

the messenger

Mid-America Reformed Seminary

Summer Busyness and Church Assemblies

by Dr. Cornelis P. Venema



*URC & OPC Combined Synod: 1998 Graduates:
Left to right: Keith Davis, Joel Dykstra, Todd Joling, Jason Tuinstra, William Van der Woerd, Kevin Hossink*



*RCUS: Mid-America Graduates:
Back row (L-R): Randy Klynsmas, James Sawtelle, Dave Fagrey, Paul Henderson, Jon Blair, Chris Moulton
Front row (L-R): Hank Bowen, George Horner, Tom Mayville, Kyle Sorensen, Valentin Alpuche, J.P. Mosley, Steve Carr, Ruben Zartman*

I am often asked during the summer, “What do you do when there are no classes to teach?” When asked this question, I am often tempted to say, “Nothing,” which seems to be the expected answer, given the tone in which the question is asked.

The correct answer, however, is that my colleagues and I keep busy with other activities. These include writing projects for the Seminary’s journal, but they also ordinarily include the presence of our faculty and staff at church assemblies. Consistent with Mid-America’s commitment to the church and her ministry, summer-time includes attendance at the assemblies of the churches we serve and whose witness we seek to encourage.

The summer of 2018 was no exception to this pattern. Jeff De Boer, our Director of Enrollment Management, represented the Seminary at the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America, June 13-15. Mike Deckinga, our Vice-President of Advancement, represented Mid-America at the Synod of the Reformed Church in the United States (RCUS), as well as the concurrent assemblies of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC) and the United Reformed Churches in North America (URC). In addition to the work of Jeff and Mike at these assemblies, several members of the Seminary’s faculty were intimately involved in the work of the OPC and URCNA assemblies, which met together on the beautiful campus of Wheaton College, June 11-15.

The 2018 OPC GA came into session on its birthday (June 11), and met concurrently with the Synod of the URCNA. Mid-America was well

represented at these assemblies: Dr. Alan Strange served as a commissioner to the OPC GA; Dr. Cornelis P. Venema served as a delegate at the URCNA Synod; and Rev. Andrew Compton served as a fraternal delegate from the URCNA to the OPC GA. In addition to these members of the faculty, many alumni of Mid-America were present at both assemblies as commissioners and delegates.

Because of the joint nature of this year’s OPC GA and URCNA Synod, evenings were spent in joint fraternal events rather than business sessions. Tuesday evening was an especially joyous event as the new Trinity Psalter Hymnal was officially presented. Dr. Strange (OPC) and Rev. Derrick Vander Meulen (URCNA), the co-editors of the hymnal, spoke about the history and unfolding of the project. Afterwards, a panel discussion was held from members of each fellowship’s ecumenical relations committees. On subsequent evenings, joint presentations on the work of the two churches in missions and church planting were given. At the conclusion of the assemblies, a combined service was held on Friday afternoon.

Two features of these meetings were especially gratifying. The first and most important was the wonderful glimpse that the participants were given of the unity and catholicity of the church. Though of lesser significance, it was also gratifying to witness the way Mid-America’s faculty and alumni are contributing in various ways to the ministry of these churches.

While summer-time brings a different kind of busyness, it provides a wonderful opportunity for service to the churches that support our work and entrust their students to us for training.

New Hymnal

by Dr. Alan D. Strange

The URC began working on a new songbook with another denomination not long after the URC came into existence in the mid-1990s. The OPC determined to produce what would eventually become the Trinity Psalter Hymnal (TPH) in 2008, after an overture from one of its presbyteries had kicked off work on a new songbook in 2006. The URC produced a proposed hymnbook and then determined at its 2010 Synod not to continue its partnership with the other denomination.

Following the 2010 OPC GA, the unexpected happened. The URCNA Songbook Committee contacted its OPC counterpart (an action initiated by URC minister, and alum, Chris Folkerts). This led to an invitation to the OPC from the URC Committee to meet with it at Lynwood URC (in Lynwood, IL) on Nov. 9, 2010.

The 79th GA (2011, celebrating the OPC’s 75th Anniversary) extended an official invitation to the next URCNA Synod (meeting in New York in 2012) to work together with the OPC to produce “a Psalter Hymnal for use in a wide range of confessional Presbyterian and Reformed Churches.” A new day in Reformed and Presbyterian ecumenicity dawned as the URCNA Synod in 2012 gladly accepted the OPC invitation and the two bodies began the hard yet sweet labor that led to the TPH. Alum Harry Zekveld played an important role in this work, along with many others in the OPC and URCNA.

