

the messenger

Mid-America Reformed Seminary

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THEN AND NOW:

REFLECTIONS ON MY SERVICE AT MID-AMERICA REFORMED SEMINARY

p. 7



p. 5: Senior Profiles

p. 6: Foundation for the Future

THE PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE:

“YOU ARE THE SALT OF THE EARTH”



“You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people’s feet.” (Matt. 5:13)

When I consider the “Sermon on the Mount,” as our Lord’s teaching in Matthew 5-7 (cf. Luke 6:20-49) is commonly known, I am reminded of Calvin’s commentary on the passage. According to Calvin, Christ is “the truest interpreter of the law,” greater than Moses to whom the Lord gave the Ten Commandments at Sinai. As the Word become flesh, Christ is our chief prophet and teacher who gives to us in this sermon a remarkable description of what it means to live a “kingdom life in a fallen world” (Sinclair Ferguson).

Christ’s sermon, echoing the Psalmist (cf., e.g., Ps. 1:1), opens with a series of beatitudes that describe those qualities of heart and mind that distinguish those who are citizens of Christ’s kingdom. These qualities comprise a composite or many-sided portrait of the citizen of Christ’s kingdom who is conformed by the working of the Holy Spirit to the image of Jesus Christ.

It is no accident that Christ, after providing a remarkable portrait of the heart and life of those who are citizens of His kingdom, immediately turns to what might be described as the vocation or calling of such citizens. If the beatitudes provide a mirror or portrait of the habits of heart that characterize citizens of Christ’s kingdom, the two metaphors that Christ uses—“you are the salt of the earth ... you are the light of the world”—describe the function that kingdom citizens fulfill as those are who are “in” but not “of” the world. Citizens of Christ’s kingdom have a lofty calling to be salting salt in a tasteless and decaying world and to be light in a world that lies in darkness. They are not to be like “potted plants” in a living room that get dusted off once in a while but contribute very little to their surroundings.

The first of these metaphors, “the salt of the earth,” is the one I would like to consider briefly in this meditation.

Though I once heard an imaginative chapel meditation on this metaphor (the speaker identified no less than ten functions of salt!), Jesus’ use of the language of “salt” would have reminded His listeners of its two common functions in the Scriptures. First, when the ESV translates Matthew 5:13, it identifies salt as that which lends taste, zest, or flavor. Though the text literally says, “if salt has lost its saltiness,” the ESV reads, “if salt has lost its taste.” Just as is true today, in biblical times salt was synonymous with tastiness, that which lends flavor and interest to what would otherwise be bland, insipid and dull (see, e.g., Job 6:6; Col. 4:6). I am told that, even today, salt is the most universal and effective means of enhancing the flavor of food. Though the medical profession may frown upon an overuse of salt, it remains a chef’s best friend.

A second, and closely related, function of salt in biblical times was its use as a preservative against decay or a means of preventing or showing the corruption of food. In Old Testament practice, newborn babies were rubbed with salt as a means of hygienic cleansing (Ezek. 16:4). When Abimelech defeated the land of Shechem, he scattered salt over the land to prevent it from bearing wicked fruit (Judges 9:45). By way of extension, salt was used in covenant ceremonies to symbolize the permanence of the bond between two parties, as a kind of symbol (like a wedding ring) of the constancy of their faithfulness to each other (e.g., Num. 18:19).

Though much could be said about each of these functions of salt, consider the remarkable and significant implications of Jesus’ words for an understanding of your calling as a citizen of Christ’s kingdom.

When Christ says, “you are the salt of the earth,” He reminds us that kingdom citizens, in contrast to the dullness and tastelessness of a world that is under the dominion of sin, are to bring zest and taste. I once heard a preacher say that “some Christians behave as if they were baptized in lemon juice”! Sadly, this is too often the case. But Jesus tells us that we should bring taste to a world that is often numbed by its mania for pleasure, whether it be found in the accumulation of this world’s goods, binge-watching cable TV, sexual promiscuity in all of its forms, or the abuse of drugs and alcohol. The contrast between life apart from Christ and life in Christ is like that between drudgery and delight. The joy of life in Christ should stand in marked contrast to the meaninglessness of life without the hope and purpose that belongs to a life well-lived, seeking first the kingdom of God and its righteousness.

Furthermore, when we see so much decay all around us in many forms and expressions (think only of what the contemporary world has done to marriage and family, economics and politics, entertainment, and the like), Jesus reminds us of our high calling to resist whatever is rotten and putrefying. In the little place where we find ourselves, whether it makes a great or small impact, the citizen of Christ’s kingdom ought to be like salting salt—lending taste to what has become dull, resisting sinful decay wherever it expresses itself.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Cornelis P. Venema".

