

Clarion

Turning Water into Wine
Is the Church Ready to Serve the Elderly?
Governing the Church



Clarion: a trustworthy and engaging magazine, widely spread and read in Canadian Reformed households and beyond.

To equip God's people for his glory, in faithfulness to Scripture, as summarized in the Reformed confessions, Clarion adheres to the following core values:

Confessionally Reformed
Loving in manner
Attuned to current issues
Readable and Reliable
In Submission to Scripture
Open to constructive criticism
Nurturing Christian living

What's Inside

Do you have elderly parents or grandparents? Or aunts and uncles? Perhaps you are one such person! Chances are that most of us will know of aging people in our family, church, and community for, as we learn in the interview with Mr. Tom McCormick, seniors form a large and growing portion of our Canadian society. I suspect it's much the same in most Western countries. For that reason too we are happy to present this theme issue on caring for the elderly, as it is a matter of increasing necessity and importance. Mr. McCormick presents a challenge to us as Canadian Reformed people, something for our councils and evangelism committees to consider – will we take it up?

If you've ever thought that you should visit seniors but wondered how to do it well, Rev. Dick Wynia offers some wise advice in "Congregational Care for the Elderly." What is life like inside a nursing home? Mr. Mike Krabbendam walks us through a typical day and sensitizes us to the needs there in "Residing in Care." Ms. Anna Nienhuis pulls back the camera a little to urge us to advocate for policies in our communities that will both serve our senior population well and bring honour to the

Lord. Rev. Matthew VanLuik, whom we thank for coordinating the writing of these articles, gives some guidance on "Aging Gracefully" in his editorial, something each of us can take to heart as we journey along in life. All in all, there is much to consider in these pieces.

And yet there is more! Rev. DeGelder is back with the second installment of his new column *Governing the Church* and here too we find sound reasoning and sage remarks that all can digest. Rev. Wes Bredenhof gives us a review of not one but two recent books written by the duo Elyse Fitzpatrick and Eric Schumacher where he finds things to appreciate as well as things to be concerned about. The MERF newsletter gives us a picture of one (typical?) moderate Muslim life in north Africa and his story of conversion to the Christian faith. The Muslim world seems to be as varied as the Christian world in terms of levels of commitment. And Amanda DeBoer presents our kids with the joyful news of the resurrection from the dead! Happy reading!

Peter Holtvliuwer

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EDITORIAL

Aging Gracefully

Today, as I write, it is Queen Elizabeth II's funeral. Crowds are lining the streets to show their deep affection for the Queen. She was loved as a sovereign who faithfully served her people for seventy years of her life. She was considered a woman of faith and wisdom, who had aged gracefully.

How do we age gracefully? The Queen gave the example of someone who recognized that the Lord had given her a position of authority to serve the people. She understood that the Lord was her sovereign and it was her role to act as a loyal servant of the people. The words of the psalmist apply, "Teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom" (Ps 90:12).

Wisdom

Wisdom is never about intelligence but always about understanding all our years in the context of our service to God. Wisdom, the psalmist says, is to understand the anger of God against sin, and the great fear that is God's due. I am not king of my life, but God is ruler supreme over me. Wisdom is the constant awareness that I am living each day before the face of God.

Living every day in the presence of God means that we look to him to satisfy us with his unfailing love. We become wise only when we become like children who look to the Lord to watch over us. When we look to God to satisfy us, it is impossible to let bitterness or anger destroy the joy we have with the Lord. Aging gracefully flows from a loving relationship with God.

Telling our story

As many days as the Lord gives us, we have stories about God's care for us. When I visit the elderly, it only takes a few questions before they are telling the stories of their life. There are two kinds of storytellers; those who like to talk about themselves and their accomplishments and others who talk about the Lord at work in their lives. The latter will tell both sad stories about trouble and happy stories, yet the theme across all those stories is that the Lord was always present. God in his providence was always there and he provided in each situation.


Recently a woman in her nineties recalled stories about a mother who spoke to her children about the Lord. Although life was economically difficult, yet she reminded her children that the Lord always provided for them. She passed on a loving trust in the faithful care of her Lord. These stories are multiplied in the lives of all of God's people. It is the task of each generation to pass on the stories of God's goodness and provision. There is nothing more

beautiful or necessary than for children to hear the testimony of the faith from their parents and grandparents. When the Lord gives you many days, you have many opportunities to become wise to the Lord your God.

Wisdom is having the skill for daily living. It is the ability to understand the issues of life and the insight necessary to handle them correctly. A wise person has learned from past experiences how to approach disappointments, how to deal with broken relationships, and how to give good advice in time of trouble. A wise person is able to put all these things within the context of our daily walk with the Lord. Often the elderly are caricatured as being stubborn and opposed to change. It may be difficult in our old age to deal with change, but a wise person does not see change itself as a threat but an opportunity to teach the next generation the abiding principles of God's Word. Wisdom means that we engage others in biblical conversations to test new ideas against the truths of Scripture. Changes can be embraced when they rest on the principles of God's Word.

Prayer

Finally, it is impossible to age gracefully without prayer. Many seniors tell me they now have more time to be in the Word and prayer. We only grow in wisdom through prayer, for prayer humbly seeks insight from the Lord. You cannot learn from God's Word without asking for the insight that is necessary. It is only through prayer that you can truly listen attentively to what the Lord teaches. God understands the issues and challenges in our lives better than anyone else and he has revealed those things in his Word. No one can understand the power of sin in his own life if he does not carefully listen to what the Lord teaches us about the corrosive effects of sin at work in us.

It is a noble task for the elderly to be busy in prayer for their families, remembering the church as the family of God and interceding for the world. Even when our sight dims, our hearing fades, and our strength wanes, an elderly child of God is busy interceding for others. Though we are powerless, the Lord can do all things. Therefore, humbly intercede with the Lord to show mercy in Christ Jesus. 



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TREASURES NEW & OLD :: MATTHEW 13:52

Turning Water into Wine

“This, the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested his glory. And his disciples believed in him.” (JOHN 2:1–11)

Mary, Jesus, and his disciples were invited to a marriage feast at Cana. Weddings could last a week. It was a time of celebration, involving good food and drink. But we read that “the wine ran out.” In the culture of that day, this was a disaster. In Jewish thought, wine is a symbol of joy and celebration. There was even a saying in connection with the Passover: “There is no rejoicing save with wine.” The festivities were about to take a real downturn.

However, after all is said and done, it’s a catering problem. The Lord Jesus miraculously fixes it by turning water into wine, but to the reader it hardly seems comparable to healing seriously ill people, calming the storm, or raising the dead. But notice the summary of this passage: “This, the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested his glory. And his disciples believed in him.”


The miracle of turning water into wine is literally the first miracle recorded by John. But “first” can also be understood as “foremost.” This was a first and foremost miracle. How’s that possible when it only involves a catering problem? We see the answer when John calls the miracle a “sign” and that it “manifested his glory.” That takes us right back to the opening of John where we read about Jesus Christ in John 1:14: “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.” Jesus Christ has come to reveal the glory of the Father, to show that God so loved the world that he sent his Son to die for sinners.

The miracle or the sign of turning water to wine gives us insight into this. We read that “there were six stone water jars there for the Jewish rites of purification.” Jesus orders the jars to be filled to the brim with water which he then turned into exceptionally fine wine. John calls this a “sign” which means it contains a deeper message.

Running out of wine represents how religion in Israel had turned cold, empty, and barren. There was no joy; no comfort that touched the heart. These jugs for purification were a reflection of how the teachers of the law and the Pharisees had orchestrated all kinds of new purification laws—we see that in Mark 7—which, like their Sabbath laws, just made life joyless and religion empty. The Jewish religion had deteriorated into nothing more than law and custom. Stone jugs for purification

and running out of wine are symbolic of how the present religion was barren, joyless, and without hope.

By turning the water into wine Jesus Christ is showing from the very beginning of his ministry that something new had arrived. He is revealing the glory of the Father. He is revealing that he is going to the cross to die for sinners, redeem sinners, and through his Spirit to turn them into the true, joyful, spiritual children of God. We see this when Jesus says to his mother, “My hour has not yet come.” His “hour” is the Father’s plan that would place him at Golgotha. His “hour” would include not just his death, but also his resurrection and exaltation. The cold, mechanical, joyless religion of Israel was about to change in Jesus Christ. Out with the old, and in with the new!

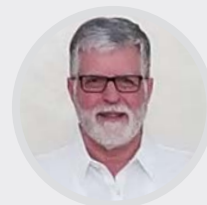
It’s a timeless message. Even today, religion can become routine, without real joy or meaning. To be a Christian is not simply belonging to the church and fulfilling some of the duties required of us. You know what a real Christian is? It’s someone who embraces Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour, loves him, serves him, and finds comfort in him. We see in the opening of John: “In him was life, and the life was the light of men.” He alone quenches our thirst and fills our hearts with lasting comfort and joy. 

Further reading

Mark 7:1–23; John 20:30–31

For further study

1. What is the significance of John using the term “sign” instead of “miracle”?
2. How does turning water into wine manifest the glory of Jesus Christ?
3. Why had religion in Israel become so cold and empty?
4. Reflect on whether there is a message in this for us today.



