

SALT

JOEL 3:16 MATT 5:16

SHAKERS

"They paid their budget, sang the songs of the church, talked with others before and after the service, but their thoughts were on their jobs, their education, their advancement... and the cars they desired to own. To leave the church was easy, for belonging to it was boring."

*-Lessons from God's Letters to the Churches (2):
Letter to Ephesus*

"...let us not allow busyness, fears, excuses, or a pandemic to break down the unity of Christ's body. ...Jehovah's name is praised when His people are knit together in unity." *-Reaching Out*

"Death then becomes a passageway to life eternal. It is a blessing that we can pass from this life to the more glorious and eternal abode with Christ... What shall we fear then?" *-Till My Last Breath*

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Chairman's Note

Dear readers,

We've come to the final edition of SS for 2020. As always, we have striven to publish an assortment of articles addressing the issues of life. Finding your knowledge of OT history weak? Struggling to be a mother faithful to her covenant callings? Realizing the need, young men, to prepare for the office? Our articles seek to steer us to the Word of God in these matters.

Whether you spend your \$100 Rediscover Vouchers this month or simply rest at home, set aside *everything* each day to meditate on the Scriptures. We pray our articles help you to that end.

In Christ,
Yang Zhi

Salt Shakers is a bi-monthly Reformed magazine published by Covenant Evangelical Reformed Church in Singapore. In each issue, we strive to bring readers quality articles discussing Reformed doctrine as well as practical theology and Reformed viewpoints on recent issues.

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2021:



Lim Yang Zhi
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And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, Let us go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us.

(Luke 2:15)

Besides the unusual title, did the verse capture your attention? In this season of Christmas, it is fitting that we briefly meditate on this verse and its context.

This history preceding this verse is familiar to you, isn't it? Months before, Mary had been made pregnant with Jesus by the Holy Ghost. Months later, She and Joseph had to return to Bethlehem, a small town in then-Judea, to pay Joseph's taxes. Approaching Bethlehem, Mary entered into labour. Having been given no room in the nearby inn, Joseph and Mary had no choice but to deliver and care for baby Jesus in an unsanitary stable and lay him in a feeding trough.

Meanwhile, shepherds outside Bethlehem were tending to their sheep. To these shepherds, God magnificently announced the birth of Jesus—one angel in its angelic glory delivering the message, followed by a huge entourage of angels singing praise to God. This entire announcement, in a blink of an eye, was manifested to these ordinary, believing shepherds—and then the announcement ended.

This history is made plain in God's Word. In God's Word, God's sovereign hand is made plain. God was sovereign, conceiving the Messiah by the Holy Spirit in the womb of Mary (Matt. 1:18). God was sovereign, working in the emperor of Rome to call for a taxation that would lead Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem for the promised birth of the Messiah (Mic. 5:2). God was sovereign, announcing the Messiah's birth to the shepherds.

That announcement was not your ordinary social-media post. Certainly, it was extraordinary in the grandeur of the angels singing praises unto God. But

the extraordinary work was in God's message to these shepherds. Through the angel, God said, *Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people* (v. 12).

God did not ring a trivial notification to these shepherds. He brought to them good tidings of great joy. Good tidings, that a Saviour is born unto the city. Good tidings, that that Saviour is the person appointed by the triune God to redeem his people from their sins (isn't that the meaning of the name Jesus?). Good tidings that have been fulfilled by Jesus Christ himself, so that these good tidings are power of God unto salvation to everyone who believes, including these believing shepherds (Rom. 1:16). Such good, joyous, and powerful tidings were brought to the shepherds!

Powerful? Yes, so powerful, that the shepherds were stirred by faith to action. If the tidings were mere invitations to believe, they would not be powerful. If the tidings were good and joyous to the shepherds, *only* if they believed, they would not be powerful. These tidings were the Word of God Almighty, and that Word did not return void from the shepherd's hearts.

What was the fruit of God's work in those shepherds? As God had spoken, so these shepherds spoke. They spoke one to another. Certainly, each shepherd believed what God's announcement of the Messiah. Certainly, each shepherd wanted to worship the Messiah. Certainly, each shepherd wanted to declare to others that Jehovah God has been faithful to his covenant promises! But the first evident fruit God makes known to us is that they spoke *to one another*. They spoke to one another with the same heart and mind to bring glory to God in thankfulness for his great salvation.

Brethren, this is the testimony of God's Word: God powerfully calls you and me to believe in that gospel of Jesus Christ. God calls us so powerfully, that we receive all the riches of our salvation in that gospel of

Jesus Christ. God calls us so powerfully, that by faith we experience joy of that gospel in our hearts. But God calls us so powerfully, that he joins us to one another by faith. Joined together by faith, we receive those riches in Christ *together*, and rejoice in them *together*, and make them known to others *together*.

Have we spoken, brothers and sisters? Have we talked, discussed, shared, advised, encouraged, exhorted, rebuked, comforted...have we spoken to one another? Masks on or off, we freely speak to one another in a united desire to live in thankfulness to God for his great salvation in us. Whether restrictions ongoing or limited, we earnestly seek for opportunities to hold such fellowship with another. How else shall we render to God for his benefits to you and me? We are called out of the darkness of sin into God's marvelous light, and in that light, we are built up as the spiritual house of God, where fellowship dwells (I Pet. 2:4-9). Let's not just render reminders to obey the government concerning worship and gatherings; let's render frequent exhortations to find ways to fellowship while complying to those laws. Let's not render sighs—*COVID is just pulling our church apart*; let's render joyful calls to commune with one another!

What shall we fellowship about? The fruit of God's work is clear. These shepherds spoke of what they had seen and heard—the gospel of Jesus Christ, *made known to them* (v. 15). They were certain that what they had seen is true, and, in that certainty, spoke of that gospel in faith. Then they spoke of what they sought to do—to go into Bethlehem and see what they had heard. Their speech, in other words, was filled with truths of God's Word.

