the messenger

Mid-America Reformed Seminary

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THE EVANGELISTIC POWER OF HOSPITALITY

p. 8



p. 5: MARS Out & About
p. 11: Alumni Profile: Steve Carr

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THE PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE:

ONLY CHRIST'S COMING WILL REMEDY ALL OUR ILLS



One of the things I began to learn early in the pastorate, especially as I ministered to my congregation, was that one must deal with life not as one wishes it were, but as it is. Surely, this is no small part of what Paul meant when he indicated, in prison, that he had learned contentment in all circumstances. It became quickly clear that parishioners and others who sought me out for counsel, as well as my own heart, needed to learn this lesson. God has given us in his Word his will for our lives, and we, and all those about us, obviously fall woefully short of it, and the whole world is, consequently, a mess. This can create great unrest in one's life, the gap between the way things ought to be, in keeping with God's revelation to us, and the way that they are.

We, as Reformed, know that God has ordained everything that should come to pass, including the worst things imaginable, seen pointedly at the cross. The very darkest hour became the very brightest, because in the death of Christ we witness the death of death. This is what bridges the gap, as it were, between the way things actually are and the way they should be. Christ took upon the worst of what actually is to bring us all to the best that can be. God's perfect will is ultimately accomplished, and this will all be brought to pass in the consummation at the Second Coming.

Until that time, however, we wait upon the Lord and seek contentment in every state, even the worst ones, because we know that the kingdom has come and will ultimately triumph. One of the greatest temptations that beguiles us now is to jump the gun and to seek what we have coming before the Lord is pleased to bring it to us (and to bring us fully into his kingdom). I offer no counsel of quietism or passivity here. No, we are to live below personally and corporately, doing all that we can, by his grace and for his glory, to die to sin and to live to righteousness. But our very best efforts will not bring about more in this age than God intends for us to have, and we must learn over and again to resist pursuing, in the flesh and by our own strength, an overly realized eschatology.

An overly realized eschatology is one in which we seek here below, in our own power and strength, to bring about what only the Parousia (our Lord's Second Coming) will bring about, especially perfect justice and peace. The world, in its wickedness and opposition to Christ, certainly seeks to bring about swords beaten into plowshares in the here and now, seen not only in quixotic projects in which they put all their hope (seeing the United Nations and like organizations in this light), but in the desire for perfect justice here below, a constantly frustrated desire. This was brought especially to mind recently by a special series I watched about the Pan Am Lockerbie crash that occurred just before Christmas in 1988.

The frustration of the families that lost loved ones was palpable (both in the bombed plane and those on the ground showered with flaming detritus from the sky) and one can feel deeply for them in their staggering losses. The families remain stymied in their pursuit of justice by many things, especially the reality that no matter how many individual men got arrested and even convicted, a state power remains behind it, the Libyan government, that will escape censure and accountability, at least as such is pursued through courts and the legal process. The largely unacknowledged problem here is that the legal process is not calculated to provide satisfaction in such a situation, a circumstance that even many participants called an "act of war." Once authorities know who's responsible for an act of war, mere quotidian legal procedures will not do. Only a like act of war in return seems proportionately appropriate.

This futile attempt to make all right is not something we are immune to. We see it in our churches, where elder and members grow frustrated with the disciplinary process, sometimes demanding what no court (ecclesiastical or civil) can or is meant to give. We should do all we can in our churches to deal righteously with sin and its consequences. Having said that, we cannot, and we should not be frustrated here, seeking to bring about the perfect justice (in church or state) that only the Parousia can accomplish. This makes us patient with our processes and we ought not to seek here below what only Judgment Day will accomplish.



Dr. Alan D. Strange,
President of Mid-America Reformed Seminary

INSIDE THIS ISSUE:

NEWS

4 Development Report: Continuous Improvement
5 MARS Out and About
6 Incoming Student Profiles

FEATURE

8 The Evangelistic Power of Hospitality

ALUMNI

11 Alumni Profile: Steve Carr

MESSAGE FROM THE EDITOR



September always arrives with energy at Mid-America. A new academic year is underway, our incoming class has settled into the rhythms of seminary life, and our faculty and staff are already crisscrossing the continent—teaching, preaching, and representing the Seminary at conferences from Wildwood to Alberta. You'll find the full fall itinerary on page 5, and I'd encourage you to look for a familiar face if one of these stops is near you.