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

INSIDE THIS ISSUE:

March 2024
Volume 42 Number 3

NEWS

- 4 Development Report: “Dad, Can I do the Money?”
- 5 Senior Profiles
- 6 Foundation for the Future
- 6 Reflections on Dr. Currie’s Interim Class

FEATURE

- 7 Then and Now:
Reflections on My Service at Mid-America Reformed Seminary

ALUMNI

- 10 Alumni Updates
- 11 Alumni Profile: Nathan Bloechl

MESSAGE FROM THE EDITOR

In 2016, I was in my car (also known as my office) sitting in the parking lot of a Home Depot store. I worked for a large paint company as an outside sales representative, serving professional painting contractors. In between sales calls, or if a meeting was canceled, I’d head back to Home Depot to utilize the Wi-Fi signal that reached the parking lot and to jot down names and phone numbers of companies displayed on work vans that were parked in the lot. That way I could call those numbers later to see if their business had any paint needs. I began to daydream and ponder – isn’t there something better I could be doing?



I had heard that Mid-America was searching for a new Vice-President of Advancement. I updated my resume and sent it in. A few days later, I had an interview. (I knew nothing about being a vice-president and only a little about fundraising.) Dr. Venema promptly greeted me. We had a great conversation and a few more meetings; the rest is history. Here I am.

I’m sad to see Dr. Venema retire but excited to see what the Lord has in store for him. Over the years, he has become a friend. His leadership style has also helped me flourish in this role. From day one, I was a trusted colleague. Thank you, Dr. Venema, for taking a chance on a paint salesman and for your many years of God-glorifying service to His kingdom here at Mid-America! We look forward to your new books to be written in retirement, “Chapels at Mid-America” and your memoirs, “All Most of the Things I’ve said to Nancy.” I invite all of you to read his “Reflections on My Service at Mid-America” beginning on page seven.



Michael B. 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:

“DAD, CAN I DO THE MONEY?”

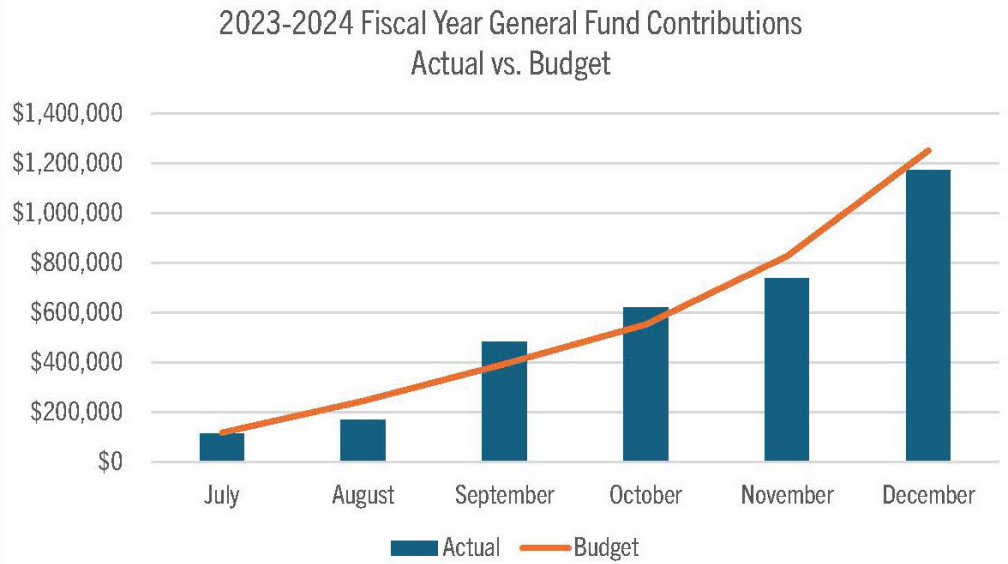
“Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.”
2 Corinthians 9:7

The question I am asked every Lord’s Day morning is “Dad, can I do the money?” My wife and I have seven kids. Usually, our four-year-old, Levi, is the first to ask. He loves to put our offering into the plate on Sunday. He loves to sing, too. He volunteers to pray before meals all the time. He’s probably going to Seminary someday (I know of a good one). I digress.

“Dad, can I do the money?”

