Blessing in a Time of Violence

Which is to say this blessing is always.

Which is to say there is no place this blessing does not long to cry out in lament, to weep its words in sorrow, to scream its lines in sacred rage.

Which is to say there is no day this blessing ceases to whisper into the ear of the dying, the despairing, the terrified.

Which is to say there is no moment this blessing refuses to sing itself into the heart of the hated and the hateful, the victim and the victimizer, with every last ounce of hope it has.

Which is to say there is none that can stop it, none that can halt its course, none that will still its cadence, none that will delay its rising, none that can keep it from springing forth from the mouths of us who hope, from the hands of us who act, from the hearts of us who love, from the feet of us who will not cease our stubborn, aching marching, marching until this blessing has spoken its final word, until this blessing has breathed its benediction in every place, in every tongue:

Peace.

Peace.

Peace.

Jan Richardson

For Beirut, for Kenya, for Paris, for Syria. For every place broken by violence and hatred. For every person in pain and grief. For you, from me, in sorrow and hope.
Military Chaplains on the front lines

Lisa Hall-Wilson

We see headlines, photos and video clips of war. We know that many new refugees are risking their lives to escape it. But Canadian soldiers and peacekeepers see these situations in real-time. They are face-to-face with the tragedies we read about. When they return, some battle scars are easy to see. Some are invisible.

Who stands ready to renew or offer hope to our soldiers? Military chaplains, or "padres," in the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) are available to offer spiritual guidance and counselling to the soldiers and commanding officers they serve with. Chaplains are active members of their unit and train alongside those they serve, including daily personal fitness. Unit padres deploy with their unit but remain unarmed even in combat.

The Christian Reformed Church endorses two Military Chaplains in Canada. Christian Courier spoke with Captain Gerald Van Smeerdyk, stationed at CFB Edmonton (AB), and Captain Kevin Stieva, stationed at CFB Gagetown (NB) to find out more about their ministry.

Why would an ordained minister want to become a military chaplain? Captain Stieva served in regular armed forces for 18 years before going back to school for a degree in theology. He cited the freedom to talk about faith as one of the reasons for joining the chaplaincy.

“if you have the means and the ability to help someone in need, why wouldn’t you? Personally, as a Dutch descendant, I am also paying back to the members of the Canadian Armed Forces what they have done for my family who emigrated from the Netherlands,” Van Smeerdyk said. “I’m serving as a military chaplain because it’s the right thing to do.”

The Unremembered

Last month, new Minister of Defence Harjit Singh Sajjan raised concerns about the increased rate of suicide among members of the military. He ordered the chief of defense to make investigating this tragedy a priority. Fifty-nine Canadian soldiers who served in Afghanistan have committed suicide, the Globe and Mail reports; 158 died in the mission, which ended in 2013. Because those taking their own lives are not honoured in the same way as other fallen forces for 18 years before going back to school for a degree in theology. He cited the freedom to talk about faith as one of the reasons for joining the chaplaincy.

For Captain Van Smeerdyk, the answer came with a bit of a history lesson.

“if you have the means and the ability to help someone in need, why wouldn’t you? Personally, as a Dutch descendant, I am also paying back to the members of the Canadian Armed Forces what they have done for my family who emigrated from the Netherlands,” Van Smeerdyk said. “I’m serving as a military chaplain because it’s the right thing to do.”

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Soldiers returning home from WWII, the Vietnam War, the Korean War and other combat situations were the first to bring post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) to light. PTSD is caused by traumatic events combined with feelings of helplessness and hopelessness. When an individual is subjected to war, combat, physical or sexual abuse, childhood neglect or forced captivity, these situations can (and often do) cause PTSD. This disorder has links to suicide.

And according to a recent Statistics Canada report, “Post-traumatic stress disorder and panic disorder were twice as high among Regular Force members who had been deployed in support of the mission in Afghanistan compared to those who had not.”

Chaplains are among the first-responders for soldiers dealing with personal stress or mental distress. Captain Van Smeerdyk served in Afghanistan, and he says that “the mental trauma many of us experienced there is incalculable.”