This issue's feature comes from Dr. Eric Watkins on the evangelistic power of hospitality. It's a fitting preview for our CME Conference on October 2nd–3rd around that very theme. If you've ever wondered whether an open table can do the work of an open door, this article—and that conference—will make the case. We'd love to have you join us.

We're also delighted to introduce this year's incoming students on page 6. Their stories are as varied as their paths to Dyer—California golf courses, Wuhan classrooms, a Bible camp—but each one is a reminder of why this work matters. Please pray for them as they begin.

And in our alumni section, Steve Carr (Class of 2015) reflects on a decade of pastoral ministry in Arkansas and a new call to Nebraska, including the rare joy of mentoring the very man who would succeed him in his former pulpit.

May the Lord use this issue to encourage and equip you for his kingdom's work.

Brett Chase,
Vice President of Advancement

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Mid-America Reformed Seminary

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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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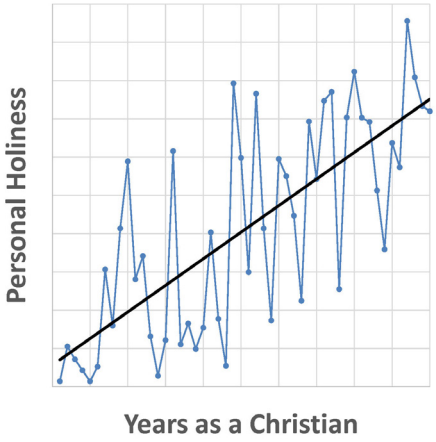
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DEVELOPMENT REPORT:
"CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT"

"… that you do so more and more."
"… to do this more and more …"

1 Thessalonians 4:1b, 4:10b

In the life of a Christian, sanctification can be pictured as a scatterplot of progress and regress in personal holiness. We learn to love and obey more faithfully over time, but there are times of stalled progress or even setbacks. But over the course of one's lifetime the Holy Spirit works in us that "trendline" with a positive slope where our love and obedience is evident "more and more." And this progress is not passive, but as Paul exhorted to the church in Thessalonica, we are to intentionally seek to please God by pursuing love and obedience "more and more." To borrow a phrase from the world of manufacturing, our personal holiness is a work of continuous improvement.



As an institution, Mid-America seeks to continuously improve in our corporate efforts to love and obey the Lord in our work of educating servants for his kingdom. We aspire to evidence our faithfulness "more and more" in our stewardship of your financial support, in our use of the campus facilities, in our commitments to the Word of God in our curriculum and classrooms, and in how we work together to operate the Seminary in a manner that is pleasing to God. Your ongoing partnership encourages us and sustains us even as we navigate through challenges and setbacks and seek new opportunities for growth.

2025-26 Year in Review

Mid-America's fiscal year runs from July 1st through the following June 30th. This aligns with our academic calendar and helps us manage our budget through the ups and downs of giving during the year. From July 1st, 2025, through June 30th, 2026, our total income was down $71,537 (-2.3%). Given the significant challenges the school faced over the past year, we are very encouraged by your faithfulness in supporting our school financially and in your prayers. We feel your love and support, and we give thanks to the Lord for your generosity and affection.

Source	2024-25	2025-26	YoY Change
General Fund	$1,865,451	$1,780,694	-$84,757
Student Aid	$41,378	$65,283	$23,905
International Aid	$17,371	$23,104	$5,733
Building Fund	$813,441	$463,931	-$349,510
Miscellaneous	$145,970	$113,326	-$32,644
Estate Gifts	$228,623	$594,360	$365,737
TOTALS	**$3,112,234**	**$3,040,697**	**-$71,537**

Areas of Continuous Improvement

The Seminary has worked through the summer on a draft of our 2026 Long-Range Plan (LRP). This strategic roadmap will be presented to the Board of Trustees in early October and, with their approval, submitted to our accreditors (ATS) by early November. There are several areas of continuous improvement that are developing in our LRP strategy.

One area of improvement at Mid-America is the need to enroll more students and produce more graduates each year. Over the past 30 years Mid-America has averaged an enrollment of 27 students and 7 graduates each year. This is a very consistent average with negligible growth. Our campus can readily accommodate an annual enrollment of 60 or more students, and our churches need more pastors and more kingdom servants.