Often, these truths are missing from our conversations. Often, we say, "This kind of fellowship is all good, but, you know, we aren't going to be perfect in CERC." The question, my dear readers, is not whether we are perfect in this life. That is not the question God teaches us to ask. The question God teaches us to ask is, *What shall I render to the Lord, for all his benefits to me? What will you and I render to the Lord and to his people, after all the grace he has shown to us?*

What shall we talk about? Will it be the Word of God

we read for our devotions? Will it be that verse that strengthened you for the toils of work? Will it be the verse that steered your heart away from evil thoughts? What shall we ask about? Will we ask, How is your walk with God? Will we ask, *What have you read from God's Word recently? Will we set forward the question, What did you take home from the sermon?*

A different question (which I asked in another editorial last year): Whom will you talk to? Do you believe that the gospel of Jesus Christ has united us to Christ so firmly, that we have unity with likeminded singles, married, children, youth, and the elderly? Do the differences of these age-categories distract us from holding true, spiritual fellowship, in thankfulness for the gospel of Jesus Christ? Just as these shepherds rejoiced with Joseph and Mary, and just as old Simeon and Anna praised God for the Messiah with Joseph and Mary, so we, too, can rejoice with one another, notwithstanding our age or background.

But more important is this, that the Word of God fill our conversations. That's where the gospel of Christ is! That Word is the gospel of Jesus Christ! Every promise of the Word points us to Christ, for he fulfills every promise (2 Cor. 1:20). Every judgment pronounced against our sins shows our need for Christ to take away our sins (Jn. 1:29). Every sorrow described in the Word shows the consolation of Christ (2 Cor. 1:5). The Word must fill our mouths speaking to one another.

Most important, most urgent, is this: Does the Word of God fill our hearts? The shepherds received these glad tidings in faith. They clung to Christ, the Son of Man so helpless in his human nature, believing he would be strong to save his people from their sins. Is that the Word we believe and cling to in faith? Do not expect proper fellowship, brethren, if these good tidings do not fill our hearts in our daily walk. Do not expect proper fellowship, brethren, if we do not sit ourselves under the preaching of God's Word (in sermons preached and read). Do not expect proper fellowship, brethren, if our attitude toward this comforting doctrine is, "I already know this part of God's Word and that truth." Do not expect proper fellowship, brethren, if the Word of God fills only our minds, for knowing what God says is not true faith, but to trust in Christ alone is true faith. Cling

to Christ, brethren, and Christ will prosper us with a rich and deep unity with one another.

2021 looms, brethren. Will you make time for such fellowship during the week? A simple meal for a lonely individual; a vibrant dinner for some rowdy youth—some opportunities may be small, while others may stir a mess enough to spend the night cleaning up. Whatever they are, will you make time?

It is not just in the seasons of Christmas or long weekends that we host. Notice that God announced the Messiah's birth in the middle of the shepherds' work, and that they soon after rose up with thankful hearts and mouths. But

right after these events, these shepherds vanish from the pages of Scripture, no more to read about. Likely, they simply returned to their ordinary, God-given work. Not empty-handed, but with the marvelous gospel of Jesus Christ, more clearly revealed in their hearts, did they return to their sheep! In the same manner, God so fills our hearts with the joy of our salvation, that we want to taste that joy with others amidst the busyness, sorrows, and worries of life!

There's a blank at the title to describe your resolve for 2021, the year God has given to us to grow together in fellowship. What will you write there?

Lessons from God's Letters to the Churches (2) Letter to Ephesus (Revelation 2:1-7)



Prof. Herman Hanko

Emeritus professor of the Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary in Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA and frequent contributor to *Salt Shakers* since its inception.

The church of Ephesus was established by the apostle Paul on his second missionary journey. He labored in the city for two years, and it became a center for mission work in the entire area. It was a strong church that was present yet in later centuries and became a major church among the churches established throughout the Mediterranean World. It is perhaps true that all seven churches to which Christ sent letters were established by Paul and his co-workers while he labored in Ephesus during his second missionary journey.

The letter is addressed to the "angel" of the church who was given the letter by John to read to the entire congregation. Ephesus was blessed with good ministers, Paul himself and Timothy especially. That both men taught the congregation sound doctrine is evident from the fact that, in his commendation of their strengths, the Lord lays special emphasis on their orthodoxy: "... thou hast tried them which say they are apostles and are not, and hast found them liars". Their exercise of discipline was also in keeping with the Scriptures: "... how thou canst not bear them that are evil". The other commendations were probably to be applied to these two strengths which the Lord points: their faithfulness

to sound doctrine and their faithfulness even in the face of opposition, perhaps in part from some members of the congregation.

Twice their labour and patience are mentioned, the second time it is added "for Christ's sake". They even are commended for not wearying, apparently because they were under heavy pressure not to censure those who walked in sin. Their commitment to sound doctrine was strong — as it ought to be in any congregation of Christ's church.

But the congregation had one serious fault; so serious in fact, that if it did not repent, the congregation would cease to be a church of Christ — their place would, in the candlestick, be taken away. The serious weakness is that the congregation had lost its first love.

There has been a lot of discussion concerning what is meant by "first love", but I am convinced that a church's first love is love for the truth. To possess the truth, as the church of Ephesus did, is one thing and to defend the truth against those who deny it is another, but neither is yet to love the truth. That indeed is what Christ

demands.

I think the clearest example is to be found in the ecclesiastical situation in the Netherlands in the years after the end of the Synod of Dordt in the beginning of the seventeenth century. The Reformed, having just defended the truth concerning the sovereignty of God in a rich and beautiful Confession, was strong and had shown its love for the truth. But by the end of the century, all that had changed. The Netherlands was extremely powerful and wealthy. Its navy sailed the seven seas and brought back to the Netherlands the riches from the Dutch East and West Indies. Located at the mouth of the Rhine River, all the overseas commerce of Europe past through the country to be shipped around the world and all that was shipped into Europe came through the Netherlands to be shipped to the interior of Europe via the Rhine River.

While the country still adhered to the Canons of Dordt and while it even produced a few outstanding theologians, it had lost “its first love”. As a result, by the end of the 18th century it had also opened its doors to apostasy, apostasy so blatant that the Reformed Church required reformation by 1834.

The loss of love for the truth leads to dead orthodoxy and dead orthodoxy leads to corruption of life. We have been to the Netherlands two or three times, and we were appalled at the spiritual condition of the church there, even though it had been the cradle of the Reformed faith. Even the most conservative congregations have only a few attendees and they are, generally speaking, old folks. We even had difficulty locating the historic Reformation sites because no one seemed to know what we were talking about when we mentioned a particular place.

The essence of God’s law is to love God. How can we say we love Him if we have no interest in Him, no knowledge of His truth – revealed in the Scriptures, no desire to walk in His ways, and no problem associating with those who deny His truth?