I love this question. Each week, usually after everyone is ready for church and eating breakfast – and I’m just coming down the stairs because I take too long to get ready – I write out our cheque to church. So much for the General Fund and the Missions Fund, and then I equally divide the rest between the designated A.M. and P.M. offering beneficiaries. I write the amount in the ledger but never do the math (I’m sure my wife loves that) and look around the table at the eager eyes of my dear children, as most of them are hoping I’ll say “yes” to their question. My response is usually “we’ll see,” an answer and stall tactic in one—a response every parent is accustomed to using.

I like the question because it shows they know the liturgy – even if just a little bit. I like the question because they are eager to participate in worship – a benefit to keeping your kids with you during the entire service. I like the



question because they are being trained to be cheerful givers. The expressions on their faces when I hand them the folded envelope are fantastic.

Do we approach our giving with the same joy? Are we excited to share the resources the Lord has entrusted to our care with people and institutions in need? Do we give begrudgingly out of a spirit of compulsion, or do we happily participate in the kingdom work done by those who receive our gifts? Do we recall the great mercy shown that “while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8) and, in response, show mercy to others, and for our purposes here, through cheerful giving? I might add that when you contribute to the work of Christian institutions, you are, by extension, participating in that work. You’re a beloved partner. Do you see yourself as such with Mid-America?

We are off the heels of another calendar year-end fundraising season. I’m pleased to mention that, for all intents and purposes, you have once again joyfully, enthusiastically, and sacrificially participated in the work to train the next

generation of pastors for a lifetime of fruitful ministry.

While we have seen a slight increase in giving over last year (July – December), donations are essentially flat compared to the previous year. Priorities have shifted some amid our capital campaign, so we have realized growth there, but we currently trail our General Fund contribution budget by \$76,000. Please don’t misunderstand this analysis as grouching or scolding. We are delighted with your willingness to share in our work. We humbly ask that you prayerfully consider a special gift – individually or through your church – to help us catch up so that the excellent work being done here can continue in the academically robust, pastorally practical, and biblical and confessional manner you’ve rightly come to expect. Thank you for being our cheerful partners in ministry.

Michael B. Deckinga
Vice-President of Advancement

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

SENIOR PROFILES

On May 8th at 7:30 p.m., the Lord willing, the following six students will graduate from Mid-America Reformed Seminary at Redeemer United Reformed Church in St. John, Indiana. We are thankful to God for the diligent work these students have undertaken in their studies and pray His blessings over them as they move forward into service in His name.



Johnathan Allen (OPC) plans to take some time with his wife, Monica, and his children, Parker, Nolan, Avery, Juniper, and Irene to celebrate completing

seminary. After this, he hopes to explore potential opportunities with interested churches. Besides the priceless knowledge gleaned from the various classes, he has most appreciated the formation of his Christian walk. He says, “The faculty and staff have been dear to me in the process of maturation. My fellow students have also played a significant role in that process.”



After graduation, **Brian Bowen** (wife, Kelsey) plans to become ordained in the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) and become

either an associate pastor or solo pastor. He has appreciated the great depth of knowledge at the Seminary during his time as a student. Reflecting on his time here, he says that “the professors are very knowledgeable across subject areas and are always open to discuss and offer advice on various topics beyond the coursework.” Brian also cherishes the camaraderie amongst the students at MARS, having made what he feels will be life-long friendships.



After graduation, **Andrew Chang** hopes to serve a Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) congregation around the Chicago

area, and to start a family with his wife, Elina. Andrew describes his time at Mid-America Reformed Seminary as a profoundly life-changing experience for him. He says that gaining a deeper understanding of Scripture and how it points to Christ has set him free from the bonds of perfectionism and legalism that once weighed him down. Instead, Andrew now feels a nurtured, deeper daily union with Christ in his life. He looks forward to sharing what he has learned with his future congregants in the Chicago area.



Josh Dykstra plans to serve in a confessional Christian Reformed Church after graduation. He valued the wise, knowledgeable, and pastoral

professors who mentored him in orthodox theology and confessional standards. Josh also appreciated the professors’ passion for clearly and pastorally addressing topics to guide students’ understanding of God and Scripture through church history. Josh formed edifying friendships with like-minded past and present Seminary students and found that Mid-America’s community allowed him to develop bonds that encourage him even now. God has used Josh’s challenging yet blessed time at Mid America (filled with responsibilities) to mold, equip, and prepare him to serve according to His call.