Another area of improvement is how the administration staff is organized. For a seminary of Mid-America's size, a reasonable goal is to have one faculty member for every administrative staff position (a 1:1 ratio). Currently we are closer to one faculty member for every two staff positions (1:2 ratio). To grow our enrollment will require growing our teaching capacity, and a more efficient organizational structure will be needed to ensure that our growth is sustainable.

Related to our organizational structure is an exciting announcement in the Advancement Office. Rev. Dr. Eric Watkins has been appointed to a leadership position within the Administration starting on August 1st, 2026. Dr. Watkins is now Mid-America's "Director of Church Relations and Development." In addition, Dr. Watkins has also been appointed as a Senior Fellow of the Center for Missions and Evangelism (CME). His leadership in the CME will continue, with missions and evangelism training being a core component of his work in church relations and his ongoing opportunities to teach on campus.

"More and More"

As Mid-America seeks to please God by evidencing our faithfulness "more and more," our success is inextricably linked to your ongoing financial and spiritual partnership. Even as Paul recognized that the Thessalonians were already "doing" works of love and obedience, he asked for more. In a similar way, it is clear how loving and supportive our seminary community continues to be in partnering with us. Yet to be the seminary we aspire to be, we need more prayer and more financial support from you. Please join us in pursuing "more and more" for the kingdom of Jesus. Soli Deo Gloria!

Brett Chase,
Vice President of Advancement

MARS OUT AND ABOUT

The faculty and staff of Mid-America often visit churches, schools, and conferences to promote the Seminary, recruit future students, and serve the broader Church in teaching and training opportunities. For the Fall 2026 semester, below is a list of some of the dates and places that you will find one of us "out and about." If you are in the area, please let us know and, if possible, stop by to say "Hi!" or even join us for the event.

September 2-3	Dr. Watkins: Speaking to teachers & pastors at the OPC Boardwalk Chapel (Wildwood, NJ)
September 11-12	Dr. Strange: Presbytery of the Midwest (OPC)
September 11-12	Dr. Compton: Speaking at a marriage conference at Cornerstone URC (Edmonton, Alberta)
September 14-16	Dr. Watkins: Attending the OPC Committee on Home Missions & Church Extension
September 16	Brian Blummer & Dr. Watkins: Moody Seminary Fair (Chicago, IL)
September 18-19	Brian Blummer: Association for Reformed Political Action Conference (Ancaster, Ontario)
September 18-19	Dr. Strange: Conference & Seminary presentation at the Presbytery of CT & SNY (OPC)
September 25-26	Dr. Strange: Inauguration of new president at WTS (Philadelphia, PA)
September 26	Brian Blummer: Reformed Forum Conference (Gurnee, IL)
September 26	Dr. Mininger: Speaking at the Reformed Forum Conference (Gurnee, IL)
October 1-2	Brian Blummer: Reformation Bible College Seminary Fair (Sanford, FL)
October 2-3	Dr. Strange & Dr. Watkins: Speaking at CME conference (Lansing, IL)
October 5-6	Dr. Strange: Meetings of the Committee on Christian Education & Committee on Appeals and Compaints of the OPC (Willow Grove, PA)
October 6-7	Brian Blummer & Dr. Watkins: Grove City Graduate School Fair (Grove City, PA)
October 7	Dr. Strange: Meeting of the Committee to Address Matters of the Church, State & Christian Nationalism (OPC)
October 10-12	Dr. Watkins: Teaching at the Bayhaven OPC evangelism conference (Tampa, FL)
October 12-13	Brian Blummer: Redeemer University Seminary Fair (Ancaster, ON)
October 16	Dr. Strange: Conference & preaching in Saskatchewan (URC)
October 16-17	Dr. Watkins: Attending the Presbytery of the Southeast (OPC)
October 16-18	Dr. Compton: Speaking for the family retreat/conference at Grace Presbyterian Church (PCA) (Indianapolis, IN)
October 22-24	Dr. Watkins: Attending the Presbytery of the South (OPC)
November 1	Dr. Strange: Speaking at Mission Fest (Colorado Springs, CO)
November 6-7	Brian Blummer & Dr. Watkins: Ligonier Southern Ontario Conference (Ancaster, ON)
November 7	Dr. Ipema: Elders' Conference at Trinity URC (Lethbridge, Alberta)
November 7-8	Dr. Strange: Christian Nationalism Conference & Preaching at Covenant Grace (Roseburg, Ontario)
November 13-14	Brian Blummer: Association for Reformed Political Action Conference (Lethbridge, AB)
November 17-19	Dr. Mininger: Evangelical Theological Society Conference (attending, not speaking)
November 18	Brian Blummer & Dr. Watkins: Chicago Metro Presbytery Meeting (Western Springs, IL)
December 30-Jan 2	Brian Blummer & Dr. Watkins: Cross Conference (St. Louis, MO)