Specific prayer needs

For churches who minister to veterans or those currently serving in the CAF, Stieva and Van Smeerdyk offer several suggestions for how to help. Pray for those who are currently deployed and for their families. The military has resources for families, but having a church family come alongside helps those waiting for loved ones to return and gives peace of mind to those who are away for weeks or months at a time.

Pray for those who are overseas. Pray for and support those returning wounded and suffering, but also pray for those who return bearing scars you can’t see. PTSD manifests itself differently from person to person, and can appear immediately after a traumatic event or even years later. The symptoms range in severity and it’s very difficult to admit that you need help. The military has a range of helps available, but having a church family for support is always beneficial.

“If some of our injured members are members of your congregations, learn about PTSD and don’t pass judgment on them for inappropriate behaviour, but embrace them with compassionate support and prayers for healing,” recommends Van Smeerdyk.

Captain Stieva said it’s not hard to remember the chaplains because they’re easy to pick out of a crowd. They might be dressed in white or have a purple scarf on for official duties. Yet in a crowd of soldiers dozens are suffering silently and need prayer and support.

Serving in a pluralistic environment means a chaplain could be ordained from one of 20 Christian denominations, or have a Jewish or Muslim faith tradition. “We are called to speak the truth, even to our military commanders, but we must never forget to do so in love. Pray that chaplains always remember that their Commander in Chief is gracious, compassionate and abounding in love,” says Van Smeerdyk.

Captain Stieva wants to encourage those looking for a mission field to consider serving as a military chaplain. Chaplains in the Army and Air Force are assigned to a specific unit and live and train with the same group of men. In the Navy it works a little differently as a chaplain may not always serve on the same ship.

“The military may cover the cost of an education in order to be ordained, and though chaplains aren’t allowed to proselytize, there are many opportunities to share about my faith,” says Stieva.

“The work we do is your outreach to the members of the CAF [Canadian Armed Forces]. You have made us your hands and feet,” writes Van Smeerdyk. “Being a military chaplain offers incredible opportunities for ministry. If civilian ministers were to take a close look at chaplain ministry, or even just talk to a military chaplain, I think that Christian Reformed churches would be expanding their outreach in the CAF.”

‘Operation Provision’

Meanwhile, “staff at Canadian Forces bases across the country are counting beds and making tentative plans to house and feed thousands of Syrian refugees expected to arrive in the coming weeks,” the Huffington Post says. Members of the military currently overseas may be called upon to help transport immigrants to Canada, journalist David Pugliese theorizes, a task for which some soldiers have already volunteered to give up their Christmas leave.

Lisa Hall-Wilson is a freelance writer in London, Ontario.
This is how a heart breaks

Sometimes, your heart breaks.
Your heart breaks in your own home.
Like when your daughter comes back from school, and you ask her how her day went, and she goes quiet. You know she’s been having a hard time with some of the other girls in her class. But she’s getting older, and doesn’t want her parents to fight her battles or solve her problems. So she suffers quietly, and you know you can’t do anything to help her.

Your heart breaks at work.
Like when a new coworker is struggling with his job. He’s just a kid, fresh out of school, and he’s in over his head. He keeps making mistakes. The boss is getting frustrated. He knows it, and he tries even harder, and somehow that makes it even worse. This downward spiral only ends one way – and you know it – but no matter how hard you try you can’t help.

Your heart breaks out in the world.
Like when you’re at Wal-Mart and a mom is at the end of her rope, with three crying kids clinging to her. She’s swearing at them and raising her voice and making a scene. And your heart breaks for her – for her stress and for her inability to cope. And your heart breaks for her kids, who can’t understand why mommy is angry and sad.

All of these heartbreaks are happening around you, every day.

Daring to hope
Sometimes your heart can even break for things that happen nowhere near you. For people you’ve never met, in places you’ve never been, in circumstances you’ve only read about.

There’s a lot of that kind of heartbreak, these days.
Your heart breaks for Paris. For the bodies beneath bloodstained sheets, lying in alleyways and on sidewalks. For the young lives cut short.

Your heart breaks for the Middle East.
For the little three-year old Syrian boy whose body washed ashore in Turkey. For the kids, clinging to her. She’s swearing.