A congregation possesses its first love when it comes to the knowledge of the truth of God and that truth thrills the congregation, excites the members, creates

a desire to know more of God and devours everything taught about Him. A first love of the truth is apparent in a personal appropriation of that truth and a humbling knowledge of what God has done for him, a lost sinner. A love for that truth results in a godly life of gratitude to God for such great salvation as He has freely given us.

Paul, in 2 Thessalonians 2:10, describes the followers of Antichrist, the man of sin, as those who perish, not because they had not the truth, but because they received not “*the love of the truth*” – “that they might be saved”.

Churches where the love of the truth is absent are churches, while known for their orthodoxy, seem not to care for the truth they confess. They have not modified or altered their Confessions, but the members know little of what the Confessions teach. They have not read the confessions for a long time and perhaps never. They are not sure of anything about the history of the church of Christ. As a fellow pre-Seminary student in college said to me: I am surprised that you appealed in our discussion to the *Canons of Dordt*; I thought they were artillery the Spanish used when they besieged the Dutch city of Leiden.”

But more than that: the people are always clamoring for less doctrinal preaching, which they consider “cold and sterile”; they prefer “practical” preaching, although they pay little attention to what they hear if it in any way conflicts with their interest.

The “love of the truth” is so important because it is love for God Himself, the sovereign God of their salvation. If one loves someone deeply and truly, one wants to know all one can of that object of their love. If they are indifferent towards someone, they are not interested in what that person is like. If they truly love someone, they want fellowship in the bond of love; but if they have no interest in someone, they prefer to avoid such a person.

In Ephesus the people were usually in church on the Lord’s Day. They paid their budget, sang the songs of the church, talked with others before and after the service, but their thoughts were on their jobs, their education, their advancement in the places in which they work and their cars they desired to own. To leave the church

was easy, for belonging to it was boring.

No wonder that the Lord warns such a church that if they do not repent, they will lose their place as a congregation of the faithful people of God and of Christ.

But to those who “overcome” their spiritual indifference and lack of zeal for the church, to those for whom their church is the center of their lives around which all their lives revolve, they are promised fruit from the tree of life, the heavenly tree of life, where God in Christ meets

with them and has sweet fellowship with them and all the other saints through the ages who loved the truth. The spiritual strength of their church was, with their families, the most important part of their life. This fellowship was true of Adam before he fell. In the cool of the day he met with God at the tree of life and they talked together. Faithful saints will enjoy the highest possible fellowship with God in glory that is far more blessed than the Tree of Life in Paradise. At the foot of that heavenly Tree of Life we shall grow eternally in the knowledge of God who saved us (Rev. 2:22).

Right and Wrong Motivations for Seeking the Office of Elder or Deacon



Rev. Angus Stewart

Pastor of Covenant Protestant Reformed Church, our sister church in Northern Ireland

1 Timothy 3:1 declares, *“This is a true saying, If a man desire the office of a bishop [i.e., elder], he desireth a good work.”* By extension, this applies to the office of deacon. But are *all* desires for church office good? Does the text mean that it is good to want to be an elder or deacon in God’s church for the *wrong reasons*? No!

There are God-honouring and holy motives for preparing for and seeking church office, and for allowing one’s name to be submitted for election and accepting the call of the congregation (and of the Lord) to an ecclesiastical position. But there are also sinful reasons why some desire to be an elder or a deacon.

Wrong Motivations for Seeking to Be an Elder or Deacon

First, some seek church office in order to gain the esteem of others. Consider a man in the church who realizes that his wife has lost respect for him, because of his own foolishness and sinful behaviour, especially in his treatment of her. However, instead of repenting before God and receiving forgiveness through the blood of Christ, and confessing his sin to his wife and living with her as a godly husband, he reckons that, if he were to become a deacon or an elder, he would regain her good opinion of him.

This manipulative policy, in all probability, will not achieve its earthly and carnal ends, even if the congregation votes the man into office. The Christian wife still sees his disobedient and unloving lifestyle, and so is more likely to lose respect for the church that elected her husband than to regard him more highly.

Others desire to be an elder or deacon to rise (as they think) in the estimation of their children or the members of their congregation or the wider Christian community or their work mates. This too is the “wisdom” from below that is *“earthly, sensual, devilish”* (James 3:15).

Second, some want to be installed in church office because they “lost” in the congregational vote last time or a previous time or several times. In other words, they view the ballot of the male confessing members as a popularity contest or a referendum on their piety, gifts and abilities, and are sore at what they view as past defeat or defeats.

A third sinful reason for desiring to become an elder or deacon could be summarized like this: “It will give me power to make decisions in the church!” This is not the spirit of a servant of Christ and His people, but of one who wants to be a lord *“over God’s heritage”* (1 Pet. 5:3).



Fourth, this is a motivation for some in seeking church office: “Then I’ll know what is going on in the congregation!” This is plain nosiness and the members of the church will soon detect it in an office-bearer, causing resentment in the congregation and limiting the effectiveness of the elder or deacon.

“I need to get into office”, says a fifth person, “because I have been in the church longer than X and it looks like X could become a deacon or an elder soon”. This is simply a worldly desire to “keep up appearances”, involving sinful competition and jealousy.

Sixth, some seek to become an office-bearer because they have an agenda. “If I get in, I will really shake the church up and get things moving” – invariably in the wrong direction!

Pride

Which one word best encapsulates the root sin in the wrong motives for church office? Pride!

This is involved in all of the six instances above: wounded pride (1, 2) or the fear of wounded pride (5), and the pride of power (3), knowledge (4) and rule (6).

This is also borne out very clearly in Biblical instances of people wanting church office and/or its power for the wrong reasons. What does the Bible say about the attitude and motivation of King Uzziah who went into the Lord’s temple to burn incense upon the golden altar, as if he were a priest? Pride: “his heart was lifted up to his destruction” (2 Chron. 26:16).

Think of Simon Magus in Acts 8. He desired “power,” apostolic power to give the Holy Spirit by the laying on of his hands (v. 19). His problem was his evil “heart” (vv. 21, 22) for he had not really been converted but was still gripped by the same insatiable pride (vv. 9-10) that had characterised him before Philip preached the gospel in Samaria.

