is plainly evident, and for that, we are most thankful. Stay tuned for additional ways to get involved as the year progresses in the Lord’s providence.

Michael Deckinga
Vice-President of Advancement

To make, or plan for a gift today, contact Michael Deckinga, VP of Advancement, at mdeckinga@midamerica.edu

FAMILIAR FACES AND NEW PLACES

You may recall that last year's commencement exercises did not "commence" the way we would have desired. COVID-19 no doubt impacted our plans. Being mindful of health protocols implemented by the state of Indiana, we relegated our formal graduation ceremony to a smaller communal event. Students who had been taking ZOOM classes for months found themselves invited to campus for one last time to participate in the conferral of degrees, followed by a (socially-distanced) meal. As we look to the future, however, we're happy to announce that a portion of the graduates from 2020 plan to return and join the class of 2021 in-person on the stage. This will take place, Lord willing, on May 13, 7:30 p.m. at Redeemer United Reformed Church in St. John, Indiana. The graduating class of 2021 includes the following three students:



Along with his wife, Rachel, and their two children, Hazel and Silas, **David Dick** is very grateful for the opportunity that he had to be a part of the Mid-America community over the past three

years. The friendships he and Rachel have built with classmates and their families "have been a huge blessing for us, in addition to the encouragement and support of the faculty and staff." David is particularly thankful for the instruction of each of the professors, both in and out of the classroom. In reflecting upon the Ministerial Apprenticeship Program (a requirement for M.Div students), David remarks that it was a wonderful part of his educational experience. His summer internships were spent ministering to the congregations of Borculo Christian Reformed Church in Zeeland, Michigan, and Christ Reformed Church (URCNA) in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. David has also appreciated "being able to travel to

other congregations to provide pulpit supply. I have learned much during my time at seminary and am extremely grateful to this institution for its work in preparing me for gospel ministry." After graduation, David plans on becoming a candidate in the Christian Reformed Church in North America this June, Lord willing, and looks forward to finding a call wherever the Lord may lead him and his family.



As their time at Mid-America Reformed Seminary draws to a close, **Aaron van der Heiden** and his wife Karissa and their three children (Drew, Grayson, and Anna), reflect

upon their time here. They've been richly blessed by the Seminary community and the fellowship of believers in this area. Moving from their home in Alberta, Canada was a big transition, but it was a very positive and encouraging experience. Aaron thoroughly enjoyed the education he received at Mid-America and is "grateful to the faculty for their knowledge, their insights, and their teaching ability." Additionally, he is grateful to both the faculty and the staff for their willingness to sit down, answer questions, have good theological discussions, give godly advice, hang out, and joke around as well. In Aaron's words, "At Mid-America I gained a deeper appreciation for and understanding of Scripture, a better grasp of the depths and beauty of Reformed theology, and I feel more prepared to enter into the life of ministry to which God is calling me and my family." Aaron hopes to become a candidate in the United Reformed Churches of North America in the not too distant future, but firmly believes that "our gracious God will place us exactly where we need to be for His honour and glory."



For the past three years, Mid-America's environment has fostered **James Stafford's** spiritual and vocational development. The school's "curricula have been the perfect blend of rigorous theological

instruction with pastorally sensitive hands-on training." James is thankful that the faculty have passed on their wisdom and knowledge to students from a historically grounded, confessional perspective while being sensitive to the current historical moment, "instructing us on how to think biblically about everything from the controversies of the early church right up to the present Social Justice movement." In addition to Mid-America's rigorous academic curriculum, James comments that the Seminary has been invaluable for its "bonus features: regular personal interactions with professors outside the classroom, weekly prayer with a faculty advisor, the opportunity to fill pulpits per the Seminary's Ministerial Apprenticeship Program, and a close-knit brotherhood of students encouraging one another as we pursue a call to pastoral ministry." After graduation, James and his wife Dana will be headed to Springfield, Ohio for a year-long internship with the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. They intend to assist the evangelistic outreach of a Hispanic Presbyterian congregation which meets in the building of a local OPC. Long term, James has an interest in seeing the Reformed tradition take deep roots in Latin America (and everywhere else, too) and hopes to serve in any capacity towards that end.