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Is the Church Ready to Serve the Elderly?

ILSE VANDERMEULEN

The world population is aging, and this increase in seniors is affecting us in Canada and in the church. According to Tom McCormick, who is involved in nursing home ministry and teaching with the Word & Spirit Institute, this is a mission field for the church. He notes that according to God's Word we are expected to honour our parents and treat old people as our parents and that biblical honour encompasses comprehensive respect and care. But is the church ready to serve an increasingly older population amongst its members and the community?

An aging population

The global trend of aging is profound and without parallel in the history of humanity. The stats don't lie: since 2016, in Canada, the share of seniors in the population exceeds the share of children under fifteen. In 1966, 7.5% of the population in Canada

were seniors; in 2040, Statistics Canada expects this to be over 25%. Over the next twenty years, the senior population in Canada is expected to grow by 68% and the over-seventy-four age group will almost double from 6.2 million Canadians to 10.4 million. By some calculations, in 2050 we will have almost 3 million seniors in Canada who are eighty-five years or older.

This has huge implications for all aspects of human life and society, including the church. In the early 1980s, there were seven working people for each retired Canadian; this year that ratio is 3.4 to 1 and in 2050 the Fraser Institute expects it to be 2.5 working people per senior, seriously challenging the Canadian economy and health care system. Urban areas experience different challenges than rural communities. One clear example is that of immigrants. In Canada, the immigrant population makes up a third of the overall population of older

McCormick says the elderly “need recognition, respect, appreciation, and an opportunity to worship, to serve and to grow in grace and knowledge of our Saviour.”

people, but in the Greater Toronto Area alone nearly two in three seniors are immigrants, experiencing more challenges than non-immigrants.

Loneliness is a serious issue amongst the elderly. The National Seniors Council published pre-COVID that half of the people over the age of eighty report that they feel lonely and that men over eighty have the highest suicide rate of all age groups. Compared to socially active seniors, those who are isolated make more visits to the doctor and emergency rooms, use more medication, fall more often, and enter residential care sooner.

With the rising population comes the need for more caregivers. The task and costs to Canadians to take care of the aging in their families will increase, whether or not they are in a care facility. In 2019 Canada counted 1.9 million caregivers; in 2035 we will need 10.3 million people to be involved with the care for the elderly one way or another, juggling work, family life, and other activities with looking after a loved one, all the while contributing \$25 billion to the Canadian health care system. Caregivers for those with dementia volunteer 1.4 billion hours of care per year—the equivalent of 690,000 full-time jobs.

Ministry

Tom McCormick (seventy-three) has been active in ministry to the elderly since he was in his twenties. He has a warm heart for this work. In addition, he wrote a manual on nursing home ministry and speaks regularly to motivate and train believers to take up the task to seek and serve the elderly.

Not satisfied by what he called a fairly liberal Presbyterian church in which he was raised, he wanted to be directed by God’s Word in his life. James 1:27 pointed the way: “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction.”

The parable of the sheep and goats in Matthew 25 also strongly encouraged him to take action to help those in need.

In this parable, Jesus makes it clear that a life worthy of his kingdom must involve actively helping people in need, especially widows and orphans. “I was a twenty-something guy, trying to figure out what’s life about. Those passages made me tremble,” shared McCormick from his Toronto home. With the help of other students and one of his professors, Dr. John Skilton, Tom mapped out all the retirement homes in Philadelphia using phone books and yellow pages where he was studying at the time. “Back then there was no internet. We had big fold-out city maps. . . . We put sticky dots on the map, then called each home, not just in Philadelphia, which is a big city, but also the accessible suburbs. A hundred and fifty maybe. I was a young man. Drawn by the love of God and compelled by the fear of God, I needed to do something,” he says now, looking back at that project.

The aim was to provide each and every senior in a nursing home with a Christian greeting for Easter and Christmas. McCormick: “We encouraged everybody to get permission of course and go room to room, through the whole home, with a Christian greeting. We gave some counsel on how to go about that: stay tuned to the Spirit for opportunities to share the gospel more directly and openly or to pray with people. But to go about this with humility and wisdom and honour and respect for the people and not take advantage and not do anything that closes a door for others.”

The project was successful. On a personal level, Tom found his calling. “In the process, I began ministering personally in one particular nursing home with regular visitation and worship, learning to preach and visit as the Lord took a hold of me.” In addition to his work in nursing homes, Tom McCormick also served overseas, assisting in Bible translation and literacy among minority language groups, teaching English Second Language (ESL) locally; he has also taught at universities, Bible colleges, and Tyndale Seminary.

Priority of God

Tom McCormick serves at a retirement home. After restrictions for COVID were lifted, the retirement home has invited him back and he conducts regular devotional gatherings with a team. He is a passionate advocate for the elderly and speaks at conferences and retreats on how to reach out effectively to the aging. McCormick: "Elderly are lonely, isolated, they suffer; in my opinion they are high on the priority list of God." He points out that our Western culture has idolized youth. Churches too have succumbed to some of this when youth bands and children's work and contemporary worship have taken over.

In his book and training sessions, McCormick highlights the most prevalent issues aging people face: anxiety, lack of contentment, loneliness, grief, economic adjustment, and physical decay, to name a few. By visiting the seniors, we can be a source of comfort, hope, and peace as we point to God and his work through Jesus, the source of these things. McCormick says that the elderly "need recognition, respect, appreciation, and an opportunity to worship, to serve and to grow in grace and knowledge of our Saviour."

Unfortunately, many churches face limited resources both in time and volunteers and often choose to prioritize youth work—much to Mr. McCormick's disappointment. "It's astounding and frightening to hear pastor after pastor say: 'we hear you: you're right, we have no problem with what you're saying or with you, but we are focusing on the emerging generations.' And I say: 'Is it really an either-or? And aren't intergenerational relations and care part of the solution for reaching the emerging generation?'"

McCormick asks churches to focus on the various developmental stages of humans, and the unique spiritual challenges and opportunities of each, especially the neglected stages of mid-life in adulthood and elderhood. "Most churches I know of stop anything specifically stage-relevant after infant, youth, adolescent, and young adult; from then on, it all seems the same."

He recommends several books, including *Vision for the Aging Church—Renewing Ministry For and By Seniors* by James Archibald Houston and Michael Parker. In this book, the authors suggest that the church embrace the challenge of the aging church and make seniors part of the solution.

Dutch Reformed

"My experience with the Dutch Reformed church is that you care for the aging better than anybody I know. And I keep telling my Canadian Reformed friends that you are the best-kept secret in terms of integration and care of the aging. I want to commend

you and urge and pray that in some way the model of what you have been doing for generations can be reproduced and held out to others."

McCormick refers to the regular visitation by elders and pastors and the pastoral care that comes with that. "The intergenerational connections are also fairly standard and normal, as they ought to be. It's part of humans being families and being community; that's intergenerational inclusion." McCormick also gives the Canadian Reformed churches something to consider: "On the other hand, you also are very weak in reaching out beyond your own congregations to the elderly in the community, whether they are Dutch or Reformed or not. Whether they are in institutions or neighbours." After a pause he asks, "What do you think? Am I off?" A question worth pondering.

McCormick wonders if the aging in our churches receive what he calls "their rightful place." "I wonder if they are not only taken care of but are also recognized for their giftings and their wisdom, as if they were sitting at the city gate, as in Jerusalem of old. Are they consulted, have input, and listened to? Are they given opportunities for their gifting and their service, not just within the congregation, but also in the community? For example, elderly mentoring youth in crisis, immigrants who are just out of the water and scared to death. As a community you know about being immigrants not too long ago. You know how to take care of each other."

As an example of involving seniors, McCormick mentions helping out with ESL courses. "The older people who have been involved with ESL find it so richly rewarding to help other immigrants with the simple skills of having a conversation in English. The kindness of the older people, the respect and honour of the immigrant community for older people, it's magic!"

Loneliness

Many aging people are suffering and the restrictions around COVID have made this situation worse. "The stats are heartbreaking to me," says McCormick. "Half the people over the age of eighty report feeling lonely. What kind of mission opportunity is that? Loneliness is more dangerous than obesity and is as damaging to health as smoking fifteen cigarettes a day. So interventions of visitation, of simply being present, and being kind, can be a lifesaver for many!"

It will be a huge challenge for younger generations to care for the increasing amount of aging in society. McCormick says that the whole congregation needs to understand what the Bible has to say about aging. He notices that many people find it hard



familiar with the Bible as those a generation earlier. “A lot of the boomers grow up with some church but then left it. There’s still some residual memory of Jesus Loves Me or the Lord’s Prayer or Psalm 23 and some of the traditional songs.” However, McCormick thinks the basic spiritual needs are the same, including grief, loneliness, and anxiety. “The boomers have questions, even the non-religious ones. These unresolved questions visit them: all the suppression of the truth that boomers and others have tried to keep a lid on. The geriatric literature points out that in the latter stage of life they have less strength and ability to hide from the unresolved issues in their life that come back to haunt them.” McCormick stresses that even though the presentation of the gospel might have to change, the Lord will prepare and help believers reach this generation as well.