Brett Chase,
Vice President of Advancement

INCOMING STUDENTS

It is a rare occurrence that all of Mid-America's entering students this year come from the United States. Two share an alma mater in California, although they attended at different times. Two students come to us from the URCNA, while the others represent Presbyterian denominations. Several have already gained valuable experience in pastoral or teaching ministries and now seek their formal theological training. We are delighted to welcome each of them and pray that the Lord will richly bless their studies and preparation for kingdom service.



Liam Argue (MTS) is a deep thinker who aspires to use seminary studies later as a foundation to practice law.

Liam graduated in May from Providence Christian College (Pasadena, California), where he studied politics, philosophy, and economics. He enjoys great authors like Dostoevsky, Lewis, and Tolkien.

Liam grew up in California and appreciates special avenues to give Christian witness and testimony, particularly in the life of sports. Liam for a time played NAIA college golf for Providence, traveling cross-country with his teammates and learning the challenge of competing well and living for the glory of God. "Our talents and abilities are gifts from God, and it's a responsibility and a joy to hone them, use them, and steward them so that we point everything back to Him."

Liam seeks to continue in the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA), though he's thankful for his evangelical and non-denominational upbringing. He accepts the challenge from his classmates to memorize the Reformed confessions.



Fred Beall III (M.Div.) first learned about Mid-America through the Reformed Forum podcast and its executive director, Dr. Camden Bucey, who serves on the Seminary's Board of Trustees.

Fred was converted to Christ shortly before his nineteenth birthday, leaving behind a deeply committed atheism. He has never desired to return to unbelief and says that his life has never been the same.

Fred met his wife, Rose, through campus ministry and discipleship. Together they have two sons.

He has served as a preaching and teaching elder in a small independent Reformed church in Texas, located just fifteen miles from the U.S.-Mexico border, while also working as a registered nurse. Fred now desires to pursue pastoral ministry in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC).

The presuppositional apologetics of Greg Bahnsen played a significant role in shaping his Reformed convictions and commitment to Presbyterianism. Above all, Fred seeks to make Christ known in all things and to uphold the preeminence of Christ's Word.



After pausing his ministry as an associate pastor in Wisconsin, **Caleb Cornelius** (M.Div.) moved with his family to begin studies at Mid-America in the Spring 2026 semester.

Caleb transferred to Mid-America after previously completing courses online through the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. He is excited to begin residential studies and to become part of both the Mid-America community and the Dyer area.

Caleb first met his wife, Rebekah, in Nebraska during their shared college years. They have four children and are expecting their fifth child in October.

Before entering pastoral ministry in Wisconsin, Caleb worked at a Bible camp. The Cornelius family has also recently become members of an Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC) congregation.

Caleb and Rebekah first learned about Mid-America through Pastor Brian DeJong, an OPC minister who spoke at a homeschooling conference they were attending. Caleb adores the American Midwest as the best area he says anyone could imagine.



David Danielson II (M.Div.) comes to Mid-America from the suburbs of Minneapolis-St. Paul, Minnesota. He and his wife, Leah, have three children.

In a sense, David joined the Mid-America family on his wedding day. "I married the granddaughter of Jelle Tuininga and the daughter of Jim Sawtelle. So we like to imagine the Thanksgiving dinner conversation if I had announced that I was attending anywhere other than MARS!"

David and Leah come from Redeemer URCNA in Golden Valley, Minnesota. Before entering seminary, David served in client and patient advocacy roles for individuals with disabilities. He also holds a Master of Arts in Biblical Studies from Durham University in the United Kingdom.

Opportunities to exhort and teach pre-catechism classes helped solidify David's sense of call to ministry. His excitement for seminary grew even further when Redeemer hosted Joel Trinidad as a summer intern. The Danielson and Trinidad families developed a close friendship.