May God bless these men in their ministerial journey ahead!

Jared Luttjeboer
Director of Marketing

WATKINS' INTERIM COURSE: SOCIAL JUSTICE AND THE CHURCH IN REFORMED PERSPECTIVE

How should the church think about and respond to the challenges of social justice from a biblically reformed, historically informed, confessional perspective? From January 4th-8th, a group of Mid-America students and a few auditors took a class on "Social Justice and the Church in Reformed Perspective" taught by Rev. Dr. Eric Watkins, pastor of Harvest OPC in San Marcos, CA, and Instructor of Ministerial Studies at MARS.

The course was a week-long roller coaster (with very little screaming, thankfully). Days one and two focused on the biblical doctrines of justice, the image of God, the sins of oppression and racism; God's mercy demonstrated in Christ and through his church, reconciliation, and finally the church as a "colony of heaven." Days two and three focused on justice and mercy in the reformed confessions, and then looked at key documents in American

history as well as the difference between northern and southern Presbyterians on their view of slavery and how this impacted the spirituality of the church. Professor Alan Strange joined the class for this section (it was lively, to say the least!).

Day three afforded a long discussion about the church during and after the Civil Rights movement, and attention was given to the life, ministry, and legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. This set the stage for a critical review of Critical Theory and Critical Race Theory (the intellectual underpinnings of Black Lives Matters and similar movements). The final day of the course drew a number of threads together, including a discussion about the role of women in the church, the subject of abuse in the church, and resources for addressing it.

Each day of the course began with prayer and a Scripture memory and quiz. Classes were peppered with lively interaction,



questions, and practical discussions about the role of the church in addressing these challenging issues. It was a brave move for Mid-America to address this subject. Yet these issues are very much before the church, and not talking about them will not make them go away. Students in the course seemed very grateful for the reading and the opportunity to discuss the content with openness and honesty. I was grateful for the privilege to teach it.

Dr. Eric Watkins
Instructor of Ministerial Studies

EVENING CLASS ON ETHICS: CHRISTIANS LIVING IN A SIN-STAINED WORLD

This April (Thursdays, 1st, 8th, 15th, 22nd), the Lord willing, there will be an evening class at the Seminary on select topics in Christian ethics. I have had the privilege of teaching ethics at Mid-America Reformed Seminary for many years, and this class will aim, first, to lay out foundational issues for approaching Christian ethics, including principles of moral reasoning (that is, how we decide and sort out difficult moral questions). In the three weekly classes to follow, we hope to take up topics surrounding human sexuality, Christian engagement in society, and questions about truth and deception.

Foundational issues treat basic questions about love and justice, along with law and virtue. Can a moral life be characterized as mere conformity to the law? What about virtue and motivation as they pertain to moral behavior and what is morally good? Then, too, God's law, in its three uses, likewise needs to be understood if we are to avoid

legalism on the one hand and licentiousness on the other.

On the topic of human sexuality, we live in a culture that has changed radically from the 1950s. The sixties sexual revolution, coupled with many other changes in society, have worked to place Christians in an increasingly uncomfortable position in defending traditional biblical commitments to human sexuality. Some of these issues will be surveyed, even as we face as well the difficult task of trying to minister the gospel to persons who count the Christian position as archaic and backwards.

Meanwhile, there is a growing awkwardness (or concern) about how Christians should engage society and be part of public discourse. Here we hope to lay out some major paradigms presented for Christians to follow, and explain why, given our current cultural climate, we need to be circumspect in how we proceed to do this. Finally, as the last topic, we want to explore truth-telling, and particularly what it might



mean to protect neighbors from those who would use truth to do them harm. When is withholding the truth, even the use of deceit, a necessity in this sinful world? These weighty questions are all quite up-to-date as Christians seek to love God and their neighbors in the world today.

Count this as your invitation to come to the Spring 2021 evening class, in-person or online.