Your heart breaks for all the people living in ISIS-controlled Syria and Iraq under the rule of an oppressive, insane fundamentalist regime. People who plant bombs in dolls to kill children. Who behead the clerics of their own faith for standing up to them. Who set enemy soldiers on fire and burned them. Who behead the Muslims of their own faith for standing up to them. Who set enemy soldiers on fire and burned them. Who behead the Muslims of their own faith for standing up to them. Who behead the Muslim friend Suniya – one of the gentlest and most caring souls I know – and boil with rage at the ignorer notion that all Muslims are violent? Do I look beneath these words at the foundation of cowardice supporting them? This paranoia some Christians profess that says, in essence, “I’m less concerned that some brown people I have never met will almost certainly die than I am about the completely unlikely chance that I will.”

Actually, as hateful as the words themselves may be, and as ignorant and as false as their foundation, the words themselves are not the problem.
What makes my soul despair is how far those words are removed from these words: For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me. Then the righteous will answer him, saying, “Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?” And the King will answer them, “Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.”

Sometimes, I wonder if people who call themselves Christian have read the book that sits in my nightstand. Because I don’t read anywhere in there that the only people who deserve love and compassion are the people share my beliefs. In fact, it says the exact opposite.

I look at our community – so many of us children and grandchildren of postwar refugees from Holland – and I worry that we’re so busy protecting the lives we’ve created for ourselves, we’ve forgotten that it was kindness and love that attracted us to Canada in the first place. I worry that we’re more self-interested than we are interested in the wellbeing of others. That we’ve become calloused and cowardly. Uncaring and unchristian.

I still want to believe that God’s love can change the world. But when I listen to the people who claim to follow his word, I lose that hope.
And that is what truly breaks my heart.

Lloyd Rang is the Communications Director at the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Toronto and a member of Rehoboth CRC in Bowmanville.
Editorsials

Every moment holy

Angela Reitsma Bick

I am too alone in the world, and yet not alone enough to make every moment holy.

Rainer Maria Rilke, Rilke’s Book of Hours: Love Poems to God

Martin Pistorius was trapped inside his own body for twelve years. After a sudden illness as a child, he had degenerated into a mute quadriplegic by age 14 – oblivious to everything around him. But then, after two years of darkness, his mind “came up for air.” Mentally aware but unable to speak or move, neither health care workers nor his family realized he had regained consciousness for an agonizing 10 years.

“...Martin Pistorius wrote Ghost Boy himself...

Few of us have experienced isolation to the same degree as Pistorius, but everyone knows what it’s like to feel lonely. And modern life is making us lonelier, according to all reports; spending more time online and less face-to-face leads to social isolation. Some studies even warn that loneliness is the next biggest public health issue.

Yet Pistorius – as cut off from other people as it’s possible to be – was not alone. “The only person who knew there was a boy within the useless shell was God, and I had no idea why I felt his presence so strongly.” The Pistorius family was not religious but God was as present to Martin “as air, as constant as breathing. “

Batten the hatches

I was reading two books (Ghost Boy and a murder mystery called Bury Your Dead) as all the columns for this issue trickled in, shaded darker than normal by bleak world news.

Lloyd Rang’s column (on the previous page) is particularly hard-hitting. He condemns Christians who display cowardice and hatred toward refugees rather than the hospitality Matthew 25 requires of us. Where does that fear of the other come from? Could it be connected to loneliness? Theologian Henri Nouwen believed that caring for others happens best in mass. Groups and organizations help us respond to the problems that we see; community promotes compassion.

I am too alone in the world.

Fear is what drives the desire to circle the wagons, to protect ourselves. Two ugly motivations for murder, as Canadian author Louise Penny shows, are “the fear of losing what we have and the fear of not getting what we want” (Bury Your Dead, 120). Ouch.

Without warning, Martin Pistorius lost everything – mobility, speech, childhood – and his parents lost a healthy son. In his virtual coma he heard his grieving mother say, “I hope you die.” Martin spent his days in a care facility for the profoundly disabled and his nights at home.

In 2001, a therapist noticed that Martin was alert, communicating through twitches and small eye movements. She suggested a cognitive evaluation, and when Martin passed it, his joyful parents bought a computer with communication software. Within two years he had taught himself to read, write and fix computer programs. He got a job and applied to university. Health care professionals invited him to speak at conferences.