Upon graduation, URCNA student **Eric Heida** (wife, Emma, and two children, Ariana and Jack) is prayerfully pursuing a yearlong internship so he can continue to

be mentored by a seasoned man of God, resulting in greater maturity and learning before he embarks on full-time ministry, whether domestic or abroad. In the Lord’s providence, he doesn’t have concrete answers yet as to where that internship might be, but eagerly awaits His guidance toward the goal of His glory. Eric is grateful for the mentoring received through classes, the Ministerial Apprenticeship Program, and everyday life at the Seminary, which pushed, poked, and prodded him to strive for excellence in study, preaching, devotion, and desire for continued accountability on the path to greater Christlikeness for God’s glory.



Ben Verdonk is thankful to God for His mercy in allowing him to graduate, after which he will have the opportunity to serve in a year-long internship at Covenant

United Reformed Church of Toronto in Ontario. He is grateful for his robust theological education “in particular the invaluable tools [he] gained in the pastoral leadership, counseling, and the Center for Missions and Evangelism classes.” Additionally, Ben and his wife, Nathaly, are delighted to announce that their family will be growing with the arrival of their first baby in April. They’re thankful for all those who support Mid-America and for all who contributed to Ben’s journey through Seminary.

Jared Luttjeboer
Director of Marketing

FOUNDATION FOR THE FUTURE

Our long-anticipated building addition has finally started to move from concept to construction! Site work has officially commenced after much careful planning, a few design changes, and additional fundraising.

The Seminary has hired Knudsen Construction, Inc. (Calumet City, IL) as the general contractor to coordinate all aspects of the project. Mr. Peter Vander Wall, President of Knudsen, remarks:

“We are pleased to work with the Seminary to bring this long-standing vision of expansion to reality. Since most of our team members belong to supporting churches and some even were involved in the original project when the campus was first built, we see this opportunity to participate as a huge blessing – we’re truly honored. We look forward to seeing how the Lord will bless this project and, ultimately, the Seminary for many

years through the additional facilities and the expansion of the beauty found on campus in the structures, but more importantly, the ministry housed within.”

Additionally, the Seminary has benefited from the collective wisdom of our Facilities Expansion Committee, comprised of local constituents. As tradesmen, architects, and business owners, they understand building projects from the inside out.

We still deal with a bit of extreme winter weather occasionally, so delays may be a reality for us, but if all goes according to plan, we’re hopeful the project will be completed by this year’s end or early 2025. We look forward to keeping you updated along the way.

We have a long way to go regarding funding, but we’ve made progress because of you! We have cleared the \$3,000,000 mark to an anticipated \$4,500,000. Thank you to the many



of you who have partnered already with us. We humbly ask that you continue to support the project throughout its duration. The money we have raised will be spent quickly. Please help us see this through to completion. To those who have been on the sidelines, wondering if we would run this play, it’s time to get in the game. Please consider how you can joyfully and sacrificially support our work to expand our campus to accommodate our growing student body.

Michael Deckinga
Vice-President of Advancement

REFLECTIONS ON DR. JOHN CURRIE’S CLASS ON PASTORAL LEADERSHIP: AN ELECTIVE COURSE BY THE CENTER FOR MISSIONS AND EVANGELISM

Pastoral Leadership is *the process where, for the glory of God, the man of God, appointed by the Son of God and empowered by the Spirit of God, proclaims the Word of God so that the people of God are equipped to move forward into the purposes of God together.* For our January Center for Missions and Evangelism elective, Dr. John Currie, professor of Pastoral Theology at Westminster Theological Seminary, reminded us that there is always a Mission in Leadership, following the Mission of the Leader, Jesus Christ. We need to keep the mission (the Great Commission) ever before our eyes and the eyes of God’s people, as well as that great and wondrous end-times vision (the LORD exalted in worship by uncountable multitudes of people flowing into His presence hungry for the word and

walking in His will!). This glorious vision of the glory of God answers the big *why* question of our ministry — *why* am I a pastor of this people, in this period, and in this place?

As pastor-leaders, we are appointed to steward our Lord’s Bride — to gather her, protect her, and prosper her in Jesus’ name and under His Headship. But how are we to gather, protect, and prosper Christ’s Bride in Christ’s name? The answer is in Jesus. Jesus is the One who ultimately gathers, protects, and prospers His church and has appointed steward-leaders to care for His Church in His name. Thus, Jesus primarily and purposefully leads His church through the preaching of the Word of God, by the man of God, through the equipping of the Spirit of God, to the people of God.



Another important thrust of the course was that pastor-leaders must define, develop, and deploy other leaders. Effective leadership does not come from being lone-wolves, but from training others to have the character and competencies of Christ that they may in turn lead others to do the same.