Subsequent GAs and Synods approved the psalter and then the hymnal, and requested and received significant input from both our respective churches and members. Finally, at the 2016 OPC GA and 2016 URCNA Synod, both bodies gave overwhelming final approval for the production of the TPH. Derrick Vander Muelen of the URC and Alan Strange of the OPC were appointed as general editors. A joint venture partnership was formed between the OPC and URC and over 30,000 copies were sold in the pre-publication offer. The publication of the TPH has strengthened the ecumenical bonds of both the OPC and URCNA. All glory to God!

The President's Message: "Of Tulips and Roses"

by Dr. Cornelis P. Venema



During the summer months, I have been working on an article for the *Mid-America Journal of Theology*. The article addresses the topic of the assurance of election and salvation in the *Canons of Dort*. In commemoration of the 400th anniversary of the Synod of Dort, my article aims to show how the *Canons* emphasize the comfort that believers derive from the Scriptural teaching on election.

While working on this article, I was once again struck by the inadequacy of the common acronym, TULIP, which aims to summarize the five main points of doctrine set forth in the *Canons*. Acronyms are often useful aids to memory. When you form a word using the first letter of a series of words, this can be a helpful device to jog your memory. So it is with TULIP: T stands for "total depravity"; U stands for "unconditional election"; L stands for "limited atonement"; I stands for "irresistible grace"; and P stands for "perseverance of the saints." No doubt many a candidate for the ministry has found this acronym useful, when frantically trying to remember the five points of the *Canons of Dort* at a classical or presbytery examination!

The problem with this well-known acronym, however, is that it fails to capture well the Scriptural teaching that is set forth in the *Canons*. To paraphrase Roger Nicole, a Reformed Baptist theologian from France: "Though the Dutch are known for their love of tulips, this particular TULIP needs to be plucked out and thrown away"! The tulip may be a pretty flower, but it doesn't represent the best theology.

In case you are a lover of tulips, and of this TULIP in particular, let me explain why it is not very helpful.

In the first place, this acronym changes the sequence of the main points of doctrine in the *Canons*. The First Main Point of the *Canons* summarizes the biblical teaching of unconditional election, not its teaching about human sinfulness. According to the *Canons*, the gospel of Jesus Christ finds its deepest roots in God's gracious election of his people in Christ before the foundation of the world. Salvation is God's work from first to last, and it is not based ultimately upon any human work, including the faith whereby sinners embrace the promise of the gospel. Thereafter, the *Canons* teach four related Scriptural teachings: Christ's effective work of atonement; the nature and consequences of human sinfulness; the work of the Spirit in regeneration and conversion; and the perseverance of the saints.

And in the second place, it uses language that fails to capture well the actual teaching of the *Canons*. Three letters in TULIP are particularly misleading. When the *Canons* treat the topic of Christ's work of atonement, they emphasize the "effectiveness" of his work rather than its being "limited." Christ's atonement does not make the salvation of fallen sinners merely possible, as in the Arminian view. No, Christ's atonement actually provides for and ensures the salvation of all those for whom he died. When the *Canons* address the nature of human depravity and sinfulness, they accent the "radical" depravity of fallen sinners, who are incapable of doing any saving good, not their "total" depravity. Furthermore, when the *Canons* describe the work of Christ's Spirit in communicating the benefits of salvation to believers, they speak of "effectual" rather than "irresistible" grace. The term "irresistible" was often used by the Arminian party to caricature the Reformed view. The *Canons* do not deny that fallen sinners "resist" the gracious work of the Spirit. Left to themselves, all fallen sinners would spurn the gracious promise of salvation through faith in Christ. What the *Canons* affirm is that the Spirit works with the Word in a mysterious and invincible way, granting his elect people the will, the heart, and the disposition to embrace gladly what is offered to them in Christ.

Due to these problems with TULIP, a contemporary theologian, Timothy George, has suggested a different acronym, ROSES: R for "radical depravity"; O for "overcoming grace"; S for "sovereign election"; E for "eternal life"; and S for "singular redemption." Somehow, I don't think this flower is much of an improvement over TULIP!

Perhaps the main lesson in this is that we need a first-hand (re-) acquaintance with the teaching of the *Canons of Dort*. Rather than relying upon misleading acronyms, we need to find time to read the *Canons* themselves. May I encourage you to do so, and to join many others in celebrating the good confession we make regarding salvation by grace alone.