Dr. J. Mark Beach
Professor of Ministerial and Doctrinal Studies, Faculty Secretary & Managing Editor of MAJT

THE LORD PROVIDES: FORTY YEARS OF GOD’S FAITHFULNESS

GLENDATHES

More than forty years ago, eight pastors met weekly for fellowship at the Iron Horse restaurant in Sheldon, IA. They discussed the need to equip men for ministry with confessional awareness and gospel preaching. After several months, they decided to begin a new institution.

“One morning my phone rang,” relates Tom Vanden Heuvel, one of the pastors. “It was my mother calling from Grand Rapids.” She had read a newspaper article mentioning him in connection with a new seminary and wondered what was going on. Word of the decision had somehow reached central Michigan, where it generated opposition.

Those opposed to the idea called a public meeting in Hull, IA, which was crowded to standing room only. After speaking against the venture, they allowed comments from the audience and were peppered with questions and complaints. “Instead of crushing the movement,” Rev. Vanden Heuvel says, the meeting “added impetus and enthusiasm for the proposed new venture.”

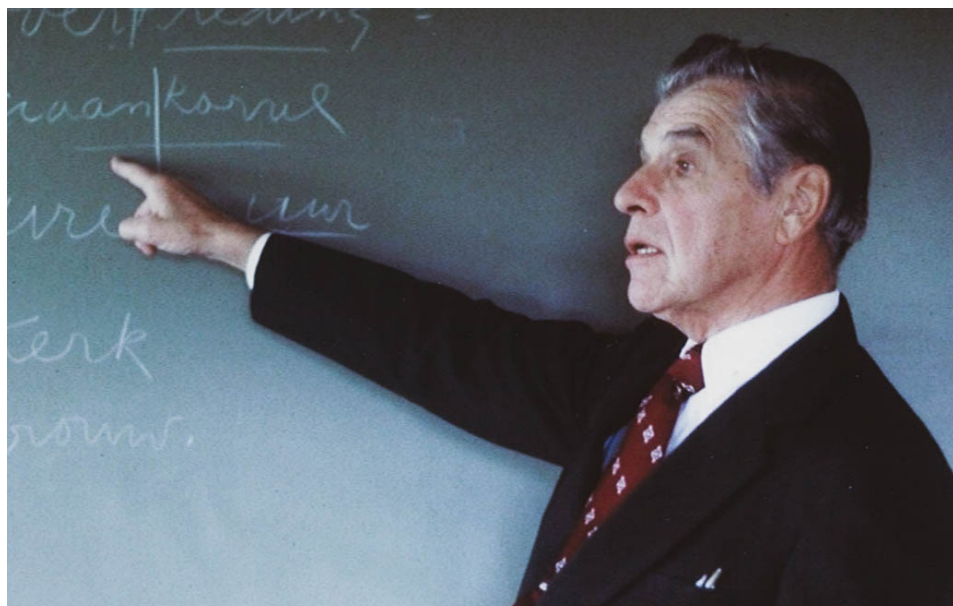
The concept became reality during 1981. A facility near Orange City came up for sale in March. An organizational meeting was held on April 21 at the Chicago O’Hare

Hilton. Seventy guests from as far as Florida and California approved the proposal for a new seminary, pledged support, and formed the Mid-America Reformed Seminary Association. The Association took possession of the Orange City property on May 29, and renovations began. Volunteers organized books for the Seminary library and cleaned the building. Hundreds packed a huge tent for the first annual Sem-Fest on September 4.

One attendee was Florence Kooiman, who signed up to volunteer two days per week, while her youngest child



Board and Faculty at Orange City location, 1981



Dr. P.Y. DeYoung, one of the first professors of Mid-America Reformed Seminary

was in Kindergarten. “The Board underestimated how much work there was to do in setting up a new school, so I spent quite a bit of time there in September. In October, Dr. P. Y. De Jong said, ‘Flo, you’re here so much, I think we should just put you on the payroll.’ That’s how I started my career at Mid-America.”

She began as Receptionist, became Executive Secretary, and went on to be Business Manager, before retiring from her position as Vice President of Administration. Over her 35-year career, Florence saw technology transition from “the electric typewriter to a word processor with floppy discs to a computer,” while filing documents went from a “metal cabinet to an invisible cloud.” Board of Trustees meetings were a highlight for her. “I was always amazed how many men gave up vacation time to attend and serve on the Board of Mid-America,” she says. “Such commitment!”