David looks forward to building new friendships and enjoying the Seminary's fellowship.



Dustin Dunigan (M.Div.) traces God's providential care and mercy leading him to Mid-America.

Dustin began studies in the Spring 2026 semester. Previously, he studied Fire Science and then added Interdisciplinary Studies when he began to sense the call into pastoral ministry.

Dustin is married to Jessica. "Our house is busy but vibrant," he says. "We always make sure we can account for the six kids." Dustin and Jessica were saved as adults while they were dating, and the Lord reached them together through the instrumental shepherding and discipleship of Rev. Iain Wright (now retired, Covenant OPC, Orland Park, Illinois). Dustin and family remain members of Covenant OPC, where Dustin occasionally exhorts.

Dustin is passionate to reach lost souls, regularly doing street evangelism and sharing the gospel. At 40 years old, some of his sassier classmates try calling him "Dad."



Sam Fennema (M.Div.) spent the last seven years navigating mission, vocation, and the Covid-19 outbreak while teaching in Wuhan, China. "I was on a service trip in Laos with our students, when all of a sudden we got the news that Wuhan International Airport closed, and we were locked out of the city!"

Sam graduated from Providence Christian College (Pasadena, California). His Pastor, Rev. Movses Janbazian (Pasadena URCNA) challenged Sam to consider pursuing pastoral ministry.

Hesitant at first, Sam chose to take time after college to mature and work abroad while preparing to pursue the ministry. In that time, Sam met Britta, a Texan who moved to Wuhan in 2020, and they married Spring of 2022.

Sam and Britta have one son who was born in China, and a second son born in Texas just before Sam begins his studies at Mid-America. Sam's family has some roots in the suburbs of Chicago, though much of his life was spent around Tucson, Arizona.



Hans Mininger (M.Div.) is coming full circle. Having most recently served as a teacher, he now returns home as a student and will have the unique experience of taking classes from his father, New Testament professor Dr. Marcus Mininger. Hans graduated from Covenant College with a double major in English and Philosophy and stayed near the college to teach at Grace Baptist Academy in Chattanooga, Tennessee for a couple years. Hans taught 11th and 12th grade English at Grace and also coached the middle school boys' soccer team. While at Covenant College, Hans took the opportunity to study abroad at Oxford for a semester, which he still describes as his favorite memory from college. Hans enjoys philosophy and languages, particularly French and Greek. He is passionate about church life in all its forms, from polity to congregants connecting in the pews. He has remained in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC), where he grew up, and he hopes for a fruitful life ahead of ministry in the church.

Brian Blummer,
Director of Enrollment Management

FEATURE



Photo credit: Caleb Oquendo from Pexels

THE EVANGELISTIC POWER OF HOSPITALITY

by Dr. Eric B. Watkins

"Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor. Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints *and seek to show hospitality.*"

Romans 12:9-13

Introduction

One of the most powerful evangelistic tools in the life of the church is often an under-used, sleeping giant. This significant, yet overlooked evangelistic tool is hospitality. Some churches are proficient at it; yet if we are being honest, many churches struggle with this tool, especially as it comes to outward-facing hospitality. Hospitality (inward and outward facing) is one of the evidences of health in the life of a local church. Think for a moment about all the various forms of ministry that take place in the Bible—at tables—or in the context of eating and drinking. From the ministry of Jesus to that of his disciples and ultimately the church, hospitality is one of the ways God is pleased to build up his church spiritually and numerically. In this article, we will reflect on a few biblical and practical examples of the power of evangelistic hospitality, as well as give a short preview of the 2026 Center for Missions and Evangelism annual conference (October 2nd-3rd in Lansing, IL), which will be focused on the theme of hospitality. And of course—we hope you will join us and let us show you a bit of hospitality!

Jesus—the Master of Hospitality

In the Bible, food and ministry often go together. One of the sweetest and most winsome ways that Jesus signals his love for us is by inviting us to dine at his table. The Bible ends with a lovely preview of the church, gathered and perfected, robed in white and seated at the eternal table of the Lord (Revelation 19:9). That meal sits against the backdrop of texts like Luke 22, where our Lord graciously instituted the Lord's Supper at a meal—the Passover meal. There, in a home, over good food and celebrating at a large table, Jesus demonstrated his love for us and his first disciples as he not only instructed them but set before them patterns and principles that would be handed down for countless generations. In short, Jesus often utilized food and fellowship (hospitality) as a means of building up his church and spreading the good news of the gospel. Oftentimes, hospitality is at the center of the Christian faith.