Korah, Dathan and Abiram in Numbers 16 committed the same sin. They were not content with being a Levite (Korah) or rulers in the tribe of Reuben (Dathan and Abiram). They “envied” Moses and Aaron (Ps. 106:16). They wanted even higher offices in God’s (Old Testament)

church: the priesthood or national leadership. Since Dathan and Abiram sought to be lifted up to heaven (as it were), the Most High opened the ground which swallowed them up. For unlawfully desiring to draw too close to Jehovah in His holy tabernacle to offer incense to him, God showed Korah His awesome holiness and burned him up.

For further proof that pride is the primary wrong motivation for church office, we need only look at 1 Timothy 3, the number one chapter and chair passage on the qualifications for (teaching and ruling) elders and deacons: “Not a novice, lest being lifted up with pride he fall into the condemnation of the devil” (v. 6).

There are two main options for the meaning of “the condemnation of the devil” in this verse. First, Satan will condemn a proud office-bearer. Second, pride is the very sin for which God condemned the devil who thereby lost his high place among Jehovah’s holy servants. Both of these positions are correct but the latter is the meaning of 1 Timothy 3:6.

In Isaiah 14, the King of Babylon is “blended” with proud Satan who was working through him: “For thou hast said in thine heart, I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God: I will sit also upon the mount of the congregation, in the sides of the north: I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will be like the most High” (vv. 13-14).

How many times has the Lord not taught us in His Word how He abases the proud who wants a high office in His kingdom! Look what He did to the devil: “How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning! how art thou cut down to the ground, which didst weaken the nations! ... Yet thou shalt be brought down to hell, to the sides of the pit” (Isa. 14:12, 15). King Uzziah was smitten with leprosy, fled out of the temple and lived in isolation for the rest of his life—a long time to consider, and repent of, his arrogance in usurping priestly functions (2 Chron. 26:19-21). Moses reminded Israel of God’s destruction of the proud rebels in Numbers 16: “what he did unto Dathan and Abiram, the sons of Eliab, the son of Reuben: how the earth opened her mouth, and swallowed them up, and their households, and their tents, and all the substance that was in their possession, in the midst of all Israel” (Deut.

11:6). Even Simon Magus was made to humble himself by the threat of divine judgment (Acts 8:24).

What are some of the bad things that happen when proud people do not get their way and are not voted into church office? Sometimes they resign and leave the congregation. Sometimes they remain in the church, but become bitter and embitter others by pretending that injustices have been perpetrated against them. Sometimes they mercilessly and unfairly criticise the elders and deacons (those who, unlike them, were chosen by God and His church). Sometimes a sizeable number of people foolishly listen to them so that they create serious divisions in the congregation and then they perversely rejoice, "See, I was right about our church's office-bearers! They cannot solve the congregation's problems (that I have created)!"

Thankfully, a man who seeks to become an elder or deacon for the wrong reasons and is not appointed by the church will often be corrected and restored by the Lord. By the Word and Spirit or even through chastisements, the brother will see the error of his ways, put off his self-seeking and grow in Christian maturity. Such a man may well be installed as an office-bearer in the years ahead!

Of course, this is not to suggest that a man who is nominated for church office but not chosen by the congregation is, therefore and automatically, exposed as proud. Far from it!

Right Motivation for Seeking to Be an Elder or Deacon

The right motivation for seeking church office is very

simple: to glorify the Triune God in Jesus Christ, our Redeemer and Lord who loved us and gave Himself for us, and to serve His body the church, by promoting the truth and serving our fellow saints. So much more could be said to open up and drive home this truth but shortage of space prohibits further elaboration. Let us read the first sentence of this paragraph several times and let it sink into our hearts!

This statement regarding a man's proper motivation immediately commends itself to all of God's people. Everyone instinctively knows that it is right, even those who desire church office for the wrong reasons, and seek to hide their real motives from themselves and others.

As 1 Timothy 3:1 states, "*This is a true saying, If a man desire the office of a bishop, he desireth a good work*" – the work of advancing and extending the kingdom of God's dear Son among men, women and children. This is the right attitude and holy desire of Jehovah's thankful covenant friends.

Men, this must be our motivation in seeking church office, in preparing for church office, while being installed into church office and when serving in church office! By His grace, we must maintain this spirit, not allowing proud and selfish motives to creep in. In this way, we can have confidence that our merciful God will bless our feeble efforts and we will have a good conscience before Him through Jesus Christ.

The right motivation for seeking church office is very simple: to glorify the Triune God in Jesus Christ, our Redeemer and Lord who loved us and gave Himself for us.

Reaching Out



Joanna Chua
Member of CERC

In the monotonous hustle of daily life, we are prone to forget the truth of the oneness of the body of Christ. We all know it in our heads, but is it *real* in our *hearts*? Do we think about the other members of the church, consider how we may be a blessing to them, and seek them out? Or do we go about our lives thinking only of ourselves, with little to no thought of our brothers and sisters, except maybe on Sundays when we happen to see them in church?

COVID-19 has drastically changed the life of the church in Singapore in the past year. For several months we could not even gather for worship or meet others outside of our immediate families. Now that worship services have resumed, we can only go for one service instead of two, most other activities are still cancelled, and we are required to leave promptly after each service with no mingling allowed. **Left to itself, COVID-19 will be disastrous to church unity.** What will church be like when we can finally go back to the old norm? Will we have grown so distant that it feels strange to fellowship with one another? **Making opportunities for fellowship is more important now than ever before,** and this involves getting out of our comfort zones and reaching out to others.

A quick Google search describes the activity of reaching out as one of contact, interaction, and help. The Bible is replete with verses exhorting us to provide such support for one another. Here are just a few:

- “Let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works” (Heb. 10:24).
- “Bear ye one another’s burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ” (Gal. 6:2).
- “Comfort yourselves together, and edify one another” (1 Thess. 5:11).
- “Iron sharpeneth iron; so a man sharpeneth the countenance of his friend” (Prov. 27:17).

But why should we reach out to others?

The first reason I can think of is the **love of Christ**. Have we not experienced God’s immeasurable mercy towards us? Let us list some of the ways we have tasted of His love: (*Think of more ways as you read!*)

- He chose us as His own, entirely of His grace, before we were even conceived.
- He has forgiven each and every one of us of our sins because of the blood of Jesus.
- He bears our burdens and carries us through, no matter how weary our paths may be.
- He gives us comfort, hope, and joy for each day, even though we do not deserve any of it and are often so sinful and unthankful.

We have received so much. Should we not overflow with love from our hearts for Christ, and as a result, for His people?