Getting on in years himself makes Tom connect even more with those he reaches out to but caring for seniors is important for everyone to do. “There is something in youth that wants and needs connection with older people—grandparents for instance. There is a natural connection both ways. Not only children but teens and adolescents as well. They often can’t get along with their parents,” he laughs, “but they do with their grandparents! That is God-given, the way it is.”

He is deeply grateful for how the Lord has used him in the nursing home ministry. “To be present with the Lord in his care is exquisite. His merciful loving-kindness to older people, often with dementia and their own shattered brokenness, anxiety, desperation, and darkness. Coming along with the Lord who is light and love, kindness and mercy, and present that to them, is for me an immense privilege and blessing.” The people whom he visits take him as he is. “I’m such a broken mess in my own eyes, but that is not what the elderly see and that is not all that the Lord wants me to see either.” He is humbled to work in God’s service: “To know him, to be faithful, to be obedient. To participate, to experience who he is, whom he revealed himself to be in Holy Scripture, and to experience that in the presence of the Holy Spirit is transforming and fulfilling beyond words. It’s an unspeakable blessing.” 🙏

to visit the elderly—including ministers and elders—because it confronts them with their own inevitable aging and mortality. “Death is an issue we all have to face,” says McCormick. “But doesn’t the Lord specifically address that? If our only comfort in life and death is not the Lord Jesus, what is your gospel? What and how are you a Christian?”

Part of his training sessions is preparing people well for visiting the elderly and to take away some of the apprehension participants might have. McCormick takes them to a long-term care home as well: “Getting them through the front door is the biggest challenge. Getting them back out is the other big challenge! Once they get a taste of it, it turns out that they actually like these people, saying: ‘he was so interesting;’ ‘she was such a laugh! I want to go back!’” he says about the reaction of participants.

McCormick encourages us not to think too small of God’s power in us. He recalls a situation visiting a lady who was babbling and off in her own world. “I tried all my techniques to reach her, but nothing was working. And I thought, I have nothing to lose, and I started to recite: ‘The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. . .’ and she joined me in German.” After that, he could talk to her for a little while, even about her church and faith. He also points out that sharing the gospel with the elderly impacts also the nursing staff—many of them Christians who can share—but also the children and families of the residents.

Boomers

Tom McCormick has seen much in nursing homes over the decades he has worked there. The seniors today are not as



Ilse Vandermeulen

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Congregational Care for the Elderly

DICK WYNIA

Care for vulnerable and needy people has always belonged to the very life and identity of the church. In his law, God commanded Israel to provide for sojourners, widows, and the fatherless.¹ In that way, God set Israel apart from the surrounding nations, where widows, strangers, and orphans received no special favour or protection. In the early church, the presence and the power of the Holy Spirit was reflected particularly in the church's generosity toward those who were in need, to the point that "there was not a needy person among them" (Acts 2: 45, 4:34, 35). As is clear from Acts 6:1, widows were certainly recipients of this congregational care. Paul lays out the obligations of family and church to look after widows in our midst (1 Tim 5:9). God expects us to care well, as believers, for the elderly among us.

We live in a time in which governments provide financial support and care facilities to help the elderly, but we, as the body of Christ, may not abdicate our responsibility to these brothers and sisters. Pension cheques and long-term care homes don't meet all their needs. It is true, as many say, "Growing old is good, but being old is hard." Old age is often a time of deep loneliness and in the world many residents of long-term care homes are more or less abandoned by their families. A Google search for "dying alone" reveals that it is becoming more and more common in the developed

world; in Japan, it has even created an industry "to deal with the aftermath of 'lonely deaths,' where paid professionals go into people's homes and clean up the remains of the solitary deceased."² Recently, a local funeral director described to me how increasingly, when an elderly parent dies, relatives request "direct disposal"—the funeral home is instructed to pick up the body and "dispose" of it, by cremation, with no memorial service or formal burial.

Show love by giving time

These phenomena reflect the prevailing attitude of the world toward the elderly, even toward elderly parents. Christ called us to a very different ethic and practice, namely, that we should follow his example by loving one another as he loved us. He said, "By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." Visiting our elderly brothers and sisters will let our light shine before others, so that they see our good works and give glory to our Father who is in heaven (John 13:34-35; Matt 5:16).

Time is a precious commodity, and spending some of "our time" to visit the elderly is a generous thing to do. Family members have the first and greatest obligation in this respect. Paul has harsh words for those who don't provide for widowed family members (1 Tim 5:8). Practically speaking, some of us,

¹ See e.g. Deuteronomy 14:29, 24:19-21; Matthew 25:31-46; Ephesians 4:28; James 1:27, 2:1-9

² <https://qz.com/1764682/more-people-around-the-world-are-dying-alone/>

Christ called us to a very different ethic and practice, namely, that we should follow his example by loving one another as he loved us

like empty nesters and retirees, probably have more “spare time” than most others, and visiting seniors is a profitable way to invest that time. But we all have some time to give, and it’s a holy thing to develop the habit of giving of ourselves, whatever our age or life circumstance. Our elderly brothers and sisters are encouraged and uplifted by the thoughtfulness that we express by visiting them.

What will we talk about?

We don’t need to feel intimidated because we’re not sure what we’re going to say to them. The best way to show our respect and our love is simply to listen. If you take a genuine interest in what they have to say, you won’t have any trouble having a conversation that edifies them and you. Many elderly people live alone and miss having someone to talk to about things that they’re dealing with. If you wonder what you might ask them, put yourself in their shoes. Ask them about their lives, the things they’ve seen and experienced in church and family life—and as they tell you what they’ve learned, spiritually and practically, you’ll discover that you receive more than you give. Share what’s happening in your life; talk about what God is doing in the creation around you. Your visits don’t have to be long; as with other gifts that we give, it’s the thought that counts.

Check with the person you hope to visit, or with staff at the long-term care home to make sure you visit at a time that works. Don’t be afraid to bring little children along; it might be a bit of a challenge, but generally speaking our aged brothers and sisters enjoy seeing little children.

Office bearer visits

When elders are ordained to their office, they are mandated to “faithfully visit the members of the congregation in their homes to comfort, instruct, and admonish them with the Word of God.” Describing the ministry of mercy, the Form for the Ordination of Elders and Deacons says, “No one in the congregation of Christ may live uncomforted under the pressure of

sickness, loneliness, or need.” Ministers have the “duty to visit the members of the congregation and to comfort the sick and sorrowing. Thus comforting and admonishing, he shall call the whole congregation to the redemption which is in Christ Jesus.”³

All of the office bearers are therefore called to minister to elderly members, especially by visiting those who are frail, lonely, and no longer able to attend the worship services. Ministers, elders, and deacons should all make regular visits with the elderly, and especially when a crisis arises such as illness, accident, or bereavement. Birthdays and anniversaries are also occasions that call for visits from the office bearers. There is no “airtight” separation of the office bearers’ concerns or responsibilities: all open the Word to provide comfort and admonition, and all work together to help ensure that the elderly are well looked-after spiritually and materially.

The elders’ main focus is on the spiritual well-being of the elderly members, keeping in mind how their experiences and circumstances might affect them spiritually, and helping them to think about what God is teaching them about him and about themselves. If they are unable to attend worship services, it is important to ensure that they receive regular spiritual nourishment from God’s Word. Elders should point them to the comfort of belonging to Jesus Christ, of being God’s children, and of the inheritance that has been promised them.

The deacons work with the family to make sure that practical needs are being met. That might include financial need, aids to mobility or safety in the home, rides to church and to medical appointments, meals, home care, and home or vehicle maintenance. Deacons should remind them of Christ’s care for them, as revealed in his Word.

The minister’s role is central to the church’s care for the elderly. As they grow older, they face particular spiritual struggles and questions. It’s important to ask them how they’re dealing with their mortality, and the prospect of coming before the judgment seat of Christ. Some are weighed down by regrets because of sins and (perceived) failures of the past; some feel

³ Forms for the Ordination of Ministers, and of Elders and Deacons, p. 618-621; p. 624-627, *Book of Praise*



ashamed, or guilty, or afraid to die. Many have unbelieving children or grandchildren. Many have lost a spouse and find themselves alone after a long marriage and may be caught up in grief without hope. Some are too proud to repent of wrong they have done; others bear grudges against people who have hurt them. As a result, they may be estranged from family members and fellow believers. It is tempting to “let sleeping dogs lie” and not stir up longstanding conflicts. The minister should consult and work with his fellow elders and family members to try to address these difficult situations with tact and wisdom, doing his best to see to it that the brother or sister lives and dies in the comfort of the gospel, reconciled to God and neighbour.

We have mostly focused on the challenges that elderly members have to deal with, but office bearers will also find much to rejoice about in their care for the elderly. It is encouraging to hear their testimony to God’s mercy and faithfulness throughout the years, and I thank the Lord for what I have gained and learned from my aged brothers—far more than I have ever given or taught them (Ps 92:12-15).

Listen!