Eric Heida
Student Body President



THEN AND NOW:

REFLECTIONS ON MY SERVICE AT MID-AMERICA REFORMED SEMINARY

Dr. Cornelis P. Venema

When the editorial committee for *The Messenger* met recently to plan this issue, I was asked to write an article that offers reflections on my thirty-six years at Mid-America Reformed Seminary. I happily agreed to the request because it affords me an opportunity to express my heartfelt gratitude for the privilege of preparing our students for the pastoral ministry. As I have remarked through the years, if serving a local congregation as a pastor who preaches Christ “is the best, hardest, sweetest work on this side of beholding Him”

(Archibald Alexander), then “entrusting” the gospel to “faithful men who will be able to teach others also” (2 Tim. 2:2) is a close second.

My reflections will begin with the story of how I began my work at Mid-America, and then turn to some of the challenges we have faced as an institution.

The Beginning: “Three Strikes and You’re Out”

As I reflect upon how I came to teach at Mid-America in 1988, the observation of

a Puritan writer about God’s providence comes to mind: We read God’s providence “back to front.” What may seem to us to have been mere happenstance at the time becomes more clearly discernable as we look back and recognize the work of God’s fatherly hand in our lives.

During my years of preparation for the ministry, first at Trinity College and Dordt College (1971-1975), and then at Calvin Seminary (1975-1978), my only vocational aspiration was to serve as a pastor in a local church. Though one of my professors at Calvin Seminary managed to convince me that I should

pursue graduate study at Princeton Theological Seminary (1978-1982), I did not do so with the aim to teach theology at a Christian college or seminary. Since I was quite young when I graduated from Calvin Seminary (24 years of age!) and was accustomed to the rigors of academic study, I thought graduate study would provide further time to mature and prepare for the ministry.

And so I became a candidate in 1982, accepted the call of the Ontario Christian Reformed Church in Ontario, California, and served that congregation from the fall of 1982 until the summer of 1988. Perhaps my wife, Nancy, and I view those years through a nostalgic lens, but they were for us and our children (the youngest two of four were born during this period) among the happiest and most enjoyable years of our life together. I loved the pastoral ministry and the congregation I served.

I mention this in order to explain in part my reluctance for several years to consider the call to serve as an instructor at Mid-America. Prior to the end of my studies at Princeton, I had been approached by the Faculty Development Committee (FDC) of Mid-America



Dr. Venema in his Orange City office.

regarding my interest in a possible teaching position but rebuffed the overture. After serving for a few years in Ontario, I was again approached by the FDC on three separate occasions, asking me to consider an appointment to teach doctrinal studies at Mid-America (perhaps due to the persistence of one of its members, Rev. Jelle Tuininga, who refused to take “no” for an answer!). When I accepted the appointment of the Board of Trustees early in 1988, I can still remember saying to Nancy, “If I say ‘no’ this time, I believe that means ‘three strikes and you’re out.’ I had better give it a try and, if it doesn’t prove to be the task for me, I can always return to the pastoral ministry.”

Teaching at Mid-America in the Early Years

When I arrived in Orange City in the summer of 1988, Mid-America was a young institution in its sixth year of existence. The faculty consisted of four full-time professors (Rev. Mark Vander Hart, Dr. Nelson Kloosterman, Rev. Robert Grossmann, and myself). The student body was small in number. After one of our students, Roger Vander Veen, was unexpectedly called home by the Lord in the spring of 1989, my junior class was reduced to one student. In this early period, Mid-America was challenged to defend its existence in the face of controversy and strong opposition on the part of many within the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRCNA).

From the beginning, the founders and supporters of Mid-America were very clear about the school’s mission and purpose. Several features of Mid-America’s approach to seminary training were frequently identified and are worth remembering:

- **Biblical and Confessional Fidelity.** If a seminary is to serve the church’s ministry of the gospel, it must be wholeheartedly committed to the inspiration, authority and infallibility of the Scriptures, as well as the Reformed confessions that summarize their teaching. As Charles Hodge, one of the great theologians of old Princeton, argued: teachers at a seminary must be held to the highest degree of fidelity to the church’s

primary and secondary standards.

- **A Classical Curriculum.** If a seminary is to serve the church’s ministry of the gospel, it must furnish its students with a classical theological education that, in all its parts, aims to provide students with the tools needed to be faithful preachers and teachers of the Word of God. If the central task of a pastor is to preach and teach the Word of God, students who aspire to the pastorate must be taught: 1) to read the Bible competently (biblical studies); 2) to become familiar with the church’s history of engagement with the Word (ecclesiastical studies); 3) to know the “system of doctrine” taught in Scripture (doctrinal studies); and 4) to minister the Word in preaching, teaching, pastoring, and discipling (ministerial studies).