Separation anxiety

In the poem quoted above, Rilke hints at the difference between loneliness and solitude. His “too alone” connotes loneliness. In the first line, the narrator sounds abandoned.

You know that feeling you get in the summer, when you look up at the stars? As the earth beneath grows cold and night things out, you shrink. The universe is so vast; how could anything down here matter? We are alone: literally, “unaccompanied.” A Hebrew idiom used in Genesis for “alone” means “stick” branches without a tree. Rootless.

But – thank God – Christ’s arrival changes that. In the bleak mid-winter – a celebration! From the stump of Jesse, a new shoot has come. God came down in human form to exist.

and tangible. And if that wasn’t audacious enough, it also considered it to be divine.

I am too alone in the world.

Yet Pistorius – as cut off from other people as it’s possible to be – was not alone. “The only person who knew there was a boy within the useless shell was God, and I had no idea why I felt his presence so strongly.” The Pistorius family was not religious but God was as present to Martin “as air, as constant as breathing.

Alone enough to make every moment holy. Is this what the German poet Rilke imagined?

Born to hold our lives together

Albert Wu

The ancient Greeks used to believe that there was a kind of divine structure that held everything in the universe together called the “logos” or the “word.” A mysterious framework that connected all that they knew into this harmonious cohesive order. They had to explain their experience of reality somehow. They had to explain why everything seemed to have its place. Why so much of reality as they knew was open before them like a gift just waiting to be explored, discovered and understood.

So they took this beautiful mystery of reality, named it and considered it to be divine.

Today, after everything that we have catalogued, learned and discovered, the cosmos is as beautiful and mysterious as it has ever been. There are still many who look out at reality as we know it and are astounded at its apparent organization and elegance. Some see the constants in the universe and are amazed that they seem to be finely-tuned for life to exist. Others see how orderly mathematic formulation and calculation can account for so much of the world around us. And, in the face of the mysterious and beautiful world we find ourselves in, some of us may even be tempted to see divinity stirred about like the ancient Greeks did. Abstract and impersonal perhaps, but numinous nonetheless.

However, the Christian worldview claims that the divine is not abstract or impersonal, but that it is deeply immediate and tangible. And if that wasn’t audacious enough, it also claims that this tangible God wants to meet with us. That he created everything like a master craftsman in order that we might encounter him and know him. Perhaps that is one of the reasons why (as many literary scholars note) the creation account in Genesis reads so much like the building of a temple, since one of the primary things do in a temple is to meet with the divine.

Under this worldview, the entire created order exists to glorify God and draw people to him in worship. The universe is God’s cathedral and it is billions of light years wide. It has redwoods for piers, the sun as a rose window, and stars for a vault. A vast edifice that the book of Hebrews tells us is held together by the power of God’s, “word” or “logos.” That every constellation and every vibrating atom is sustained by his Word, which we are told in the gospel of John, was with God in the very beginning and was God.

Bound in flesh and blood

What does this have to do with advent? What does this have to do with the arrival of Christ into our world? Because the Gospel of John also tells us that, “the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.” It tells us that this divine, life-sustaining force that binds all of creation together bound himself in flesh and blood and was born into the

Continued on page 5

Angela Reitsma Bick is Editor of Christian Courier. She lives in Newcastle Ont. with her family.
A farewell from Brent

Near to God forever. Will be a time where we will be able to sit in his fully restored cosmic cathedral and be as things in our universe seem orderly and conducive for life, everything is still breaking from the marks of death and decay that sin has left on the created order. Because as much as things in our universe seem orderly and conducive for life, everything is still breaking down. The universe is expanding, energy is dissipating and people are dying. But there will be a time where we will be able to sit in his fully restored cosmic cathedral and be near to God forever.

For unto us a child is born. Albert Wu is Associate Pastor at The Tapestry, a church plant in Vancouver, B.C. He came to the rainy city in 2004 for an M.Div at Regent College; he fell in love with The Tapestry and never left.

As I write this farewell, Paris formed a “Borderless” approach, exploring the ever-present reality that in 2015, Kingdom Refugees – as though they too aren’t fleeing division, xenophobic fear-mongering and terrorists massacred 129 innocent souls, with 1505 – 35 Kingknoll Dr. In 2015, Kingdom Andy Vandergrift highlighted in her recent column “Waste not, want not: Reforming food systems in Canada” (“CC” Oct. 26, 2015). The Prime Minister puts the following as a priority: “to develop a national food policy that promotes healthy living and safe food by putting more healthy, high-quality food, produced by Canadian ranchers and farmers, on the tables of families” (pm.gc.ca).