The original Board of Trustees formed an Executive Committee to oversee daily operations. Harlyn Jacobsma, who served as the Seminary’s first treasurer, recalls traveling with Tom Vanden Heuvel to meet John Sittema and Stewart Kanis (other Executive

Committee members) at a restaurant in Ft. Dodge on some Saturday mornings. Harlyn shares, “What struck me in those early years—and I think it’s still true today—is how the Lord always provided what we needed. We never got too much, but we received what was necessary.” He adds, “This was a big lesson that translated into my personal life. The Lord provides.”

Dr. P. Y. De Jong, Dr. Timothy Monsma, and Rev. Henry Vander Kam served as initial faculty when classes began on September 2, 1982. Four students entered the Seminary, with Roger Sparks and Duane Vedders graduating on May 25, 1985.

Rev. Roger Sparks (Luverne MN CRC) admits the Seminary had a few “growing pains” in those early years, but he’s glad he chose Mid-America because of its commitment to Scripture and its goal of training pastors with an emphasis on preaching and teaching the Word. “I learned to be confident, not in myself or institutions, but in the Gospel of God’s sovereign power and grace,” he says. “The Gospel has sustained me through many ups and downs of ministry.”

In January of 1983, the Board of Trustees offered an appointment to teach Old Testament studies to Rev. Mark D.

Vander Hart. “I came on board clearly as the very ‘junior’ member of the faculty,” he says. “Some of the founders of the Seminary were ministers whose ecclesiastical memories might take them back to the 1920s and 1930s. Not that they dreamed they could re-create that era (even if they had wanted to!). Rather, they believed that the best of preaching and church life back then should be encouraged and promoted today, as much as possible.”

He explains, “The Seminary started with the goal of producing men who would be strong preachers in at least two areas: redemptive-historical preaching, coupled with knowledge of, and promotion of, strong, confessional convictions. This arose out of the firm belief that the Bible was the infallible, inerrant Word of God. The sermon should be a kind of ‘event,’ in which the living Word was once again heard in the presence of the congregations of God and all who might be within ear-range.”

Although Rev. Vander Hart’s primary focus is OT studies, he was often asked to teach courses in other areas such as doctrine, church history, or ministerial studies. “By teaching outside of the Old Testament I have been personally enriched and my own knowledge was greatly enhanced. I often say, ‘The teacher benefits more than the student.’ I hope and pray this great privilege helped me in all of my own preaching and involvement in the leadership of the Reformed and Presbyterian churches.”

Rev. Vander Hart, who serves as Dean of



Florence Kooiman



Class of 1993

Students, has come to realize how difficult seminary teaching is. “Over the decades we have had students who were strong in ‘book knowledge,’ but they were somewhat lacking in ‘people skills.’ Or vice versa. Working with students who have personal or academic struggles is a great and good challenge, but it is not always easy. The goal is to teach teachable men, who in turn teach others the living Word of God and build up the faith of God’s people and work to help disciple the nations.”

Rev. Vander Hart has traveled extensively over the years to disciple ministers and lay persons in global locations, notably the Baltics and Myanmar. He also directs the Ministerial Apprenticeship Program, linking students and churches in short-term assignments for mutual benefit.

Dr. Cornelis P. Venema came on board the faculty when he accepted a position as Associate Professor of Dogmatics in 1988. He was inaugurated as President in September of 2001 and also serves as Professor of Doctrinal Studies. He has witnessed the Seminary’s service expand among NAPARC churches and beyond.

“When the Board of Trustees decided to relocate the Seminary from Northwest Iowa to the Chicago area in 1995, the goal was to enhance Mid-America’s ability to serve a wider constituency of churches that cherish the Reformed confessions,” Dr. Venema says. “While the Seminary has enjoyed a close relationship with the URCNA, we now also enjoy a growing relationship with the OPC and other Reformed churches that desire seminary training that is biblically and confessionally sound, but always

ministerially and vocationally focused.”