- **A Pastoral and Ministerial Focus.** If a seminary is to serve the church’s ministry of the gospel, it must always be mindful of the diversity of tasks that belong to the pastoral ministry. Therefore, from its inception, Mid-America insisted that its professors be ordained ministers with experience in pastoral ministry. It also established a Ministerial Apprenticeship Program (MAP) that aimed to integrate academic study with ministerial application throughout the whole course of the student’s seminary training.

While I was convinced at the time (and still am) that this was a clear and compelling approach to seminary training, I was not as convinced that Mid-America should restrict its work to serving the CRCNA. When Mid-America was founded in 1981, the founders and supporters of the school were all members of the Christian Reformed Church. Their aim was to establish a seminary that, with the Lord’s blessing, would contribute to renewal and reformation within the Christian Reformed Church. My initial reluctance to teach at Mid-America was in part due to my conviction that its approach to seminary education ought to include a broader aim to serve students not only from the CRCNA but also from other confessionally Reformed churches. Already during my graduate studies, I had pressed the Search Committee on the question of the Board’s interest in providing seminary training for a wider community of Reformed



Dr. Venema and his wife Nancy at a Seminary event.

and Presbyterian churches in North America. I suggested that Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia might be a model for Mid-America. Just as Westminster blended its Presbyterian identity with a strong dose of Continental Reformed theology, so Mid-America could blend its Reformed identity with an appreciation for the Westminster Standards.

The Move to Chicago: A Difficult but Necessary Transition

I mention the challenges Mid-America faced in the early years of its existence to provide a context for considering the Board of Trustees decision to relocate the Seminary from Northwest Iowa (Orange City) to the Chicago area (Dyer, Indiana) in 1995. Though a Board-appointed committee was asked to explore the question of relocating the Seminary as early as 1985, the decision to do so was not an easy one to make for various reasons. It required uprooting the Seminary’s faculty, staff and students. It also meant leaving an area where many churches and supporters had welcomed the Seminary into existence and generously supported the school in countless ways. Understandably, many of the Seminary’s friends in Northwest Iowa were disappointed with the decision to relocate.

However, the decision to relocate the Seminary occurred for several compelling reasons:

First, the ecclesiastical landscape had

changed. The relocation of the Seminary coincided with the formation of a new federation, the United Reformed Churches in North America (URCNA) in the years 1995 and 1996. With the emergence of the URCNA in this period, it had become evident that Mid-America’s original purpose, which was largely focused upon renewal in the CRCNA, was too limited and unlikely to be achieved. Although Mid-America was not officially a seminary of a particular denomination, it was intimately associated with the URCNA from which it received increasingly more of its support and a majority of its students.

Second, during the period of Mid-America’s work in Northwest Iowa, several steps had moved the Seminary toward a broader field of service within the community of Reformed and Presbyterian churches in North America. Not long after the school was founded, the Board was approached by representatives of The Reformed Church in the United States. This contact led to the appointment of Rev. Robert Grossman to the Faculty in 1985. Interest in the Seminary was also increasingly expressed by members of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and the Presbyterian Church in America. Recognizing the opportunity to serve these churches, the Board of Trustees revised the Seminary’s Bylaws to include the election of Board members from various Reformed and Presbyterian denominations (1990). Shortly thereafter, the Board expanded the Seminary’s confessional basis to include subscription to a fourth standard, the Westminster Confession of Faith (1993). During this period, the Board also appointed Rev. Raymond Zorn, an OPC minister who served in the Reformed Churches in New Zealand and Australia, and Dr. Joseph Hall, a minister in the PCA, to teach doctrinal and ecclesiastical studies, respectively.

And third, the choice of the Chicago area as a new location was based upon the advantages it would provide the Seminary in serving a diversity of students and churches. The present location of the Seminary lies at what is often called the “crossroads of America,” a transportation hub and point of intersection between east and west. Significant portions of our constituency from its beginning live in the state of Michigan to the north and the province of Ontario to the northeast.

Furthermore, the diversity of Reformed and Presbyterian churches in the Chicagoland area provided an encouragement to students who naturally preferred to worship and test their ministerial skills in churches of their own communion.