In the first century, eating with someone, especially in their home was a big deal. It communicated a sense of belonging, safety and fellowship, even friendship. This is why there was such a controversy at the beginning of Luke 15, where Jesus is seen not only talking to "tax collectors and sinners" but especially eating with them. Eating with someone communicated something important about how one viewed them and one's relationship to them. It leveled the social playing field, as one would sit either at a table or on mats on the floor and eat together. It suggested that one had something in common as one shared a meal together, eating the same food and drinking the same drink. And it communicated fellowship. As people ate together, people talked together about life, work, family and potentially the things that matter most—the things of God. The Scribes and Pharisees were 'above' eating

with tax collectors and sinners; but Jesus was not. Jesus understood the importance of food and fellowship as a means of discussing the kingdom of God. Hence, he humbled himself to dine with us—even the worst of us.

When Jesus ate with people, as he did many times and, in many places, it was always with a spiritual goal in mind. It wasn't simply about the food; it was about the people. In a certain sense, eating with someone humanizes them. When Jesus ate with people, he was not only showing them the goodness of this creation (earthly food), but the power of the kingdom to overcome the effects of sin, restore us to God, and preview redeemed life in God's kingdom, where the presence of God will everlastingly satisfy us. God designed us to eat (thank you, Lord!). Eating is of itself a good thing, even as it reminds us of our needs and dependance upon the one who gives us all good things, including good things to eat. But as Jesus eats with people, he often takes the ordinary stuff of everyday life and uses it as an illustration of our true spiritual need. He did this with water in John 4, as he spoke to the woman at the well. He did it with bread in John 6, as he fed and ate with thousands, while he taught them about the nature of the kingdom of God. God often uses food to get to our souls!

This is why Jesus was not above eating with tax collectors in sinners in Luke 15. The tax collectors and sinners there were, after all, just people. And just like the scribes and Pharisees who were critical of them and Jesus, Jesus knew what they all truly needed: the good news of the kingdom. And so, he ate with them, humanized them, and over those meals, Jesus taught them about the nature of the King and his kingdom. When we think about the ministry of Jesus, and the places where he announced so much of the good news, it was not just on street corners, fields and synagogues, it was often in people's homes, or in some context where meals were eaten together. In short, the evangelistic ministry of Jesus and hospitality go hand in hand. Hospitality is a significant evangelistic tool. No wonder Jesus did so much of his ministry at the dinner table! But what about the church?

The Church—A Ministry of Hospitality

Evangelism and hospitality go side by side, not just in the ministry of Jesus, but in the ministry of the church as well. Our homes—and our dinner tables—really are the center of our lives. They bring us together for food, fellowship, and satisfaction. When people are invited into our homes, they cross a relational threshold. They are drawn into our lives in a unique way. They feel not just like our friends, but almost like part of our family. People's lives are often changed in the context of hospitality, just as the lives of our family members are often shaped by the dynamics at our dinner table, which often include not just small talk, but prayer, singing, and the reading of God's word. Proof that hospitality is an effective ministry tool is found not just in the ministry to those outside the church, but foremost to the family of God. This is clearly the case as we think about the way the church functioned in the New Testament.

When Paul tells the church to "seek to show hospitality" in Romans 12:13, the accent surely falls on the way the church is to open their hearts and homes to one another. This is not only a biblical admonition, but also one of the clearest signs of a healthy church. Hospitality enables us to embody the beautiful doctrine of our union with Christ. As we confess to belong to one another, we practically live out that confession by spending time with one another, eating with one another, encouraging one another. God designed us for fellowship, relationships, and healthy Christians have healthy relationships with one another, often forged in the context of spending time and eating together.

The evangelistic side of this is important as well. It has become somewhat cliché to say, "some people belong before they believe." What is suggested by this phrase is that many people who come to saving faith in Jesus do so in the context of a relationship—someone who took the time to befriend them, get to know them, invest in them, and show some form of hospitality. In this way, a form of 'friendship evangelism' takes place that often leads to people coming and visiting our churches. Hospitality is, in this sense, the front porch of the church. It is that half-way spot between the world and the pew. Of course, we want to see people sitting under the faithful preaching of the word of God. That should always be our goal. But how do people who have no natural connection to the church find their way into the church? Again, it is often through the powerful ministry of hospitality.