Join us in watching for further developments on this issue. What obstacles does MacAulay face? What opportunities might arise? We’d love to hear your thoughts at editor@christiancourier.ca

Editor

What do you think?

Last month, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau issued a mandate letter to Lawrence MacAulay, his new Minister of Agriculture, to “develop a national food policy that promotes healthy living and safe food by putting more healthy, high-quality food, produced by Canadian ranchers and farmers, on the tables of families” (pm.gc.ca). Join us in watching for further developments on this issue. What obstacles does MacAulay face? What opportunities might arise? We’d love to hear your thoughts at editor@christiancourier.ca

Editor

New writers needed for 2016

Christian Courier is looking for two new columnists to contribute one 700-word article each per month. We would like an emphasis on economics, medicine, internet culture or fatherhood but all proposals will be considered. Interested and experienced writers should send a description of your proposed topic and two sample columns to Angela Reitsma Bick (editor@christiancourier.ca) by December 31, 2015. Content should reflect the principles of God’s sovereignty and our mandate to interact with and reform culture. View a sample of our current columns at christiancourier.ca/columns-op-ed. Applicants must be currently living in Canada.

We are also looking for a short-term Review Editor, to cover Brian Bork’s upcoming parental leave from April to July 2016. The role includes assigning, evaluating and editing three reviews per month and writing one per month yourself. CC reviews contemporary media (movies, music, plays) and recent books (fiction, non-fiction and theological). Tell us why this job interests you and send one sample review to reviews@christiancourier.ca by January 31, 2016.

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News

Canadian Lutheran church staff spur parishes to support Syrian refugees

WINNEPEG (CCNS) – The staff of Canadian Lutheran World Relief (CLWR) and the two major national Lutheran church bodies are coming together for the first time to bring a Syrian refugee family to Canada.

The national offices of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada (ELCIC) and Lutheran Church-Canada (LCC), the LCC Central District office and CLWR are pooling donations from individual staff members to raise the money needed to support a family for a year.

Earlier this fall, CLWR staff members agreed to begin collecting pledges to sponsor one person, most likely a Syrian living in Jordan, where most of CLWR’s overseas programming for Syrian refugees takes place. CLWR invited the churches to get on board, making it possible to bring a whole family.

While they have not connected with a particular family as yet, they do know that they will be able to sponsor a Syrian family of five. ELCIC, LCC and CLWR are headquartered in Winnipeg and that’s where they expect the family will live, so that staff members can provide emotional support and connect the family with settlement services like language training, job training and counseling.

CLWR is a Sponsorship Agreement Holder with the Canadian government, which allows them to facilitate private sponsorships for congregations, families and other groups, including their own. Once a family is identified, CLWR expects it will take approximately two to six months before they arrive in Winnipeg. They plan to put their expertise in refugee resettlement to use.

“Each day we work to support congregations who are acting as refugee sponsors in Canada,” says Robert Granke, CLWR executive director. “My colleagues and I are excited to come together as a team and welcome a family, together with colleagues from the ELCIC and LCC. We are looking forward to identifying a family and meeting them in the coming months.”

Keeping the Reformation in mind

This sponsorship is occurring in addition to the refugee sponsorships individual ELCIC and LCC congregations undertake every year across the country. ELCIC congregations have challenged themselves to sponsor 500 refugees by 2017 to commemorate the 500th anniversary of the Reformation.

“I’m so glad our staff are participating in this sponsorship and taking part in the ELCIC Reformation Challenge,” says ELCIC National Bishop Susan C. Johnson. “Our partnership with CLWR is such an important part of living our call to be a church in Mission for Others. The refugee sponsorship between our national offices is especially timely given the fact that our government is committed to increasing the number of Syrian refugees to Canada. Together we are taking ‘welcoming the stranger’ very seriously.”