Serving as President in a Period of Growth and Transition

When I consider the more recent period of my time at Mid-America, I view it as a period of growth and a time of transition. The school has not only experienced an increase in the number of students, but also in the size of its faculty and administrative staff. The decision to relocate the Seminary to the Chicagoland area has enabled Mid-America to prepare more students for pastoral ministry in a growing number of Reformed and Presbyterian churches in North America and beyond.

Since the Seminary relocated to the Chicagoland area, the number of students has steadily increased (from approximately 20 to 40). These students have come primarily from the URCNA and the OPC, as well as the PCA and the RCUS. But many have also come from other denominations in North America: the CRCNA, the Reformed Church in America, the Canadian Reformed Churches, the Evangelical Presbyterian Church, Reformed Baptist and other (some independent) churches. In addition to students from North America, we have welcomed international students from New Zealand, the United Kingdom, South Africa, Haiti, Jamaica, Nigeria, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Myanmar (Burma), Taiwan, Mexico, India, Ecuador, Korea, China, Indonesia and Egypt. Without compromising Mid-America’s focus upon training its students for the pastoral ministry, the Seminary now offers a Master of Theological Studies program, which aims to prepare students theologically

for service in a number of non-ministerial vocations.

With an increase in the number of students, it became evident that the Seminary would need additional faculty and staff, including some changes in its administrative structure. Dr. J. Mark Beach was appointed to teach ministerial studies in 1997, two years after the move to Dyer, and Dr. Alan Strange was appointed to teach ecclesiastical studies in 1999, replacing Dr. Hall. After the Board decided that the school needed a President, I was appointed (“conscripted”) in 2001 to be the first President of the institution. In recent years, two significant administrative positions were created in the areas of student enrollment and marketing: Rev. Jeff DeBoer was appointed as the school’s first full-time student recruiter and Jared Luttjeboer was appointed to be the Director of Marketing. Two full-time faculty members were added in New Testament (Dr. Marcus Mininger) and Old Testament (Dr. Andrew Compton) studies. The first graduate to teach full-time at the Seminary, Rev. Paul Ipema, was recently appointed to teach ministerial studies and assume the position of Director of the MAP, upon the retirement of Rev. Vander Hart. Last but not least, the seminary established a Center for Missions and Evangelism (CME) and appointed Dr. Eric Watkins, a minister in the OPC, to serve as its Director and as part-time faculty member in ministerial studies. Furthermore, due to the growth of the Seminary, the Board approved the first significant expansion of the Seminary’s facility: the addition of a chapel auditorium, an enlargement of the cafeteria, and provision of new office space and a conference room.

I mention these developments to illustrate how wonderfully the Lord has blessed Mid-America in providing for its needs, whether in finances or in personnel, and to underscore how all of this has taken place within the framework of a steady, persistent adherence to

the vision for the school that was first articulated by its founders.

However, the school now enters an important moment in its history: the challenges that come with a period of transition. I am keenly aware of the fact that Mid-America will soon have a new, second President, and that none of the faculty members who taught at the school in the early history of the institution will be part of the full-time, active faculty. I am also aware that the continued support of Mid-America’s constituency must not be taken for granted. In spite of our close and intimate relationship with the URCNA throughout the school’s history, many members of the URCNA today have little memory of this history and are not as inclined to view Mid-America as uniquely suited to prepare their future pastors (though they should be!). We are not an institution that can “rest on its laurels” and assume that all will be well. Our service to the Lord and His church will only be as He pleases or wills. We remain as dependent today upon God’s favor as we were when the work of Mid-America began.

As I reflect upon my time at Mid-America, I am deeply grateful for the opportunity that has been given me to contribute to its ministry. Though I plan to “retire” as President and professor at the end of this academic year, I hope to continue contributing in whatever way I can to Mid-America’s ongoing work—teaching occasionally (when asked), writing a few books that I have not had time to complete in recent years, and preaching and serving churches at their invitation (*Deo volente*).

As I said in the conclusion to my inaugural address as President, “we need to [continue to] pray that God would be pleased to bless this school to the benefit of His church and the glory of His name. ‘Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us; do confirm for us the work of our hands; yes, confirm the work of our hands’ (Ps. 90:17).”



Dr. Cornelis P. Venema
President

ALUMNI UPDATES

After being emeritated in June 2019, in 2020 **Steve Poelman** (1996) began serving as an associate pastor with Dutton URC, doing some preaching and teaching, and sharing visitation responsibilities with the full-time pastor, Talman Wagenmaker (2005).