Closely linked to the love of Christ is the second reason for reaching out—Ephesians 4 tells us that **the church is the body of Christ**. All members of the body are necessary for the body to be “fitly joined together” for its “effectual working” (v. 16). No part of the body may view another as unnecessary. Just as all the different parts of our bodies work together to keep us alive and healthy, so must all the members of Christ’s body be united for the spiritual life and health of the church.

Think about it practically. How are we going to work together for the benefit and unity of the church? By keeping to ourselves and our cliques? Surely not! A church characterized by cliques and individuals keeping to themselves certainly cannot be described as being “fitly joined together”. We need to go to God’s word and see how we should behave as members of one body:

- “And above all things have **fervent charity** among yourselves: for charity shall cover the multitude

of sins. Use hospitality one to another without grudging. As every man hath received the gift, even so minister the same one to another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God” (1 Pet. 4:8-10).

- “And walk in love, as **Christ also hath loved us**, and hath given himself for us” (Eph. 5:2).
- “Be kindly affectioned one to another with brotherly love; in honour preferring one another; Not slothful in business; fervent in spirit; serving the Lord” (Rom. 12:10-11).
- “Distributing to the necessity of saints; given to hospitality” (Rom. 12:13).
- “**Rejoice with them that do rejoice, and weep with them that weep.** Be of the same mind one toward another” (Rom. 12:15-16).
- “In lowliness of mind let each esteem each other better than themselves. **Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others**” (Phil. 2:3-4).

Now think again. How can we carry out the exhortations above?

We will need to *reach out*, to make an effort to *communicate* with our brothers and sisters in Christ, to *be interested* in their lives, to *look after* them, to *show* that we love them. **Love does not stop in our hearts.**

certain activities and occasions. (*Make sure you obey the rules and exercise wisdom during this COVID-19 season!*)

- Plan weekday meet-ups.
- Be on the lookout for those who may be lonely or going through a particular trial, and make a mental note to reach out to them (e.g. drop a text; call; share an encouraging article, sermon, or song; send a card; invite the person out or to your home; etc.).
- Encourage your group of friends to do the same. Involve others if you find it difficult to reach out.
- Invite others to sit with you or your group of friends in church when possible.
- Start small; find common interests and natural topics to talk about. *Hint: It may not be wise to intimidate the other person with a barrage of personal questions or heavy doctrinal discussions right away!*
- Be consistent and persistent in reaching out.
- Be a good listener and not quick to pass comments, assumptions, or criticisms.
- Be sensitive to the other person’s needs, feelings, and comfort level.
- Be genuine! Avoid doing this merely out of courtesy or a sense of obligation. **Cultivate a heartfelt concern for the lives of others.**
- And **most importantly, pray** that the Lord will so fill our hearts with love that reaching out becomes only natural and something we are eager to do.

Reaching out can be a challenging task. But let us not allow busyness, fears, excuses, or a pandemic to break down the unity of Christ’s body.

But before I offer suggestions, I must make clear that I am no expert in this matter. I have had failed experiences and been guilty of avoiding opportunities to minister, and all too often I fail to truly love those around me as I ought. I feel inadequate to offer advice from my point of view alone and hence have asked others for their experiences, from which I have gathered these very practical suggestions for reaching out:

- Invite individuals or a small group to your home for a meal and fellowship or to join your family for

Reaching out can be a challenging task. We may be very busy with school, work, and our own families. We may face rejection and unpleasant experiences. Or we may be introverted and shy and feel unable to do this, thinking so-and-so can do a better job. **But let us not allow busyness, fears, excuses, or a pandemic to break down the unity of Christ’s body.** The devil sniggers with glee when we do so. Set love for the church at the forefront of your hearts, and pray for grace and courage to put that love into action.

And finally, let us remember the ultimate goal of reaching out and of all else in life—the glory of God. **Jehovah's name is praised when His people are knit together in unity.** Each one of us must do this for the sake of the church. Imagine a church where all the members are constantly making efforts to be friendly, to reach out, to show love and concern—how beautiful that church must be! How lovely to be a member of that church! How delightful to think that it is but a small foretaste of heaven, where we will dwell in perfect love

with one another, and most of all with Christ our Head!

So “let us not be weary in well doing: for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not. As we have therefore opportunity, **let us do good unto all men, especially unto them who are of the household of faith**” (Gal. 6:9-10).

Who are you going to reach out to today?

Till My Last Breath



Julia Koh
Member of CERC and a medical doctor

If there is one thing in life that is certain, it is that we are all going to die. Despite the certainty of it happening, death is rarely spoken of in social settings, and often dismissed quickly because of the discomfort it brings to those around. Within the church, when a member of our church faces death, we are frequently at a loss and don't know how to respond. I hope to talk about death in this article, offer some guidance to how to approach death, and share about the hope that we have as Christians.

While the causes of death have remained the same locally in the past few decades (cancer, heart disease and pneumonia), the setting in which death happens nowadays has drastically changed. *Lien Foundation's "Death Attitudes Survey"* in 2013 showed that 77% of Singaporeans wish to die at home but only 27% deaths take place at home. This also highlights how decisions on death and dying are not limited to the individual, but intimately involves the family and their wishes and capabilities as well. Often, family members are afraid of what may happen, do not know what dying looks like, and mostly wish that there is something more doctors can do to prolong their loved one's life. Before the advent of modern healthcare, many patients passed on in their home, in the presence of loved ones and perhaps a religious leader. Most health problems, even infections like tuberculosis or a pneumonia were treated with symptomatic relief, and family members

were the primary caregivers and the administrators of medication, if at all available. When death occurred, the experience was less removed from the comfort of the family, and rarely did it occur with tubes and beeping machines attached to one's body. Births and deaths were treated as common events, not scary or foreign events that happened behind closed doors.

As healthcare improved, antibiotics and other medication became readily available, and the hope of the ventilator and medical facilities in prolonging a loved one's life shifted many deaths away from home and into the hospital wards and ICUs. Eventually, nursing homes and hospices were built for specific care of those with medical and nursing needs which family could not provide, and deaths also commonly occur there today.

The Science and Art of Death

Death has 3 main trajectories, with the main causes being cancer, organ failure and dementia. With cancer, the function of the individual is kept at a high level till the end. With organ failure, the individual's function dips with each exacerbation of the disease and rises again after the exacerbation is resolved, but not to the same level as before. With dementia, there is a slow and gradual decline in function towards the end. This does not include causes of death such as a massive heart attack, accidents or suicide, which often happen

suddenly without a trajectory. Based on the “lead time” of diagnosis to death, the acceptance of the individual and family members can vary significantly.