Office bearers need to develop the skill of listening, also when they visit the elderly. By listening, you come to know the brother or sister; you gain insight into their joys and sorrows, their regrets and their fears. You will be able to recognize their spiritual and material needs and get a clear picture of their faith and their relationship with the Lord. You will come to know where they need the encouragement and reassurance of the gospel, and where they need admonition and even correction. Then you can choose Scripture passages that are appropriate, that speak to the spiritual needs of your members; then you can offer informed prayers on their behalf during the visit and in your own devotions. 📖



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Additional resources

Various articles on care in aging can be found at <https://www.christianstudylibrary.org/lib/care-aging>

Residing “In Care”

MIKE KRABBENDAM

Have you been inside a nursing home lately? Is it a place where you would consider advising your parent(s) to reside?

When you look at the residents, what do you see? When you look at the staff from the various departments, what do you see? When you listen to the residents, staff, and other visitors, what is it that you hear? What you see, hear, and smell depends on the timing of your visit.

Behind the scenes

Let me introduce you to the general internal workings of a nursing home and present a sort of “behind the scenes” of everyday work life of the staff.

It is 6:45 a.m.; the night staff is writing out the last of their reports and preparing for the transition of duties to the incoming staff at 7:00 a.m. The night and day staff meet, and a report is given. The report provides the pertinent information on the events of the night, passing on information on patient medications, those needing more immediate attention, and who went to or returned from the hospital. The day staff quickly prioritize their duties for the day. The care aides and nurses take on specific duties, seeking to provide the needed care for each resident.

Mrs. A. and Mr. B. were each identified as being a higher need this morning and are checked on first by one of the nurses. Call bells start ringing as residents are waking up. Depending on the size of the nursing care home, some duties are doubled up; other larger homes have kitchen staff, dietary aides, and cooks who are preparing the first meal of the day. In general, breakfast needs to be ready by 8:30 a.m.

The dietary staff serve breakfast as residents begin to arrive in the dining room and the care aides assist the residents with their meals. One of the nurses arrives with the medication cart and gives out the prescribed medications. On average there are forty to fifty residents per floor who will be eating breakfast in the dining room.

It is now 9:30, and the dining room is clearing out. The housekeeping staff are already cleaning the residents’ rooms and the laundry is being done. Some residents walk to the lounge or walk the hallways; others may require assistance with walking, and some may require a wheelchair. The care staff are busy providing personal care: bathing, changing bed linens, making beds, and tidying up rooms. Between 10:00 and 10:15 a.m., morning snacks are brought to the residents.



Meanwhile the nurses are answering phone calls, phoning physicians, talking with family members, updating care plans and medical charts. They also prepare samples for the lab, review medications, and process various orders from other health care professionals. Care conferences are sometimes held which can include the resident's physician, a nurse, a care aide, a family member, and the resident.

By now it is 11:15 a.m. and it's time to prepare the residents for lunch. Some residents may need their meals earlier because of appointments, or outings with family or friends, and others may have a visitor waiting in their room. By 12:00 p.m. the dining room is full, and a repeat of the morning duties takes place. After lunch the residents are assisted back to their rooms and most lie down for a nap. Call bells continue to be answered, and personal care is provided.

Between 2:30 and 3:00 p.m., residents typically wake up from their naps and get ready for their tea. Then the recreation staff engage the residents in the last activity for the day and the supper preparations are well underway. The staff shift in the afternoon (which takes place every eight or twelve hours) follows the same handoff procedure as in the morning.

The nurses have been kept busy with their own reporting, changing medical dressings, and other medical procedures as required. By 5:00 p.m. it is time for supper to begin; residents are assisted to the dining room and once again the tasks related to the meal begin. By 6:00 p.m. the residents are being assisted with personal care needs; some need to be returned to their beds, some go to the lounge to socialize, and others may again have visitors or are going out. The recreation staff may have planned an evening event. The nursing staff are finishing their reports, following up with the pharmacy, processing new medication or changed medication orders and preparing for the 7:00 p.m. shift change.

Nursing home administration

In a large nursing home, there are a number of administrators, such as a manager of care, a head nurse, a kitchen manager, a housekeeping manager, a therapeutic recreation director, a maintenance manager, and a financial manager. Smaller organizations will blend their management positions.

Administrators need to keep current with the federal and provincial government legislation. Each act contains rules and regulations that need to be implemented. Under each act, other

local government agencies, including health authorities, have an impact on the operation of the care home. (In BC there are thirty provincial acts an administrator needs to be aware of.)

Multiple inspectors can legally enter the building and inspect various aspects of the nursing home without notice, at any given time. Some inspections are brief; others can occupy most of the day and major inspection / audits can take three to five days to complete. Should there be areas that do not meet the requirements of the inspection, they must be corrected and be reinspected.

Administrators report directly to the owner(s) of the nursing home. There are various types of ownership, such as a not-for-profit society with a board of directors, a large corporation with a higher management structure, a single owner or group of owners, or a crown corporation where the government is the owner.

Spiritual care

Spiritual care needs of the residents are greatly underestimated. How their needs are responded to depends on the ownership and the governing guiding principles or structure of the nursing home. The guiding principles of a care home impact the methods for the provision of spiritual care (or the lack thereof).

Historically in Canada most nursing homes began with the recognition of the need to provide care for the elderly by local congregations. It was and often still is the pastors of these churches that provide spiritual care in a nursing home. Some of the large care homes have a budget for spiritual care and will provide quiet rooms for spiritual care. Due to the multicultural diversity of the residents, chaplains have become interdenominational in their approach in providing spiritual care.

Church services and maintaining Sunday as a special day are important factors in spiritual care. Some homes may provide bus service to a local church while others may provide Sunday services by a pastor/ spiritual leader, and some make use of the live video feeds. Individuals may volunteer to visit and bring spiritual comfort and often volunteer groups visit and engage the residents in a time of worship and praise.

Homes that cater to a specific denomination can more easily provide the spiritual care residents are accustomed to. When there is stress and upheaval, residents and staff can pray together. When a resident is in spiritual need or very ill and nearing the end of their life, residents and family members can

be comforted by visiting pastors. Nursing homes that are part of a seniors campus (combined with senior housing) have Bible study groups that the more capable nursing home residents can attend. Spiritual songs with which residents grew up are very helpful for calming a resident with dementia. It is remarkable that a person with dementia can clearly sing an entire song learned as a child. Recorded church services that are shown during the week also help in the spiritual care of both those still sound of mind and those who suffer from dementia.

Seeing the staff

I have written about the routines in a care home, but it is important to keep in mind that all staff, and in particular the nursing staff, are putting into practice God's work of caring for those who have cared for others in the past. Staff members who hold to Christian values and work in a secular nursing home are instructed to avoid talking about religion. Yet, when they see the spiritual needs being expressed by a resident there is an opportunity to interact with the resident. Throughout the day nursing staff are faced with a variety of situations where they need to keep their own emotions in check and pray to God for strength. They need strength to give compassionate care, even when residents resist them.

Staff need to pray for the right words when a resident is searching for answers, as they reminisce about the past. Staff need to pray for patience when a resident is looking for a spouse, a child, or even their mother. Staff must pray for strength when a resident is passing away, for they must stand alongside a grieving family member and then be able to step away. When the staff go home at the end of their shift, they need to pray for strength as they step out of their uniform and carry on with their day, dealing with their family as if nothing has changed or affected them during the shift. Caring for seniors is more complex than many are aware—some speak about it as “a glorified babysitting service.” I would rather describe it this way: it is a most a most honourable task given by God—to care for those who are most vulnerable. 🙏



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Elder Care:

How Good Policies Support Good Care

ANNA NIENHUIS

As Christians, we know that human dignity is inherent to being human. Our identity is found in our belonging to Christ, not in our age or abilities. But knowing and feeling are two different things, and there is no doubt that some elderly Christians feel that they lose their dignity, or part of their identity, as they age. It will take intentional work to both show and tell the elderly that they are valued, and to help each of us resist the offer of euthanasia as a means to end suffering on our own terms. We need to evaluate how we can best reflect Christ's sacrificial love in our care for the elderly, and also promote good public policy that fosters proper care in our broader society.

Family first

Cultural and economic changes of the past century have shifted elder care away from the family and into the realm of institutions and governments. Families with fewer children have fewer people to share the task of elder care. Further, the trend toward having kids later in life means some parents are juggling child care and elder care at the same time, sometimes referred to as the "sandwich generation." Medical advances have led to longer life expectancies, resulting in more years where elder care may be needed and higher levels of need in the oldest elderly. We also live in a more transient society, where many

The removal of elder care from the realm of family responsibility is a trend Christians should resist

people leave their home communities and do not live near elderly family members when the time comes that they need care. All of this, coupled with the rise of institutionalized care homes and hospices, has diminished our sense of responsibility toward our elders as well as our actual capacity to care for them.

Despite these cultural shifts, the removal of elder care from the realm of family responsibility is a trend Christians should resist. God calls us to honour our fathers and mothers, to respect the aged, and to care for the vulnerable among us.¹ Paul teaches that family has the first responsibility for caring for widows, as a way for children and grandchildren to “make some return to their parents” (1 Tim 5:4). Jesus condemned those who made pious claims of doing good while abandoning the proper care of their parents (Mark 7:9-13). Clearly, family-based elder care was an expected norm in Christian communities.