The decision to relocate came in 1992, after years of discussion. A 30-acre parcel of land was purchased in 1993, and the ground-breaking ceremony took place on August 25, 1994. The hope was to open the Seminary’s doors in the fall of 1995. As the wait for the occupancy permit dragged on, Flo Kooiman continued managing the temporary office set up in her garage. Finally, the permit was granted at 5:00 p.m. on Friday, September 1. Classes began at 8:00 a.m. on Tuesday, September 5.

Dr. J. Mark Beach, now Professor of Ministerial & Doctrinal Studies, Faculty Secretary, and Managing Editor of the *Mid-America Journal of Theology*, came to the Seminary in 1997. Dr. Alan D. Strange, Professor of Church History, Registrar, and Theological Librarian, joined the faculty in 1998.

The Seminary was able to begin the year 2000 debt-free. At the “Going Throughout the Earth” celebration on October 29, 2000, several hundred seminary friends witnessed the burning of the mortgage and praised God for His faithfulness. Some of the Seminary’s longest-tenured employees joined the staff thereafter. Keith LeMahieu, now

Vice President of Operations, began working for Mid-America in August of 2001 as Director of Development. Administrative Secretary Tracy Dopkowski was hired in 2003, and Bart Voskuil became Associate Librarian in 2008.

The past decade has been a period of transition for Mid-America, particularly in the area of personnel. Dr. Venema says, “I am delighted that in recent years three eminently qualified professors have joined our ranks: Dr. Marcus Mininger (New Testament studies) in 2011, Rev. Andrew Compton (Old Testament studies) in 2016, and Dr. Eric Watkins (Ministerial Studies, especially evangelism and missions) in 2020.” Dr. Mininger also serves as Director of Institutional Assessment, and Rev. Compton is the MTS Program Director.

“I consider it a privilege to serve as Mid-America’s president during this season of transition,” Dr. Venema says. “Though I sometimes doubted whether our needs for faculty and staff would be met, the Lord has blessed us with the right people at the right time.”



Breaking ground at the Dyer location, Summer of 1994



Student Body with Faculty and Staff, Fall 2020

As the marketplace for seminaries grew, so did Mid-America's efforts in public awareness. The need to pursue accreditation with the Association of Theological Schools (ATS) became evident, and in 2010, Mid-America was granted such accreditation. Recently, Mid-America received the longest period of accreditation (10 years) from ATS. Key personnel were sought out in the area of Advancement. Rachel Luttjeboer, Administrative Secretary of Media and Publications, was hired in 2011. Michael Deckinga filled the new position of Vice-President of Advancement in 2016, and Jared Luttjeboer became Director of Marketing in 2018. Brian Blummer joined the Mid-America team as Director of Enrollment Management in 2019, and Sonja Vooyo, Assistant Financial Officer, was hired in 2015. Mid-America alumni now serve in at least 10 foreign countries, three Canadian provinces, and 34 U.S. states.

"In recent years," Dr. Venema says, "the Board and Faculty have given considerable attention to how we can best prepare our students to be faithful as 'missionary-pastors.' Since Christ 'gathers, defends, and preserves' His church by means of His Spirit and Word (Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 12), ministers are called not only to defend and preserve the churches they serve 'in the unity of the true faith.' They are also called to a ministry of gathering and enfolding the lost." For this reason, the Board recently started the initiation and development of a new missions training institute and search for a Director.

"The initiation and development of the new Missions Training Institute is a wonderful example of the institution remaining true to its stated mission as it responds to the needs of the rising generation," says alumnus and Board President Jim Sawtelle (Redeemer RCUS Golden Valley, MN). "The church's need for the ministry of Christ through His Word and Spirit will never change. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and

forever. But the church and the society in which we live are not static. Prospective ministers must be trained and equipped to serve the church and society of this generation. The Missions Training Institute is designed to prepare ministers to be good shepherds on both of those fronts. The unified desire of the Board and Faculty to be faithful to the original mission in this way speaks volumes about the Seminary's current state."