LCC President Robert Bugbee reflected on the decision of the LCC staff to support refugee resettlement. “I’m deeply grateful to our friends at CLWR for inviting us to take part in this project,” President Bugbee said. “There are fewer better ways to come to grips with the worldwide plight of refugees than to spend concrete time with real individuals, and I believe that we ‘longtime Canadians’ will be the first to benefit when we seek to show this sort of love to others. It will be a great thing if the commitment of our national staff people to address this need encourages local congregations across the country to consider refugee sponsorship in their own communities.”

Ethiopia: World Renew helping to stave off hunger from El Niño-caused drought

Vanessa Mathews Hannah
HALABA, Ethiopia (CRCNA/WR) – The ongoing rain failure in Ethiopia is now as bad as it was during the 1983-1985 famine that led to over 400,000 deaths, says Ken Kim, World Renew’s director of Disaster Response and Rehabilitation.

A large portion of the Ethiopian population lives in rural areas that rely on rain-fed agriculture. Due to the failure of the last two seasonal rains, many people are facing extreme hunger – to which World Renew is responding.

The cause of the change in weather patterns is a phenomenon known as El Niño, a weather system that occurs every few years as a result of warm ocean currents. As winds blow over the ocean they set off a chain of weather responses that are often particularly damaging to people in the developing world.

Some El Niño events are mild, while others can be quite strong. Even a weak El Niño can disrupt typical weather patterns, causing too much rain in some parts of the world and not enough in others. A strong one, such as the one that occurred in 1997-1998, can cause billions of dollars-worth of destruction and kill thousands of people.

Strongest ever recorded

The El Niño predicted for this year is expected to be the strongest ever recorded. Its effects are strongly being felt in Ethiopia, where thousands of farming families now have no harvests to count on. Experts expect that the results will soon be felt all across Africa, Asia and Latin America.

World Renew, through its membership in the Canadian Foodgrains Bank, is working with Food for the Hungry Ethiopia to provide urgently needed food to 28,800 drought-affected people. This project will be centered in the Halaba District, a lowland area in Ethiopia that often suffers from “food insecurity” due to erratic rainfall. Currently, it is one of the most critical areas of the country requiring assistance.

Families will receive cereals, lentils, oil and famix, a highly nutritious porridge designed to fight severe malnutrition, especially in children who need high levels of protein to grow.

Due to current funding restrictions, the project will provide these emergency rations for only three months, although it will likely take another six months to sustain lives until the next harvest.

Emergency rations will be provided for the next three months.

The Humanitarian Coordinator of the UN World Food Program has stated, “The challenge we have before us is incredibly serious, and it will take the collective effort of the entire international community to support the government in preventing the worst effects of El Niño now and well into next year.” The United Nations, the government of Ethiopia, and the international community of non-government organizations all agree this situation is urgent and will take a global effort in order to prevent mass famine.

Editor

Ongoing coverage

There are many angles to the current refugee crisis and new developments every week. As we were getting this issue of CC ready, there was a lot of online chatter about restricting immigration – sparking Rang and van Staaldhuizen’s challenging articles. Along with a page 13 feature piece on Micah House – a community that houses refugee claimants and helps them settle here – this story on the Lutheran initiative is more hopeful, showing that many Canadian Christians are actively engaged in helping refugees. In our next issue, you’ll meet a group of nine churches working together in one community to sponsor five Syrian families.

We are witnessing the largest humanitarian crisis in a generation, and our ongoing coverage in CC will reflect that. The Christian Reformed Church’s Office of Social Justice reminds us to “pray that our nations will be welcoming places for immigrants.”

Editor
Human rights activist Miss World Canada barred from entering China

**CC Staff, with files from Townhall**

SANYA, China – Anastasia Lin is Canada’s representative in the Miss World pageant to be held on December 19 in Sanya, Hainan Island, China. But it looks like Lin won’t be there to participate. Pageant organizers have denied her a visa and she has been barred from entering China. After travelling to Hong Kong, she was not allowed on the flight to mainland China.

Lin is not just a pretty face. She is an activist who has spoken out about China’s human rights abuses, including lack of religious freedom. Though she hasn’t been given any official reason for being kept out, Lin is convinced that her public criticisms of China’s record is the reason. “I believe the Chinese government is angry with me because I have tried to bring attention to these types of issues in my work,” she says.