Policies worth promoting

Where the government and other community groups *should* be involved is in enabling family to be more confident and effective in providing elder care. Canadians overwhelmingly wish to age at home—more than 90% of Canadian seniors live in their own home or a family member’s home, and most do not enter long-term care facilities until it is absolutely necessary.² How can we honour seniors’ wishes to stay in their community or a family home as long as possible? Several policies would support this: expanded training for informal caregivers, community respite care, financial benefits, and public accessibility.

Courses with basic training on things like how to brush someone else’s teeth, how to administer medication, and how to transfer someone from a wheelchair to a bed are invaluable to at-home caregivers. These types of classes are available in some communities, but if they are not in your area, encourage your local municipal government to support such classes

in partnership with relevant organizations such as hospices or hospitals, or with experts such as nurses, care aides, and pharmacists.

Respite help ensures family caregivers are supported and able to provide care without burning out. In some places, long-term care homes offer day programs where families can drop off their elderly family member for activities, a meal, and a tub bath if necessary. There are respite beds in some care homes reserved for short-term use. Respite hours can also be used in the home, where a qualified person spends a few hours with the person needing care while the family caregiver runs errands or goes visiting. Church groups can be involved in organizing or volunteering for these respite services. Municipal and provincial governments can also be encouraged to review and fund various community respite services.

Financial support for family caregivers is another policy Christians can support, similar to family or child benefits. Current family caregiver benefits extend for up to thirty-five weeks at just over half of a person’s wage, with limitations for maximum payments. This time-limited support does not account for the multiple years of care some older adults require and does not incentivize those who are not in the workforce to care for an aging family member. Extending financial support options for family caregivers would strengthen the foundational building block of the family and help seniors to stay in their communities. It would relieve staffing and bed shortages in long-term care facilities and could significantly reduce financial costs to the civil government.

Accessibility initiatives are another great way to promote home and community-based elder care. Policy recommendations can focus on petitioning local governments to make communities more accessible for people of varying abilities. Ramps and automatic doors to stores, transportation services

¹ See for example Exodus 20:12; Leviticus 19:32; Proverbs 16:31, 20:29, 23:22; Mark 7:9-13; Ephesians 6:1-3; 1 Timothy 5:3-8)

² Daily Caring: Seniors are aging at home with help from a village. Retrieved from <https://dailycaring.com/how-the-village-movement-is-helping-seniors-age-in-place>. Garner, R., Tanuseputro, P., Manuel, D. G. & Sanmartin, C. (2018) Transitions to Long-Term and Residential Care Among Older Canadians. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/82-003-x/2018005/article/54966-eng.htm>

Too often the goal of elder care seems to be safety rather than satisfaction

such as HandyDart, extended time buttons at crosswalks, financial rebates for home modifications such as walk-in showers, and other ideas can make home and community living possible for more elderly people.

Long-term care

If institutional long-term care home placement is necessary, family involvement must remain a priority. Staff rightly remain professional caregivers, while family and community should satisfy emotional, social, and spiritual needs, and also help with physical needs when possible. Being able to fulfill these needs naturally requires access to your family member, so Christians should advocate for the essential nature of family caregivers in long-term care. Shutting out family visitors had devastating effects during the COVID pandemic, as residents faced fear and loneliness and staff struggled to maintain standards of care without the “shadow workforce” of family caregivers.

Nathan Stall, a geriatric physician, says family caregivers play an essential role in the geriatric healthcare system. They are fully capable of learning and following the protective measures necessary to prevent the spread of infectious diseases. Allowing them to assist in the care of the elders would benefit both residents and staff immensely.³


Maintaining meaning

Too often the goal of elder care seems to be *safety* rather than *satisfaction*. Keren Brown Wilson, a pioneer of assisted living in the 1980s, said, “We want safety and security for our loved ones, and freedom and autonomy for ourselves. . . . Why don’t we want the same things for them that we do for ourselves?”⁴ Whether at home or in a facility, elder care should leave freedom for, and facilitate, what makes life meaningful to each unique resident.

This could be anything from freedom to visit with friends and family to small things that consider individual joys and comfort, such as getting outside each day, eating ice cream, watching a particular show, having plants or a pet, or listening to your favourite music.

It is up to us to step up and provide that holistic care, first in our families but also in our churches and broader communities where God gives the opportunity. Supporting church-affiliated care homes is a great way to promote Christian elder care, as these homes epitomize loving care where dignity is assumed, not earned. Christians should be encouraged to pursue positions as care aides, support workers, nurses, and volunteers.

Consider too how believers could take this further, possibly setting up Christian palliative care facilities or respite programs. Elder care used to be primarily the domain of individual families and Christian organizations. Could it be that way again?

Christians should advocate for policies that promote and support home care, and that protect the religious freedom and conscience rights of private care homes. We should be active participants, when possible, in the fields of care through career or volunteer work. Above all, we should show with our words and actions that we *want* to care for our elders, not only physically but also socially, emotionally, and spiritually. May we as a church be defined by how we sacrificially care for the widowed, the lonely, and the sick, and may God’s love be seen through our love for our elderly neighbours. 



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³ <https://www.chpca.ca/news/canadian-hospice-palliative-care-association-calls-for-more-compassionate-visitation-protocols-during-covid-19-pandemic/>

⁴ As quoted in Gawande, Atul. (2014). *Being Mortal: Medicine and what matters in the end*. Picador, USA.

Governing the Church

Checks and Balances

JAN DEGELDER

The previous article ended with the questions: why is our Church Order put together the way it is? How do these arrangements reflect the purpose of this document? It is important to think about this a bit more. The emphasis was on the Church Order as a voluntary agreement of a group of local churches, with the understanding that the rules can be changed when all (or the majority) of participants agree. This could leave the reader with the impression that our Church Order is not much more than a pragmatic document with some arbitrary regulations, put together more or less haphazardly. But nothing could be further from the truth.

Biblical principles

There is much more to it. The introduction to the Church Order on page 647 of the *Book of Praise* gives a very brief history of

this document. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, over a period of about fifty years, with input from many local churches, the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands carefully discerned how God wants his church to be governed, based on his Word. With this in mind, they crafted the rules and regulations we have in our Church Order, a process that was finalized at the well-known Synod of Dort in 1618/1619.

It means that the essential content comes from the Bible, but it does not imply that each one of those seventy-six articles is backed up by one or more particular texts. The Church Order also includes instructions that can be drawn from Scripture by good and lawful deduction. This qualifies the Church Order as a “spiritual order” (BC, Art. 30) with the purpose “to maintain the body of the church” and “to preserve and promote harmony and unity and to keep all in obedience to God” (BC, Art. 32)

What could possibly lead to the need for change?

As they were formulating this spiritual order, the churches were driven by the following biblical convictions:

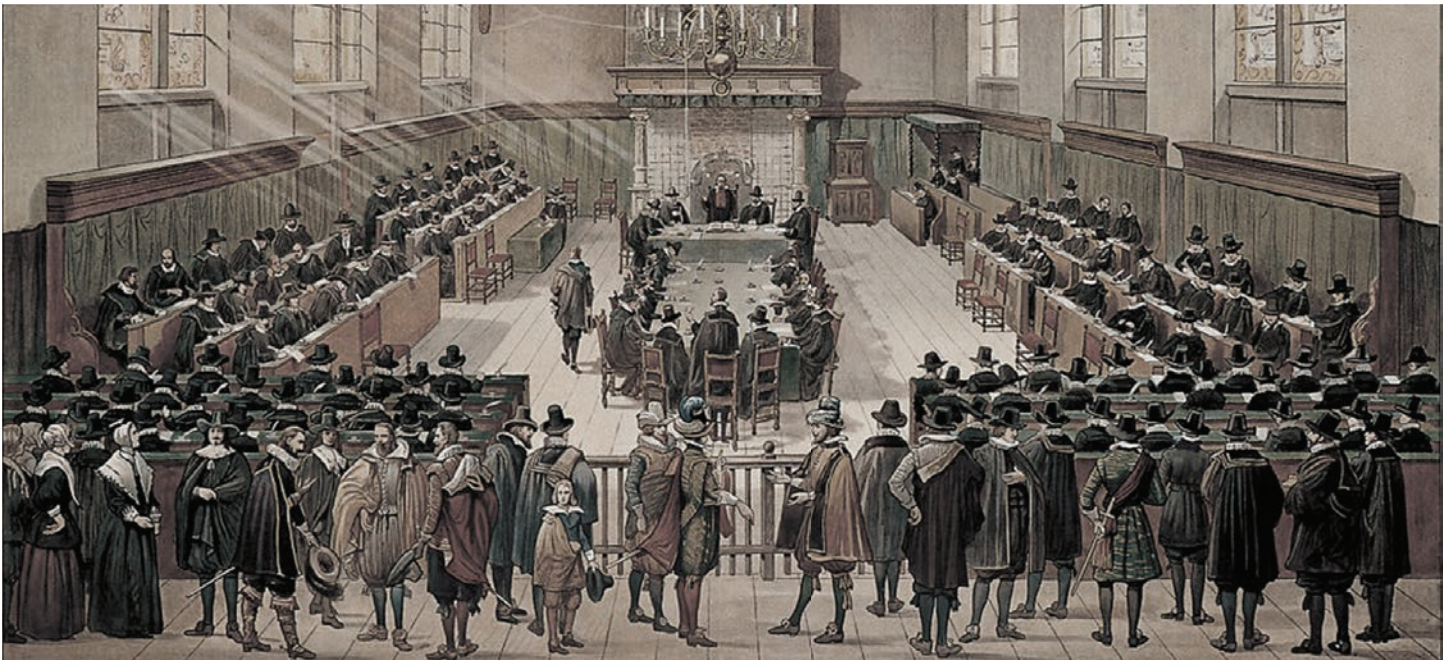
1. God is not a God of disorder, but of peace (1 Cor 14:33) and therefore all things should be done decently and in order (1 Cor 14:40).
2. All the rules and regulations we agree on must acknowledge and reflect that Jesus Christ is the only Head of the church (Eph 1:22; Col 1:18).
3. All the local churches are autonomous bodies of Christ, governed by local office bearers with local authority. There is no central (human) head or head-office. The apostle Paul wrote most of his letters to local churches. And in Revelation 2 and 3 the focus is on the angels of seven local churches.
4. At the same time, these autonomous local churches are *given* to each other, based on the unity of faith, under the Lord Jesus Christ as the same Head of all the churches. The apostle Paul wrote a letter to a group of churches in Galatia. He also instructed the church in Colosse to pass on their letter to the church in Laodicea. Other authors addressed multiple churches in their writings. And the famous church council