By God's grace, I have had the privilege of being a pastor for twenty-five years and of planting three new churches. I love church-planting! One of the main reasons I love it is because church-planting is very outward facing. Small church plants seek to grow. Their need to do so is obvious and much time and effort is spent on outreach in various forms. This often leads to spiritual and numeric growth. But how does that growth take place? Gone are the days when we can just put up a sign that says, "Faithful church inside… the doors are open" and expect people to just come streaming in. Many people today are unfamiliar with the nuances of Reformed theology and especially our church culture. But hospitality is often that bridge that brings people from the outside into our churches, as they often first come into our homes, and from there into our churches.

Many church plants begin with a Bible study in someone's home; and many established churches use living rooms for discipleship and evangelism. People from various backgrounds are invited into these Bible studies. When they come, there is food, fellowship and prayer. In many ways, these Bible studies are like on-ramps into the church. Even apart from Bible studies, families or individuals that are invited into our homes get the opportunity to 'do life with us,' if only for a few hours. But this time spent over meals is precious, as the issues of life set the table for us to talk about the Author and Giver of life.

There was a time in which it seemed like my wife and I would have someone over to our home almost every single day—and every single Sunday. We loved having people over, and people seemed to enjoy coming to our home. Some of those people we knew from church, and others were people we were trying to get

to know so that we could invite them to church. Before our church was able to start a Sunday PM service, we would have people over to our home every Sunday night (sometimes more than 40 people at a time!). It was as overwhelming as it was wonderful. Lives were changed in our living room. Church officers were trained over breakfast. Young men and women were discipled in our home over coffee and dessert. Kids that used to play in our back yard have grown up to become the moms and dads of the next generation of church kids. And the point here is very simple: much of this began with and was perpetuated by hospitality. Humanly speaking, none of the churches my wife and I have planted together would have grown the way they did without my wife being a willing host. Hospitality is essential to the life of the church.

A young man (a seminary student) was giving his licensure exam before a room full of pastors and elders. He was asked, "What brought you into this church?" His answer was deep and profound—he said, "Pumpkin pie." He was referring to the pie my wife made the day he was invited over. Similarly, a different young man (a non-Christian at the time) was invited to our home by some friends from our church that he knew from sports. He had a broken leg, and as he sat at our table eating sandwiches, he made it very clear that he had many objections to the Christian faith. As I listened to him, I thought, 'this kid is pretty bold, talking like this at my table.' After lunch I invited him to begin meeting with me regularly to talk about his objections to Christianity and consider what the Bible may have to say in response. He agreed, and we spent a couple months together doing this once a week over food. Several months later, he began attending our church. Some months after that, he made a profession of faith. Sometime after that, he ended up marrying one of the young ladies that was there the first day he come to my house. She also joined our church. I had the privilege of doing their pre-marital counseling, their wedding, and baptizing their four children. When we moved out of state, their family bought our home. We are still good friends to this day…and it all started with sandwiches in our home.

From Believing to Belonging: Hospitality and Evangelism in the Local Church

How can we grow in our ability as the church to do hospitality well, not just unto the saints, but toward an evangelistic end? In many ways, this is the goal of the Center for Missions and Evangelism annual conference this year. On October 2nd and 3rd, in Lansing, IL, a great lineup of seven different speakers will address this theme. Rev. John Bouwers, pastor of Hope Reformed Church, Brampton, ON, will open God's word from Luke 7, showing how hospitality is not just a moral duty, but a fruit of the gospel. Pastor Greg Bylsma, pastor of Living Water Reformed Church, Brantford, ON, will offer some very practical suggestions on how we can grow in the practice of hospitality. Rev. Jon Dennis, pastor of Holy Trinity Church, Chicago, IL, a thriving church in downtown Chicago, will share stories of what the Lord has done there and how we can learn from some of the ways God's people have learned to develop a heart for the city and for the lost. Dr. Alan Strange, president of Mid-America Reformed Seminary, will challenge us to see hospitality not just as the goal, but as a means of bringing people into full inclusion in the life of the church. Rev. Dale Van Dyke, pastor of Harvest Church, Wyoming, MI, will share his experience of taking a largely inward facing church and leading it into a vision for healthy hospitality and church planting. I will be speaking on the inseparable relationship between mercy ministry and showing hospitality—how the heart of God is seen in hospitality. Finally, I will have the great privilege of interviewing Heather Watkins, member of Salt and Light Reformed Church, Daytona Beach, FL, mother of four adopted kids, who has practiced the art of hospitality over decades of church planting. She has also taught many young women how to show hospitality and how to help shape the culture of hospitality in the life of local churches. This conference will be quite a feast!