Dr. Venema says, "Anniversaries are important occasions within God's providence to remember the past and to look forward to the future. In the life of an institution like Mid-America Reformed Seminary, our fortieth anniversary invites us to consider God's faithfulness to us in times past and to look to Him for His provision in the future." He concludes, "We owe a debt of gratitude to our many supporters, both prayerful and financial, as well as the churches who have supported our work all of these years. May God be pleased to sustain this work through your support for many years to come!"

Glenda Mathes

ALUMNI PROFILE: ROGER SPARKS

A “GUINEA PIG” IN THE MARS EXPERIMENT

Roger’s story goes back to 1985 – the year he graduated from Mid-America. After graduation, he attended Calvin Theological Seminary for one year pursuing ministry in the Christian Reformed Church of North America. He was ordained in the fall of 1986 and since then, has served three CRCNA congregations. He has served in Medicine Hat, Alberta, Rock Valley, Iowa, and (currently) Luverne MN. He has enjoyed the various “hats” he has been able to wear throughout his career – Stated Clerk, Synodical Deputy, member of the Classical Interim and Student Aid Committees to name a few. Presently, he represents Classis Minnkota on the Council of Delegates. A highlight for Roger is attending the CRCNA annual Synod – to which he has been a delegate ten times. He also enjoys interacting with other pastors in his local ministerial group and is privileged to serve on the Board of the Rock County Food Shelf.

As Roger reflects on his decision to attend Mid-America, then a brand-new and controversial seminary, he credits Rev. Tom VandenHeuvel – a founding pastor of Mid-America and, at the time, Roger’s pastor at First CRC of Orange City, IA – for encouraging Roger to consider being trained at Mid-America. Roger was introduced to Reformed theology at Dordt College (now University) and deeply appreciated the emphasis on loyalty to the Scriptures, and a view of the Reformed Confessions that Mid-America held, and still holds – that they are living (not just historical) standards for faith. He wanted to attend a seminary that would offer significant training in preaching and pastoral care and was willing

to be a “guinea pig” in the Mid-America experiment. He was far from disappointed.

He is thankful for his time at Mid-America because it gave him the tools he has needed to continue to study the Scriptures and to effectively communicate the good news of God’s sovereign, saving grace. Throughout his long ministerial career, Roger has encountered and interacted with many diverse ideas and situations. Roger was not able to take a class in “Pastoring During a Pandemic,” but he did learn to search and to lean on the Scriptures in the ups and downs of ministry – a theological framework that was developed and nurtured during his time at Mid-America.

Roger, along with his ministerial colleagues, is serving the church during some tumultuous times. Roger acknowledges that as the culture continues to drift away from God’s revealed will, the church needs to dare to be different. Roger exhorts his congregation to be transformed by adopting the mind of Christ, as Romans 12, the Letters to the Seven Churches in Revelation 2 and 3, and many other portions of Scripture suggest. “God is showing us ways to grow in faith, hope, and love,” remarks Roger. “We who follow Jesus must stop acting like consumers of religious goods and services and remember that we are disciples. There is a cross for us to bear, and COVID is exposing weaknesses in our churches.” Sadly, Roger has had to conduct more funerals than usual this past year. Each one has reminded him that we need to know and follow Jesus, who alone is the Resurrection and the Life.



Roger Sparks and his wife, Dianne

We asked Roger what advice he would give to someone considering seminary and pastoral ministry. He comments that “pastoral ministry is both wonderful and difficult. You will be loved by some and shunned by others. You will experience much joy, and probably a few sleepless nights. You will understand why the Apostle John said, ‘I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth’ (3 John vs. 4). Prayerfully sow the Gospel seed and trust God for the harvest.” He adds, “You will need to trust that the Word of God is reliable and useful, so when you are seminary shopping, make sure you enroll in one that is unapologetically committed to the Scriptures.

We are thankful that the Lord continues to bless Roger in his ministry. He is thankful for God’s new mercies every morning. Please be in prayer for Roger - that he will endure, boldly and effectively proclaim the good news of salvation week in and week out, and that he may better model what it means to follow Jesus, all for the glory of God!

Michael Deckinga
Vice-President of Advancement



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2021 COMMENCEMENT

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