we read about in Acts 15 illustrates how beneficial it is to cooperate and mutually support one another as churches.

Goals

The Reformed churches that were working on this “church order project,” so to speak, were faced with the challenge to formulate the rules and regulations in such a way that justice would be done to all four of those principles. And as they did so, they also kept in mind the two main goals that flow from these principles:

1. As churches we share the mutual responsibility to help one another safeguard the faithful teaching, the true doctrine as it comes to us in Scripture and as the churches have summarized it in the Reformed confessions. After all, on almost all the pages of the New Testament we are warned against false doctrine and against those who introduce and promote wrong teachings.
2. As churches we also share the mutual responsibility to protect the churches against the pitfalls of “hierarchy,” as well as the pitfalls of “independentism.”



Synod of Dort in Dordrecht, 1618-1619

Hierarchy vs. independentism

It might be helpful to look a bit closer at those words. “Hierarchy” is governing from the top down. When it comes to churches, the classic example is, of course, the Roman Catholic Church (RCC). The Pope is the (human) head of the worldwide RCC, with archbishops and bishops at lower levels. In the Reformed system, a form of hierarchy which could develop may be when members regard the general synod as the highest (human) authority over the church(es). This would violate the third biblical principle mentioned above. “Independentism” is the opposite. Here, classic examples are local churches that operate entirely on their own, sometimes break-aways from a particular denomination, but often the result of one man’s ministry. When Reformed churches embrace independentism, they declare: regardless of what we have agreed upon in the Church Order, regardless of the matter of mutual accountability, when we don’t like certain things, or we think that some of those rules don’t work for us, we can just ignore them and do our own thing. This would be a violation of the fourth biblical principle.

Interestingly, when we hear “hierarchy,” we usually think of an authority that lords it over a denomination or a group of churches. But independentism is not as far removed from hierarchy as it sounds. Strict independentism can lead to “local hierarchy.” In an entirely independent church, especially if this church is the result of one man’s ministry and mission, the charismatic leader or pastor can become the sole authority who will not tolerate any dissent and will singlehandedly silence people who criticize him.¹

Change—why & how

The Canadian Reformed Churches are a voluntary federation of autonomous Reformed churches. Within that framework, our Church Order sets the parameters for the way in which these churches are governed. In this way, it provides checks and balances to maintain, locally and as federation, the fine line between hierarchy and independentism.


All of the above does not undo the fact that the rules can be changed when all (or the majority) of the churches agree. However—it does trigger the question: what could possibly lead to the need for change?

Dr. Jack DeJong, who taught Church Polity at the Theological College between 1990 and 2003, worked with the following definition: *Church Polity is the study of the order, the polity, and the government of the church as it is required by Scripture and as it has developed in the church’s history.*

In other words, the articles of the Church Order, which were written on the basis of the biblical principles and with the biblical goals outlined in this article, were also formulated in a particular historical context. They often do reflect the circumstances of that time in the history of the church. And while biblical principles are timeless, historical circumstances are not.

So, yes—different times and different circumstances may indeed call for changes, adjustments that reflect new times and situations. That’s why since 1618/1619 the Reformed Church Order has gone through several revisions. The last one in the Canadian Reformed Churches was completed in 1983.

The previous article emphasized that such revisions can only be adopted *with common accord*, as Article 76 of the Church Order puts it. This article adds that such revisions should only be adopted under two other conditions:

1. As long as they do not weaken the commitment to the same biblical principles that from the very beginning characterized the Reformed Church Order as a spiritual order (BC, Art. 30)
2. As long as they maintain the checks and balances to strive for the two goals mentioned earlier. 



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¹ Just Google “abusive churches” or “abusive church leaders.”



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MERF News

October 2022



Middle East Reformed Fellowship—“Declaring the Whole Counsel of God”

Sovereign Saving Grace A Testimony

Asim is 43 years old. He grew up in a nominally Muslim family in Khartoum, the capital of Sudan. His father was a successful and well-respected businessman. Asim is an only son, with both an older and a younger sister. At an early age, he was employed by his father. He went on to get a university degree in business administration which enabled him to excel in his father’s business. At 24 years of age, he married a distant cousin whom he knew and liked since childhood. Their happy marriage is blessed with three children, two sons and a daughter. At 28 years of age, his father made him his sole business partner.

Becoming a Strict Muslim

Through business dealings, he became good friends with two strongly religious Muslim



men. From the start, they rebuked him for his lack of commitment to strict Islamic beliefs and religious practices. Gradually they persuaded him to follow their example. Eventually he threw his energies into pursuing an Islamic life-style. He began to memorize and recite passages of the Quran and became preoccupied by pursuing the exercise of strict Islamic Sharia law.

This new strict religious lifestyle impacted all his relationships. His circle of friends changed. He no longer enjoyed the company of some of his best friends, who did not share his new religious ways.

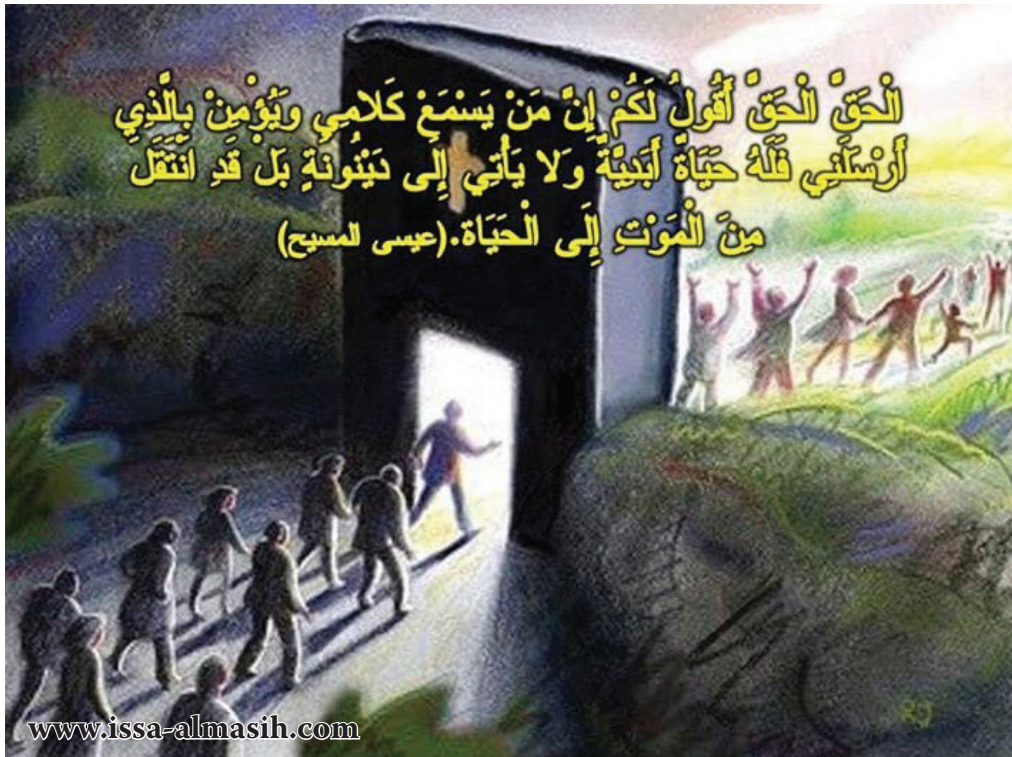
Family Tension

He introduced new demands on his wife and children. This included requiring them to memorize the Quran and attend

classes on Islamic teaching. Initially, his loving wife reluctantly went along with some of his new rules. She refused, however, to wear the Islamic *hijab* head covering for women. Neither would she accept to replace her circle of friends for his Islamic companions. So, Asim’s warm and peaceful family life became tense.