Where in the World is Rev. Vander Hart?

Rev. Mark Vander Hart has been engaged in a "working vacation" overseas this summer. He was again in the Baltics, his 12th trip there. During the last week of May and slightly into June, he taught a 5-evening course (3 hours per evening) on the post-exilic prophets (Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi) at the Baltic Reformed Theological Seminary in Rīga, Latvia. After that he taught Biblical Greek II to Latvian seminary students, three mornings a week until July 6. While in Latvia, he gave three addresses at the churches' family camp in June. The lectures were drawn from the book of Joshua (chapters 1, 2, 5, and 24). He also preached in two of the Reformed churches in Rīga. One weekend was spent in Kaunas, Lithuania, to meet with the Reformed pastor there and to preach in both a Lutheran and in a Reformed church (the two congregations meet in the same church building, but they hold separate services).

From July 19 to July 27, Rev. Vander Hart hopes to be in Egypt. This portion of the "working vacation" will include preaching on Sunday morning and on Wednesday evening, giving two lectures on Genesis 1-11 at a pastors' conference (July 24), and some sightseeing. (Egyptian civilization is very ancient, you know!) This portion of his "working vacation" was facilitated by Dr. Moody Wasif, a Mid-America alumnus. Rev. Vander Hart, at the time of this writing, is uncertain whether he will ride a camel or not! Now you know a little more about where Rev. Vander Hart is this summer.

Faculty Opening

Mid-America is seeking a full-time Ministerial Studies Instructor to teach courses in ministerial studies and practical theology, including homiletics, missions and evangelism, and pastoral care and counseling. For more information visit www.midamerica.edu.

Alumni Ministry from A to Z by Glenda Mathes



When Valentin Alpuche (2007) and Ruben Zartman (2017) worked together briefly in 2014 at El Pacto de Gracia, a Spanish language ministry in Chicago Heights, they had no idea that three years later they would be ministering side-by-side in California.

Their current church is Ebenezer Reformed Church (RCUS) in Shafter, CA. Rev. Alpuche arrived in 2014 to initiate a Spanish language ministry, and Rev. Zartman moved to Shafter shortly after his graduation to pastor Ebenezer's English-speaking congregation. So you could say their cooperative ministry goes from A to Z.

The two ministers maintain close contact throughout the week and co-teach a Spanish theology class. They both visit the elderly and frequently fill each other's pulpits. English worship services are at 10:00 AM, followed by Sunday school at 11:45 AM. The Spanish-speaking congregation

meets in the fellowship hall on Sunday, Monday, and Wednesday evenings and occasionally at additional times.

Both English and Spanish ministries have radio programs and utilize internet venues such as SermonAudio, Facebook, and YouTube. An English service is held monthly at a local convalescent hospital, with a Spanish service slated to begin in July.

Rev. Zartman leads worship and preaches to the English congregation. He teaches Sunday school, catechism classes, and Bible studies as well as chairing the Spiritual Council and Consistory meetings. Because the church does not have a secretary, he also handles many administrative tasks.

As the church's missionary pastor, Rev. Alpuche focuses on planting the Valle de Gracia congregation. He recently translated the Three Forms of Unity into Spanish. He preaches twice per month at a nearby prison, teaches a class for teenagers, directs a children's program during the summer, and maintains an outreach table for distributing Bibles and other literature during the school year.

Ebenezer Reformed Church will mark its 100th anniversary next April. It was founded by farming families, and Shafter remains a small rural community. Most employment among the church's 60 members is related to raising almonds or grapes.

The congregation has always been mission-minded, planting churches and conducting prison ministry. A Spanish language ministry had been considered for some time prior to 2014, when the church called Rev. Alpuche.

Rev. Alpuche was uniquely qualified, having extensively studied the Reformed faith while growing up within the Independent Presbyterian Church in Mexico (IPIM), which has existed for over 100 years, and attending Juan Calvino Seminary in Mexico City. While at Mid-America, he began Spanish language mission work. Following his graduation and ordination, he planted El Pacto de Gracia, which he served for six years.