He continues to be focused on missions and evangelism, making occasional trips to India with his wife, and in 2023 became a member of the URCNA Foreign Missions Committee. He is also involved in local evangelism activities, desiring to encourage and strengthen young men to be zealous to spread the glorious gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Gregory Yankey (1999) and his wife Elisabeth have been married for 19 years. They have become members of Christ Presbyterian Church (PCA) in Tulsa, Oklahoma, after previously serving in the Reformed Episcopal Church. They have three special needs children, who inspired Gregory to move into special education, after teaching A.P. World History for 15 years. “Please pray for us in this daily journey with disability. Consider reading *Disability and the Gospel* by Michael Beates (Crossway, 2012) to see how the church could minister to families of children with disabilities.”

Peter Yoo (2023): “Regarding marriage, Jane and I have been happily married for almost 10 months now, and we continue to praise God for His many gracious blessings toward us. Regarding ministry, the holiday season was busy, but things are beginning to settle down a bit. Regarding my vicariate, my final exam is coming up on Feb 23. And if I sustain my final exam, then I’ll be eligible for call to serve in our churches. Please pray for my study and preparation for the final exam, that I would sustain the final exam well, all according to God’s timing and will.”

Alumni! Send us your updates at any time to Rachel Luttjeboer at rluttjeboer@midamerica.edu.

FROM MID-AMERICA TO MBALE

ALUMNI PROFILE: NATHAN BLOECHL

It's been almost six months since we moved to Mbale, Uganda, to complete a year-long internship. We have been in awe of God's constant care for us both directly and through the kindness of His church. Anticipating moving overseas, our most significant concern was the safety and well-being of our kids. We have heard horror stories of children whose parents neglect their kids for mission work and other tales of children whose health is significantly compromised. However, our Lord has hemmed us in before and behind the whole way (Ps. 139:5). Not only has He provided us with a safe place to live physically, but our children have even been able to thrive here emotionally and spiritually despite temporarily leaving behind family and friends in Indiana/Wisconsin. No doubt we have had our trials, but we have found they have given us better self-awareness and grown our faith, our understanding of God, and our dependence on God and the church. Living in a foreign context has also opened our eyes to the need for sound Biblical teaching here.

Between talking to a native pastor and hearing my head pastor preach on our first Lord's Day in Mbale, I have quickly realized I am not in the Midwest anymore. Before moving to Uganda, I often took up the weapons of preaching, teaching, and apologetics against the current manifestation of agnosticism and atheism at work in the United States. However, as I started my work of study for sermon writing, I saw that atheism is not a regular threat to the church here. Some even say, "There are no atheists in Uganda." The people of Mbale are not struggling dominantly with putting faith in the supernatural. Instead, they struggle with putting faith in the holy, blessed, and undivided God of Scripture alone.

The faith struggle here says "yes" to Jesus but also says "yes" to other false religions (syncretism).

If you ask most Ugandans if they believe in Jesus Christ, they will say "yes." For example, one Ugandan who says "yes" to this question may also subscribe to the teachings of Islam. It is also not uncommon for a Ugandan who says yes to Jesus to practice witchcraft out of her home. Maybe she went to church in the morning, but on her way home, she cast a spell on her neighbor for one of her business clients. Another Ugandan who says "yes" to Jesus only looks at what benefits Jesus or his bride can give. To them, Jesus is only a means to an end rather than the Bread of Life, the Light of Men, and our only hope in life and death.

Yet, despite the distinct syncretism in Mbale that forces a change in my preaching, teaching, and our witness, the promises of the Lord of the harvest stand firm here, as they do in the States: "The harvest is plentiful" and "white for harvest" (Matthew 9:37, John 4:35). The Kingdom of God is still advancing throughout the world, "like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, till it was all leavened" (Matthew 13:33). Through the ordinary means of preaching, the sacraments and prayer by His Word and Spirit, the kingdom of God grows. Through the means of grace, though minimal in outward glory, the



church advances against the gates of hell in whatever form they take – atheism, humanism, or syncretism (Matthew 16:18). This is the type of work that continues in Mbale, Uganda. Normal, ordinary, and even dull at times, but precious and powerful before the face of God.

We give thanks that the Lord of the harvest can use our ordinary efforts to advance the leaven of Christ, our light, and our life throughout the world in the labors of His beloved bride. We also thank God for the many Christians holding the rope for us in America. The prayers of the saints are nearly tangible. We continually thank God for how he prepared us for this work through our churches and, not least of all, Mid-America Reformed Seminary. We anticipate that God will continue working through the church to advance His gospel to the world.

Nathan Bloechl
Class of 2023



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