A Surprising Change

Then, Hasan, one of the two Islamic friends who had convinced him to become a strict Muslim, changed completely. He became totally disenchanted with his religion. He made this very clear to his family and friends. In spite of this, his friendship with Asim remained strong. In time, Hasan confided in him about his interest in the life and teaching of Christ. Since the Quran speaks highly of Jesus, Asim didn’t find that objectionable.



***“Truly, truly, I say to you,
whoever hears my word and believes him
who sent me has eternal life.
He does not come into judgment,
but has passed from death to life.” John 5:24***

It is All About Jesus

Hasan, however, shared with him that he was finding out that the Jesus of the gospel is very different from what Islam teaches about him. This got Asim thinking and stirred up his curiosity. He became interested in learning more about Jesus. Quietly, on his own, he began searching online. As is often the case with open-minded Muslims, Jesus’ teaching in the “Sermon on the

Mount” and other sayings attracted the attention of both Hasan and Asim. Also, Jesus’ words of rebuke addressed to religious leaders appeal to disenchanted Muslim.

Growing in Grace

Today, both men and their wives are part of a small Bible study group. As they grow in their walk with Christ, Asim joyfully reports: “In Christ Jesus (*Issa al-Masih*), we know not

only what God is like, but also how much he loved us and continues to love us... We love him too!”

For Your Prayers:

S.S., of Tunisia reports that her father finally allowed her to marry A.E., another follower of Christ. She asks prayer for their marriage and also for her father and mother who have become open to learning more about their faith in Christ.

K.M. of Egypt reports with joy that two of his Muslim friends (one with his wife) are regularly joining him in studying MERF’s Arabic book about Christ’s nature and his redemptive work. Pray for wisdom as they consider attending a local church.

Christians in Hasaka and Qamishli and other parts of northeastern Syria have recently faced additional economic and social hardship. The area is mostly controlled by Sunni Muslim Kurdish separatist authorities. About 60% of younger Christian families in the area have been pressured socially and economically to immigrate or move to other areas of the country under government control. A sizeable number of the remaining Christian population are elderly people.

MERF–Canada

Thank you for your faithful support! Please make cheques payable to MERF-Canada and send them to the address at the bottom of the page.

Online donations can be made to Middle East Reformed Fellowship (Canada) Inc. through www.merf.org/support

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CLARION KIDS

AMANDA DEBOER

LORD'S DAY 22

Who rose from the dead? The Lord Jesus did. Yes, but did you know that, if you die, you will rise as well? That's right! When we die, our souls are immediately with God. Then, when the Lord Jesus comes back, our souls and bodies will be together again. We will be given a glorious body. One thing this means is that our bodies will not get sick or hurt anymore. Then we will have everlasting life. We will be filled with joy and happiness. Just think about one of the happiest days of your life. Maybe you had a delicious breakfast, swam at the beach, and then went out for supper. That would make you pretty happy, wouldn't it? Well, when Jesus comes back, we will be happier than the happiest we've ever been. Do you know who will make us so happy? God. Because he is so good and so great. How wonderful that we get to praise him forever!

Lord's Day 22 teaches us that we can already feel in our hearts the beginning of:

5 20 5 18 14 1 12 10 15 25

1=A 2=B 3=C 4=D 5=E 6=F
 7=G 8=H 9=I 10=J 11=K 12=L
 13=M 14=N 15=O 16=P 17=Q 18=R
 19=S 20=T 21=U 22=V 23=W 24=X

Wordsearch

glorious
 life
 rise
 joy

R	H	R	K	J	O	Y	S
S	I	B	C	O	K	U	Y
G	Z	S	F	K	O	D	E
A	V	H	E	I	H	L	F
M	I	H	R	R	L	G	D
X	W	O	Y	O	W	P	I
Q	L	J	S	T	R	O	R
G	N	X	L	I	F	E	E

On a Journey to Women's Ordination and Beyond?

WES BREDEHOF

In October 2021, I attended our biannual pastors' conference in Western Australia. A talk by two pastors' wives was the highlight. Amanda Poppe and Kristen Alkema spoke about domestic abuse in the church. They shared real-life stories of CanRC and FRCA women who'd been raped by their husbands, physically battered, psychologically controlled or manipulated, and emotionally beaten down. It was eye-opening and deeply disturbing. After this conference, I read Darby Strickland's book *Is It Abuse? A Biblical Guide to Identifying Domestic Abuse and Helping Victims*. Amanda, Kristen, and Darby convinced me we have to do better in our churches with how we view women and how we treat women.

I used to subscribe to the *Journal of Biblical Counselling*, so I was familiar with the name of Elyse Fitzpatrick. In the early 2000s, she wrote several wise and insightful articles. So, when I saw that she'd recently co-authored these two books with Baptist pastor Eric Schumacher, I was expecting good things. Perhaps these books would be helpful for steering us in a better direction. Sadly, the authors let me (and you) down.

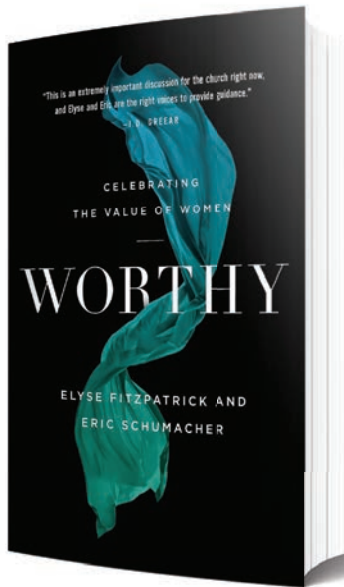
Concerning

Worthy, the earlier of these two books, was written to answer two questions: "Where is the value of women seen in the Bible? And, seeing the value of women there, how do we celebrate it?" Those are good questions to ask and, broadly speaking, I have an appreciation for how the authors answer. Throughout the book, the authors identify various firsts involving women.

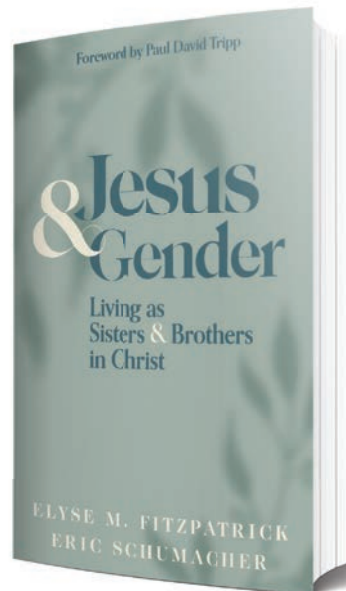
For example, "The first recorded words of faith were spoken by Eve (Genesis 4:1)." And "The daughters of Zelophehad were the first people God declares as 'right' in their request and judgment (Numbers 27:7)."

The authors also provide numerous anecdotes of how women have been undervalued and mistreated in churches. "For instance, I (Elyse) personally know of numbers of circumstances in which a wife came to elders for help with an abusive husband, only to have the elders end up disciplining her for not being submissive enough" (p. 101). That's heinous. The authors state: "There is no getting around the fact that much harm has been done to women in the name of 'Christianity'" (p. 242). Reformed churches aren't exempt.

Regrettably, what could have been a recommended read is sullied by some missteps in proposing solutions. In *Worthy*, Fitzpatrick and Schumacher insist several times that they believe that only men can serve as pastors and elders. However, they do believe women can and should serve as deacons. They assert that women should be leading prayer and doing Scripture readings in worship (p. 88). What about deacons being "the husband of one wife," as in 1 Timothy 3:12? This book doesn't answer that. What about "the women should keep silent in the churches" in 1 Corinthians 14:34? The authors argue that this isn't an absolute prohibition, because earlier, in 1 Corinthians 11:5, Paul speaks about women praying. However, is Paul speaking there about the church gathered in public worship? I don't believe so.



Worthy: Celebrating the Value of Women
by Elyse Fitzpatrick and Eric Schumacher
(Bloomington: Bethany House, 2020).
Paperback. 301 pages. \$20.78 CDN.



Jesus & Gender: Living as Sisters & Brothers in Christ
by Elyse M. Fitzpatrick and Eric Schumacher
(Bellingham: Kirkdale Press, 2022).
Hardcover. 282 pages. \$32.95 CDN.

What's most concerning in *Worthy* is the dismissal of complementarianism as an issue worth taking a stand on. Complementarianism is the idea that men and women have different, complementary—yet equally valuable—roles in the family and in church. Opposed to that is egalitarianism, which argues that men and women should be equal in every respect, including filling roles of church leadership. According to one pastor they quote, complementarianism shouldn't be "a litmus test of orthodoxy." The authors agree and say that doing so is "idolatry masked as discernment" (p. 216).

Even more concerning

This issue returns with greater force in *Jesus & Gender*. I wanted to like this book. It aims to take a gospel-centred, Christ-centred approach to the roles of men and women—a great idea. However, along the way, the authors actually endanger and undermine the gospel.