In the Singapore context, disease is dealt with as a family, and we cannot avoid speaking about how the family members are coping when death approaches. There are situations where family members who cannot accept the diagnosis, continue caring for the unwell individual while denying that their loved one is deteriorating. This profoundly affects the family dynamics and the bereavement process after the person passes on.

What does death look like?

With the above trajectories in mind, doctors usually prognosticate, which is to try to predict a possible future outcome of a disease based on medical knowledge and experience. However, as a Christian medical practitioner, it is clear to me that our time is in God’s

hands, regardless of whether we’ve been diagnosed with a disease and regardless of what the doctor says. The Lord alone determines the length of our days and the number of our months (Job 14:5). Each day of our lives is written in God’s book (Ps. 139:16).

In prognostication of survival, the accuracy improves as the person moves closer to the end of his or her life. Doctors usually give a range, of a few years, a few months, weeks to months, days to weeks, or hours to days when prognosticating, and much of these is informed by previous studies on the same disease the patient is suffering from. Regardless of medical diagnosis, reduced mobility and reduced fluid and food intake are usually poor prognostic signs. Even closer to death, there may be sudden changes in consciousness, from being more somnolent to more active and talkative. Breathing patterns likely change in the minutes to hours prior to a person’s passing, and monitoring of vital signs at this

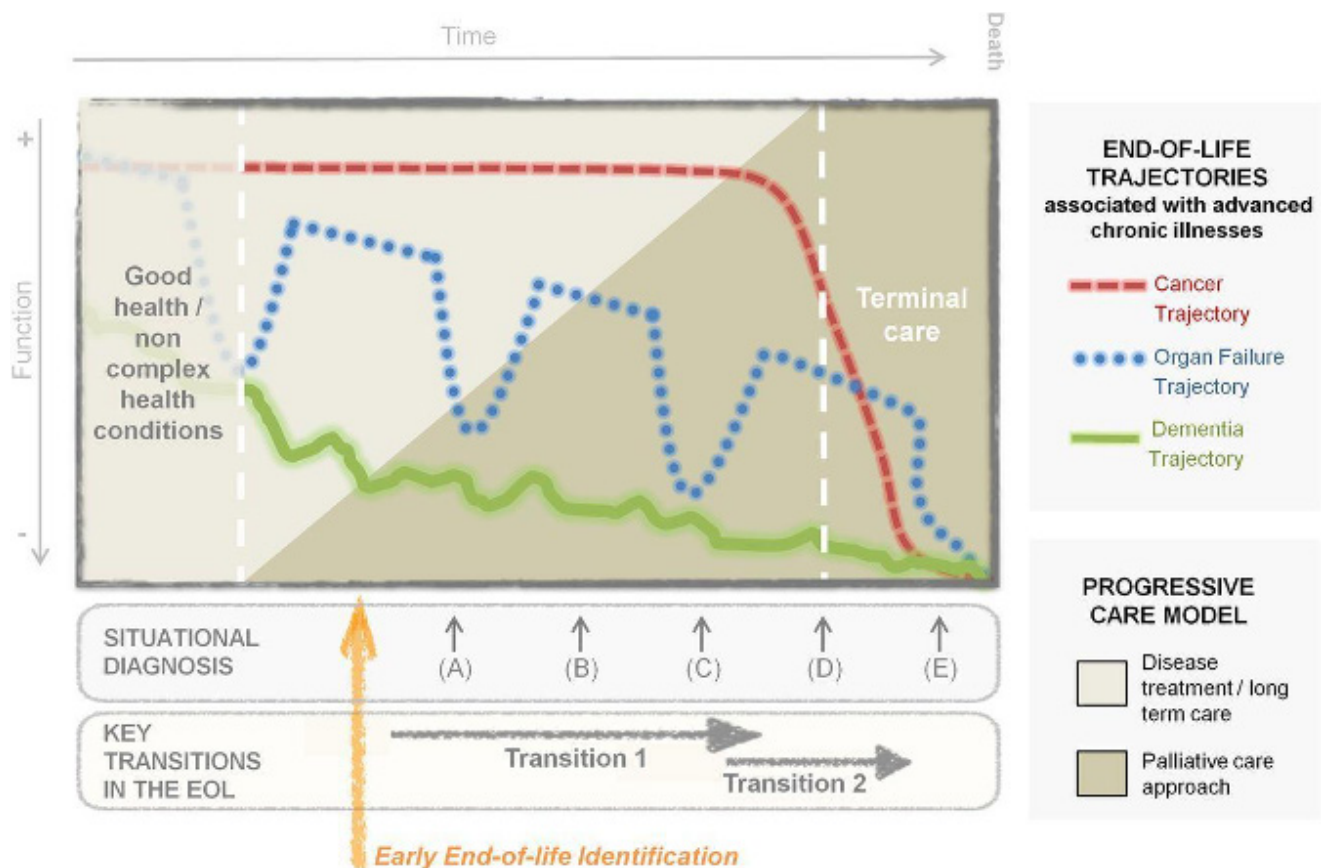


Figure 1

Key transitions and the three end-of-life trajectories. Early identification of palliative care needs becomes the starting point for transition 1. Situational diagnosis refers to the evaluation and assessment of patients that allows healthcare professionals determine patients’ health degree (A, B, C, D or E) and identify entrance to transition 2 (D) or last days-hours situation, instead (E); this situational diagnosis is indispensable to establish the objectives of care in this progressive care model in a decision-making process shared by professionals, patients and their families.

Ambàs-Novellas J, Murray SA, Espauella J, et al

Identifying patients with advanced chronic conditions for a progressive palliative care approach: a cross-sectional study of prognostic indicators related to end-of-life trajectories *BMJ Open* 2016;6:e012340. doi: 10.1136/bmjopen-2016-012340

point is no longer necessary or meaningful to determine whether the patient will pass on soon.

Things to say or do

When visiting a loved one who is in his or her final days, it may be a good idea to speak to the family to get a sense of how things are like before approaching the loved one's bedside. Are there things to avoid talking about? What is the sense of the family in terms of how the loved one is doing? Are they coping well, and is there anything we can help with?