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A Year in the Rearr by Mike Deckinga



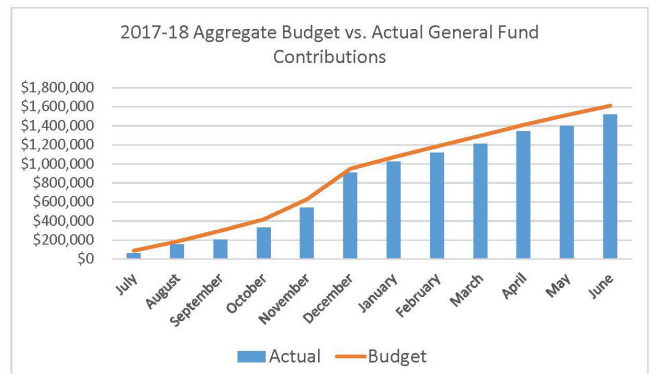
Well friends, another fiscal year is in the books at Mid-America. 365 days have come and gone in what seems like the blink of an eye. 365 days – that's 8,760 hours. That's 2,737,500 steps taken by the average person (thanks, Google!). They're just numbers, but sometimes numbers can be fun to look at.

I'd like to break down the last fiscal year by the numbers, if I may. Our U.S. general fund contributions, combined with gifts through our Canadian Foundation, make up the budgeted portion of raised revenue each year. For the fiscal year 2017-2018, the budgeted number was \$1,610,200.

Throughout the course of the year, through direct appeal letters, my articles in *The Messenger*, and in personal communication, I tried to give you snapshots of our financial situation. The final tally is in. We received your generous gifts, and with thanks, are pleased to mention that U.S. donations and Canadian Foundation transfers totaled \$1,519,587. While we are thankful for God's provision, we note also that this is \$90,713 behind what was needed.

Staying with our numbers game, let's break that down. When spread evenly across twelve months, the deficit comes to \$7,559, or better yet, \$248 a day. Are you following where I'm going with this? My math says that if 248 people would have contributed \$1 a day to the seminary, we would have been where we needed to be financially. That's not all too many when you consider our distribution of *The Messenger*. We send out over 11,000 copies of *each issue!*

Looking ahead to this coming year, our budget is \$1.9 million. \$1.65 million is budgeted revenue from US and Canadian donations. If a little under half of you reading this right now commit to \$1 a day to the seminary, we'll get there. Your gift matters! It is vital that you partner with us prayerfully and financially in the training of men for gospel ministry. Will you, please?





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A to Z continued...



“After doing church plant mission work in Chicago Heights, IL, I realized how much need there is among the Hispanic community to plant reformed and confessional churches,” Rev. Alpuche says. “When visiting Shafter, CA, my wife and I were astonished for the big number of Hispanics in this town and the surrounding area. Shafter, in terms of population, is at least 50 percent Hispanic. So we decided to accept the call to work in Shafter.”

The Spanish ministry, Valle de Gracia, has one family with three young children as

its first members. Leaders hope that two additional families, with whom they have worked extensively, will take membership classes. Six adults and nine children, ranging in age from 3-15, regularly attend services.

“These are families originally from Mexico,” explains Rev. Alpuche. “As with my work in the Midwest, our work in Shafter had no core group to start with so we had to begin from scratch. Church plant-mission work is hard work. You have to be ready for discouragement and disappointment constantly, but this is the way the Lord builds His church.” He adds, “The Lord has truly blessed my labors in bringing Rev. Ruben Zartman to Shafter, CA.”

Born to missionaries in Colombia and raised in Mexico, Rev. Zartman always hoped to serve in foreign missions. While in seminary, his two-year stint as interim pulpit supply at El Pacto de Gracia in Chicago Heights convinced him of the great need for Spanish-speaking ministers.

He says, “I thought that it would be a waste

of the gift the Lord gave me of growing up in Mexico and learning Spanish organically, if I were to take a call that did not have an element of speaking Spanish involved in it.”

His ministry at Ebenezer allows him to exercise that gift while laboring alongside Rev. Alpuche. “It’s particularly a blessing to be co-laboring with Valentin, whose sense of humor and personality make close side-by-side ministry very easy,” he says. “We hope to continue Ebenezer’s precious legacy, exalting Christ in a faithful proclamation of the Gospel and the bold profession of Reformed doctrine, as we grow in grace and holiness.”

“Please pray for missionaries,” Rev. Alpuche says. “It’s a great blessing to be part of an established congregation, but to plant a new one is, humanly speaking, an impossible mission. Our comfort and hope is the fact that our Lord Jesus Christ ‘from the beginning to the end of the world, gathers, defends, and preserves to Himself by His Spirit and Word, out of the whole human race, a church chosen to everlasting life.’”