Every author is on a journey. At the beginning of *Jesus & Gender*, Fitzpatrick writes about a book she authored in 2003, *Helper by Design: God's Perfect Plan for Women in Marriage*. Without going into detail, she says she now repudiates some of that book. Fair enough. Everyone should strive to move forward in knowledge and understanding. But between *Worthy* and *Jesus & Gender*, I sense the authors are on a journey somewhere unbiblical.

The affirmations of complementarianism have vanished in *Jesus & Gender*. Instead, there's mystery. They deliberately won't

tell us where they stand. I want to be charitable, but they're making it hard. It's made even harder by the endorsement of a female pastor on the cover. Christine Caine is an ordained minister of the prosperity-gospel preaching Hillsong Church. Not only did she endorse the book, but the book *endorses her* and her Propel Women ministry (pp. 131-132). Propel Women supports women in ordained pastoral ministry. If you're a complementarian, how can you give that a pat on the back?

My biggest concern is hermeneutical. Hermeneutics is the science of Bible interpretation. There are different approaches to hermeneutics. There is an approach undergirding the conclusion that women can be ordained. Our authors argue that this is unimportant; that it's secondary to the gospel. They can't understand situations like this: "A cessationist, congregational, Baptist church gladly joins elder-ruled, paedobaptist, and continuationist churches in a city-wide evangelism campaign. It will not, however, partner with or invite the church that has a female pastor" (p. 39). The doctrine of gender roles has become a "functional test of orthodoxy." Should it be this way?

What if we were to instead use the example of a church with an openly gay or lesbian pastor? This church says they hold to the gospel. They believe in God's Word. Are we going to make one's beliefs about sexual orientation and gender identity a "functional test of orthodoxy"?

Or what about the church that teaches theistic macro-evolution? They believe the universe is billions of years old and God created through the natural processes of macro-evolution.

Yet they also say they believe the gospel of Jesus Christ. Are we going to make our view on creation “a functional test of orthodoxy”?

Yes, yes, and yes. But not for the reason you might think. All these issues are *symptoms* of a deeper problem. It’s a problem with hermeneutics. This is a problem that jeopardizes the gospel. In 1991, during the debates about women’s ordination in the Christian Reformed Church, Mid-America Reformed Seminary published a booklet entitled *A Cause of Division: The Hermeneutic of Women’s Ordination*.¹ They wrote of an “idealist hermeneutic of autonomy.” *Idealist* because it’s “preoccupied with the general principle or idea at the expense of the concrete and the particular.” *Autonomy* because the abstract concept of gender equality is filled with one’s own content, “rather than allowing the whole teaching of the Bible to provide this content.” When one adopts this hermeneutic, one inevitably drifts away from historic Christian orthodoxy both in terms of ethics and doctrine. Ultimately, the gospel itself is threatened by this hermeneutic. It’s no coincidence that so many female pastors are gospel-deniers, either theologically liberal or prosperity-gospel peddlers. The debate about complementarianism versus egalitarianism isn’t just about men and women. The biblical gospel itself is at stake further downstream. Your hermeneutics are foundational for everything else. Therefore, the authors are dangerously wrong to assert that women in office shouldn’t be a litmus test.

I have more concerns in *Jesus & Gender*, far too many to mention in this review. Let me just briefly mention three. The authors apparently discount anything the Old Testament teaches about parenting, and since “the New Testament is nearly silent about parenting, we should be careful not to add to it” (p. 161). The doctrine of the church found on page 175 is distinctly Baptist, not Reformed. One only enters membership of the church through personal faith. Finally, Photine is a mythical figure from Eastern Orthodox tradition. She’s alleged to be the woman from the well in Samaria in John 4. As the story goes, she became a Christian preacher in Africa, martyred for her faith in AD 66. Though there’s no historical basis for this tradition, Fitzpatrick and Schumacher write about her as if there is (p. 122).

I share the burden of these authors to see women respected and honoured more. Sadly, these books, especially *Jesus & Gender*, are leaning too far the other way. While there are some helpful bits, they’re overshadowed by the hazardous direction being navigated. Intentionally or not, Fitzpatrick and Schumacher are tilling the soil for thorns that will choke out gospel seed. 🍷



Wes Bredenhof *Pastor*
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¹ It’s still available online here: <https://tinyurl.com/d8chd2pc>

PRESS RELEASE

Classis Manitoba

September 23, 2022

It was a fresh fall Friday morning, on September 23, 2022, when delegates from the churches of Manitoba and of Denver, Colorado gathered in the Grace Canadian Reformed Church in Winnipeg. The delegate of the convening church of Denver Emmanuel, Pastor Steve Vandavelde, welcomed the delegates and visitor. One delegate (from Denver) joined via Zoom. Pastor Vandavelde led in opening devotions. During prayer he remembered among other things our retired ministers: Rev. and Mrs. John and Agnes VanRietschoten, Rev. Klaas Jonker, Dr. and Mrs. Andrew and Inge Pol (who have returned home from visiting Reformed churches and federations in Indonesia).

A special welcome was extended to Pastor Rich Anjema, of the Providence Reformed Church (URCNA). Also warmly welcomed were the delegates of Elm Creek Canadian Reformed Church, which sent delegates to Classis for the first time, having instituted as a congregation on September 4, 2022.

All the delegates were properly credentialed. The following brothers were appointed as officers of Classis: Pastor Steve Vandavelde (president), Pastor James Slaa (vice-president), and Rev. Carl VanDam (clerk). Rev. Anjema was formally seated as fraternal delegate.

Reports & question period

The Deputies for Contact with Neighboring Classes/Presbyteries presented an extensive report. The deputies made visits to the RCUS Northern Plains Classis held in Dickenson, ND on March 4-5, 2022; to the OPC Presbytery of the Dakotas held on April 5-6, 2022; and finally, to Classis Southwest of the URCNA held in Loveland, CO on September 13-14, 2022. Much thankfulness

was expressed for the ecclesiastical fellowship we share with these churches.

The Committee for Aid to Needy Churches reported, presenting financial statements and a budget with an assessment for support of the Emmanuel American Reformed Church of Denver. The assessment is the same as last year, \$40.00 pcm. The delegates from Denver Emmanuel expressed thankfulness for the support given by the churches in Classis.

The Church for Auditing the Books of the Committee for Aid to Needy Churches reported that the books were in good order.

A report was received from the Committee for Students of Theology (as per Art. 20 C.O.). Classis was encouraged with the report that several students of the local churches are continuing to prepare for studies at the Canadian Reformed Theological Seminary.

Question period ad Article 44 Church Order was held. The president asked whether the ministry of the office-bearers was being continued, whether the decisions of the major assemblies were being honoured, and whether there was any matter in which the consistories need the judgment and help of Classis for the proper government of their church. One church reported that previously it had requested advice to proceed with church discipline (second announcement), and that since then there had been sincere repentance of the person involved. Classis rejoiced together with the angels in heaven at the news of this repentance. Elm Creek church sought and received assistance and advice regarding the appointment of a counselor (C.O. Art. 45) and the request for monthly pulpit supply. Another church sought advice on the matter of discipline, particularly with proceeding to the next step, involving the publication of the

matter to the congregation (C.O. Art. 67). At this point, prayer was offered, bringing these matters before the throne of God.

Greetings & appointments

Pastor Rich Anjema, on behalf of the Providence Reformed Church (URCNA), addressed Classis. He expressed appreciation for the continuing and growing bond between the URCNA and CanRC. He thanked the churches for the invitation to the meeting. A letter was received from Rev. Ralph Pontier on behalf of Classis Central of the URCNA, offering regrets for not being able to attend, and updated Classis on some of the events taking place in their classis. Prayer was again offered, this time for our neighbouring classes and presbyteries.

Appointments were made for Treasurer, Church for Auditing the Books of the Treasurer, Church Visitors, Committee for Examinations, Committee for Students of Theology, Deputies for Contact with Neighbouring Churches/Presbyteries, Deputy for Contact with the Provincial Government. In addition, the following appointments were made:

- As per request of Elm Creek, Classis appointed Pastor James Slaa as Counsellor (C.O. Art. 45).

- Convening church for next classis: Winnipeg Grace. Date and time: December 16, 2022, at 9:00 a.m. (alternate date March 24, 2023).
- Suggested president: Rev. Rick Vanderhorst. Vice-president: TBD. Clerk: TBD, arranged by the convening church.
- Delegates to Regional Synod: Primary elder delegates: John Hoogerdijk and Les Vanderveen. Alternate delegates are Wayne Weidenhammer and Wayne Versteeg (in that order). Primary minister delegates: Joe Poppe and Carl VanDam. Alternate delegates are Rick Vanderhorst and James Slaa (in that order).

With thankfulness the president declared that censure according to Article 34 of the Church Order was not needed. Question Period was held. The Acts were adopted, and the Press Release was approved. Pastor James Slaa led in thanksgiving prayer and prayed for the lunch that was going to follow. Pastor Steve Vandeveldel declared Classis MB September 23, 2022, closed.

Pastor James Slaa

Vice-president at that time