Conclusion

Each year our annual conference has grown by God's grace. Last year, we had over three hundred people in attendance, and the remarkable thing was the obvious number of young people in attendance, including church youth-groups. We also had a fantastic (absolutely packed!) exhibitor hall, sharing information about various Reformed, mission-minded ministries. The catered food at the conference was excellent, and the singing was even better! Many new friendships were made, and church leaders and members were challenged and encouraged by the event. We prayerfully look forward to what the Lord will do this year. On behalf of the Center for Missions and Evangelism, I would like to warmly invite you and anyone from your congregation to come and join us this year as we learn together how to grow in the art of hospitality for Jesus' glory and for the good of his church. For more information, please visit https://www.midamerica.edu/cme/conference. Discounted group rates are available! Oh, and did I mention the food?



Dr. Eric B. Watkins,
Director of Church Relations and Development;
Senior Fellow of the CME

ALUMNI PROFILE: STEVE CARR

What can you tell us about your family right now?

Our family recently grew from seven to eight. Our last child was born in 2016, but God blessed us with another little one who was born this year on June 9th. Our oldest is packing up and going off to college at the end of summer. We are experiencing the joys of a newborn and a college-bound son at the same time!

Where have you served in gospel ministry since your ordination?

I had the privilege of serving at Grace Reformed Church of NW Arkansas (RCUS) in Rogers, AR for ten years (2015-2025). I am now serving St. John's Reformed Church in Lincoln, NE.

What can you tell us about your present ministry?

I took the call to St. John's Reformed Church in September of 2025 and began ministry here in November. Lincoln is the capital city of Nebraska, affording us opportunities to have a broad impact. We also have a church plant going in Omaha. Our consistory is overseeing that plant, so I get to serve on the consistory with the pastor serving that plant. Pastor Randy Klynsma, who is serving the Omaha church, is also a MARS grad. He is also the one partly responsible for getting me into my previous charge in Arkansas. It has been a joy serving with a fellow MARS alumnus. I have also had the privilege of teaching a class on Pastoral Theology to Filipino students through Heidelberg Theological Seminary and am scheduled to teach several other classes to foreign students this fall and spring.

What has been your greatest joy in Christian ministry?



Pictured above: Steve Carr, 1st row, 3rd from left

A year before I took the call to St. John's, I was able to have a seminary student serve as an intern at our church. Not only was it a joy to mentor him, it also helped me to think deeper about my own ministry and calling. What was truly a joy, however, was the fact that after I took the call to St. John's, Grace Reformed had decided to extend a call to him. How many pastors get to mentor their replacement?

What has been your greatest challenge in Christian ministry?

The greatest challenge was not COVID. Our church in Rogers took a common-sense approach without giving in to the craziness that the experts were pushing on our churches throughout the nation. My biggest challenge has been in counseling married couples whose marriages ended in divorce or separation. It is hard to watch husbands and wives ignore biblical counsel, and instead choose to tear their families apart. The fallout is not only devastating for the family, but it also has serious repercussions for the unity of the church.

How has MARS shaped your understanding and practice of gospel ministry?

This is not an easy question to answer. But if I'm to pick something, I'd have to say that I have always appreciated the focus on Word and Spirit ministry. Not only did they train me how to prepare sermons, but also how to read Scripture deeply, theologically, and practically for the sake of feeding the flock of God well. I still have my class binders with all the notes, and keep them close by for reference every now and again.

Steve Carr,
2015 Mid-America Alumnus

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FROM BELIEVING TO BELONGING

Hospitality and Evangelism in the Local Church



2026 Center for Missions and Evangelism Conference
October 2-3, 2026
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More information and registration at midamerica.edu/cme/conference