Ultimately, when reaching the loved one's bedside, many don't know what to say or do. Studies have shown that the sense of touch and hearing does not wane till the very end, thus praying aloud, singing songs to the person and recounting happy memories of time gone by is a good way to spend time. It does not have to feel awkward even if the loved one cannot open his or her eyes, as is often the case. Other acts of love such as wiping the person's face with a clean cloth, cleaning the mouth and lips (which often dry up when drinking water becomes difficult) and applying cream the skin or oral gel to the lips are simple and can make a big impact to the person's comfort.

It may be good for the loved one to have a private moment with each family member, where common guide phrases such as "I love you", "please forgive me", "I forgive you" and "thank you" (first developed by Dr Ira Byock, palliative care physician) can be used in the conversation.

Understanding of life beyond death

As fellow believers united in God's family, we can share that the comfort of a Christian in life and death is that we are not our own, but belong to our faithful Saviour Jesus Christ. He has already redeemed us from the power of the devil, so that we can proclaim that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Rom. 8:38-39).

Death then becomes a passageway to life eternal. It is a blessing that we can pass from this life to the more glorious and eternal abode with Christ, and God has ordained death as the means. He has swallowed death up in victory, and the mortal shall put on immortality, the corruptible shall put on incorruption (1 Cor. 15:54). What shall we fear then?

**Death then becomes a passageway to life eternal.
It is a blessing that we can pass from this life
to the more glorious and eternal abode
with Christ.**

Reflections: Idols of a Mother's Heart (1)



Jemima Joy Boon, Joanna Chua, Julia Koh & Nicole Lim
Members of CERC and young mothers in the church

There is much that changes in our lives when we become mothers, but one thing that does not change is sin. During our experiences of early motherhood, a group of us came together to study a book titled *Idols of a Mother's Heart* by Christina Fox, and we hope to share some of our reflections and lessons from it here. All of us have less than five years of parenting experience, but in this experience we have been made acutely aware how motherhood highlights our deepest insecurities and reveals some idols we keep within.

The Idol of Children

God says in the family psalms (127-128) that children are a precious inheritance (Ps. 127:3) and the man to whom God gives children is blessed (Ps. 127:5). This is why we bear children and take on this high responsibility of raising them in the fear of the Lord. We work tirelessly round the clock in raising them. We willingly spend ourselves for the care of not only their earthly needs, but more importantly, their spiritual needs, even though it is through much sowing in tears.

(I) A Cultural and Worldly Temptation

This high and good calling can easily turn into idolatry. Perhaps it is because our Chinese culture deeply prizes children. Children are the pride and joy of parents and carry their hopes and dreams. Our society also holds children in high regard, as children are the future of society, and its power lies in the contribution of children. Whatever the reason, the idol of children is a very real danger. Our hearts are deceitful above all things (Jer. 17:9). We may think we are doing the right thing and taking this calling of raising our children seriously, when we are actually worshipping the calling and idolising our children. At worst, this idol can distort our proper focus on the calling of motherhood into an unbiblical view that our families are independent from the church.

(II) Idolising our Children

What are some things this idol may look like? For one, we live for our children. We live to please them and make them happy. Perhaps we do not go so far as to indulge them and not discipline at all, but as long as it is not something sinful, we give in to them even though it is not the wisest decision. Perhaps we give a sweet smile to whomever we see at church, but it stops there. We only make the effort to talk to those of similar life circumstances and who can be of benefit to our children. We care for our children's physical needs and revolve our lives solely around them, at the expense of our involvement in the life of the church. Perhaps we still attend one worship service every Sunday, but we are absent from every other activity that is part of the organic life of the church just because "it does not fit into our child's nap schedule". Motherhood, from an all-encompassing calling to which we devote our lives, becomes the only calling we have.

(III) Re-evaluating our Priorities in Christ

What then is the remedy? It is not that we should devalue children. They are blessings from God, precious in His sight. This high view we must keep and strive to keep. Hear what the Lord says in Psalm 128:5-6 about the blessed man and, by implication, the blessed mother: "The LORD shall bless thee out of Zion: and thou shalt see the good of Jerusalem all the days of thy life. Yea, thou shalt see thy children's children, and peace upon Israel." Godly mothers, the Lord blesses you out of Zion—the church of Christ! This means the church is our priority. Our families and our children exist to serve the church. We raise our children to serve the church, teaching them to do so from their infancy, both in practical ways and by our example. As members of the body of Christ, we have the calling not only of mothers, but also of wives, friends, sisters in Christ, daughters, and fellow-labourers for the cause of Christ's kingdom. Although much of our time is spent in the raising of our children,

nevertheless, this reality should not excuse us from serving in other aspects in whatever opportunities the Lord gives us. Moreover, we mothers ought not forget that the church itself is also a picture of the covenant of God. In fact, the church is called the "house of God" (1 Tim. 3:15). As we love our families, let us also love this family of God and love her more and more! After all, when our earthly ties dissolve, the familial ties with the household of faith remain.

The Idol of Achievement & Success

We want to be successful parents. We research tirelessly, strategise, and compare methods to achieve targets. Co-sleeping vs. crib sleeping, breast-feeding vs. bottle feeding, and baby-led weaning vs. traditional weaning are some choices which parents today face. While there is much to glean from mutual experiences and there are many godly mothers who we can mark for an example (Phil. 3:17), differing results of the same strategies can lead to discontentment and envy. Scrolling through social media, we wonder why our motherhood journey seems so tough, and we almost long to find some imperfection in the well-manicured lives others portray.

(I) Misappropriating Achievements

Lost in our endeavours to improve our parenting methods, we also risk misappropriating the achievements of our children. Secretly we think that our children are godly because we do devotions faithfully, or we believe our education methods have led to their rapid cognitive development. We forget that, just as we do not contribute to our own salvation, sin is a condition in our children that we have no power to correct. When our

children rebel or fall ill and cannot meet the standards we have set, we are forced to confess that our identity is in Christ and not in motherhood and meeting our goals.

(II) Successful vs. Faithful Motherhood

So what does "successful" motherhood look like? We all hope that our children love God, love others, say sorry when at fault, and behave well. But if that is our definition, we will be frequent failures. Paul Tripp writes in his book *Parenting* that many parents mistakenly look towards specific indicators in their children's lives that would tell them that they have succeeded in parenting. However, he proposes that "successful parenting is not about achieving goals but being a **usable and faithful tool** in the hands of the One who alone is able to produce good things in your children."

(III) God's Glory, Not Ours

"But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty; And base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are: That no flesh should glory in his presence" (1 Cor. 1:27-29). Our children, as weak creatures, will humble us in our Christian walk. Even if we fail, God won't love us any less. He died for us while we were yet sinners (Rom. 5:8) and fearfully and wonderfully made our children in His image (Ps. 139:14). Let us rest in our true identity as God's children.

(to be continued)

"Successful parenting is not about achieving goals but being a usable and faithful tool in the hands of the One who alone is able to produce good things in your children."

Jehovah's Mighty Acts

by Rev. Nathan Langerak



Lee Kong Wee
Member of CERC

This book is the first book of a series entitled "Tell His Wonders" that the RFPA intends to publish from the pen of Rev Nathan Langerak, Pastor of Crete Protestant Reformed Church in USA. As the series title hints at, the series has a covenantal purpose, namely to convey Jehovah's mighty saving acts to our generations (Ps. 78:4, 6). We want to tell God's wonders to our children so that they might know Him, believe in Him, and in turn tell His wonders to their children. The book relates some of the foundational saving acts of Jehovah in the Old Testament, from creation to the return of Judah from the Babylonian captivity.

The language used throughout is simple and straightforward, without using deep, theological terms; yet biblical, Reformed truths are clearly and accurately conveyed, sometimes even in a striking and profound manner. For example, regarding creation, the author writes "*He filled the universe with billions of stars - clusters of stars, galaxies of stars, each star a mighty work of God. Who can count all the stars? Yet God knows every one by name.*" (page 10). Explaining the doctrine of the covenant, "*During the cool of the evening Adam & Eve walked & talked with God there. That's what friends do. They want to be together & talk together.*" (page 11). Concerning the doctrine of election and reprobation, "*God is a God of choices. He chooses what is pleasing to Him.... God gives us a wonderful example of His saving choice in the story of Jacob and Esau.*" (page 35). In some of the stories, Rev. Langerak provides insightful and vivid commentary into the biblical account, e.g. "*Adam & Eve had never seen death. How shocked they must have been to see those animals being killed (to make the coats to cover them)!*" (page 18).

At the end of each story, a lesson is drawn out in relation to God's covenant, reminding us that all history is no mere passing of events through time, but are 'His-Story', with every single event being part of the

unfolding revelation of God's eternal covenant of grace with his Church. *Nothing* happened, is happening or will happen by chance, but *all* things work together to fulfil the highest purpose of God, i.e. to bring to pass the coming of Jesus Christ as Head and Mediator of the covenant, to save his friend-servants through His death & resurrection, for the glory of His Name. These brief lessons are perhaps the most important part of the book, lest we and our children miss the true wonder of God's works, impressive and astounding as they may be even in their earthly physical form and appearance.

Definitely worth mentioning is also the very beautiful and realistic full-colour illustrations in the book, which add to the reader's understanding and appreciation of the historical setting in which the stories took place. Children are naturally attracted by the colourful pictures, which not only help capture their attention, but also make the biblical story more real and understandable to them. The 2-page spread of the parting of the Red Sea evokes overwhelming awe and amazement as one imagines walking in the midst of the two million Israelites, with the howling winds blowing and beholding the turbulent walls of waters towering on both sides.

I would highly recommend parents with children from 7-10 years old to get a copy of this book to use for family devotions. If you have gone through 'Come Ye Children' several rounds already, and are reaching the end of the book once again, perhaps you want to consider using this book (and its sequel, God willing) for devotions with the children for a change, before restarting 'Come Ye Children' again. Read aloud to the younger children. Read together with the older children. Tell them the wonders of Jehovah's mighty acts in saving us from our sin through the unspeakable gift of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Tell them, that they in turn might tell Jehovah's wonders to their children and grandchildren.

NEWS FROM THE CHURCHES



Singapore

We are thankful that God has provided us the means of receiving the preaching of the Word at the morning worship services since October through a live-streamed service conducted by Prof. R. Dykstra. Special appreciation to Prof. Dykstra for his preaching every Saturday night (U.S. time) and also Bro. Marcus Wee for providing technical assistance in the USA during each livestream.

The Theological School Committee has allowed Prof. Dykstra to be relieved from his seminary duties this coming semester to come Singapore to supply us with pastoral help. The Dykstras arrived in Singapore on Dec 15 and joined us on Dec 30 after undergoing the mandatory two-week Stay-Home Notice (quarantine) and testing negative for COVID-19. We are thankful to be able to receive the preaching of the Word more regularly, as well as the fellowship and encouragement that the Dykstras bring.

As COVID-19 and restrictions continue, we are thankful that the young people (Covenant Keepers) can continue to have their annual camp this year in an innovative way. Working within the restrictions permitting only five visitors to a home at each time, the CK met in three different homes to have their camp activities concurrently. This included listening to online messages by Prof. Dykstra, message discussions and outings. We pray that the camp will be a good way for the youth to re-connect with each other as well as to encourage each other in their spiritual lives.

Ireland / Northern Ireland

We are thankful that the CPRC continues to grow in 2020, although COVID-19 did make it slightly more interesting for certain saints to join the church, especially those who had to move from other parts of Europe. Readers can find out more by reading the Covenant PRC Newsletter November Issue.

The Philippines

We are thankful that the churches in the Philippines have been allowed to start public worship services once more, albeit with some restrictions in place. May God bless the people through the preaching of His word and the sacraments.

Rev. D. Holstege and his family have returned to the USA for their furlough until July 1, DV. We pray that Rev. Holstege and his family will have a blessed time of rest and refreshment while reconnecting with family they have not seen in a long time. At the same time, we pray that the Lord continue to bless the work of the other ministers.

COVENANT LIFE IN PICTURES



ABOVE
Covenant Keepers December Retreat.
Activities included paddleboarding
in a mangrove, an escape room,
good fellowship and video speeches
by Prof Dykstra



BELOW *Christmas Gospel Meeting*
Church members gathered in various
homes with family and friends for the
gospel meeting and Christmas carolling



COVENANT LIFE IN PICTURES

P. S. Bonus photo page inside!

Prof Dykstra giving the Christmas gospel meeting speech via Zoom; church members with family and friends watching from their homes



Left: The Dykstras during their two-week quarantine, reading e-mails from family back home

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