Lin was born in China but came to Canada at age 13 with her family and is now a Canadian citizen. Canadian citizens are permitted to obtain a landing visa when they arrive in Sanya, but Lin was denied a visa. She has not been officially disqualified from the competition, but her non-appearance would technically disqualify her, which appeared to be China’s strategy.

**Ontario Superior court: Lower court wrong to ax statutory rape ban over ‘age discrimination’**

TORONTO (LifeSiteNews) – A law criminalizing sex with minors has been upheld on appeal by the federal government of Canada, but one defender of the traditional family expressed dismay that a lower court judge initially ruled the law unconstitutional.

“The appeal court decision is reasonable in that it protects minors under 16 from sexual exploitation by adults five years or more older,” Gwen Landolt, a lawyer and national vice president of REAL Women of Canada, told LifeSiteNews.

“But it speaks to the madness of today’s judges that they would throw out this protection as a kind of discrimination.”

The case involved a 15-year-old girl who allegedly pressed a 21-year-old male friend for sex. After a year, he claims, he gave in to her. The resulting pregnancy and abortion resulted in him being charged with violating the Criminal Code Section 150.1, which prohibits anyone having sex with a minor who is five years or more younger, whether or not the minor consented: what used to be called statutory rape.

But in 2011 Judge Lisa Cameron accepted the defence’s argument that the law was a form of age discrimination against the accused man, and instead of charging him, she threw out the law as a violation of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Justice Cameron said she found the girl “loving and respectful,” and mature for her age, and therefore someone who did not need the protection the law provided against exploitation by a much older person.

The prosecution appealed and the Superior Court found Cameron had erred and sent the case back for her to reconsider. This time she accepted the man’s conviction and gave him a conditional discharge. He then appealed the conviction.

**Necessary ‘age discrimination’**

But this month the Ontario Court of Appeal supported his conviction and found the law itself to be constitutional. It found the “age discrimination” built into the law to be a reasonable protection against exploitation, and therefore defensible under the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. The girl, moreover, was living alone, estranged from her only parent, and had otherwise demonstrated her lack of maturity and need of protection by her decision to go off birth control and have an abortion.

“Although the appellant may not have intended to exploit the complainant, she clearly suffered emotional and psychological harm from engaging in a sexual relationship with him,” the court found.

Landolt applauded the appeal court but asserted that Cameron’s decision is a good example of the ill effects of “judicial activism.” “Cameron’s ruling was a crazy decision. . . she can’t say this young girl didn’t really need protection.”

Landolt said the young girls were often pressured into having sex by older men, who then pressure the girls to have abortions to cover up their activities. “When you put the law into the hands of judges like this,” she said. “we all become vulnerable to personal views of people who feel free to indulge their liberal biases and bend the law.”

**Gospel artists support Bible translation with new single in many languages**

SWINDON, UK (CANADIAN CHRISTIAN NEWS SERVICE) – The Christian song “Your Word,” which reaffirms the Bible work in their local languages. In a small way each person purchasing the song, and each radio station playing it, will support new Bible translations and provide Bibles to those who still do not have their own personal copy of the Scriptures.

United Bible Societies is a global network of Bible societies working in over 200 countries and territories across the world. Together, they are the world’s biggest translator, publisher and distributor of the Bible. The Bible societies are also active in areas such as HIV/AIDS prevention, trauma healing and literacy. They work with all Christian churches and many international non-governmental organizations. Last year saw the highest number of printed Bibles ever distributed by Bible societies around the world. Nearly 34 million full Bibles were distributed, a rise of six percent over figures from a year earlier, and 14 percent higher than the number distributed in 2010.

“Your Word” features Billy Dorsey and Cindy Cruse Ratcliff. Don’t let China set terms that conflict with your values, Lin says.
Discovering God at work

In September we introduced a contest asking you for stories of how God has used Christian Courier in your life. We received too many responses to fit in the anniversary issue! So over the next few months, we’ll be sharing highlights from these stories here.

Editor

‘God put us on the bus!’

Your introduction of two Christian Courier contests is prompting me to write. Yes, CC has been used by God in my life – twice!

I used to be secretive about the first time. It was the summer of 1968 and, having arrived from the Netherlands the year before, I was about to begin my second year of teaching in Canada at Calvin Christian School in WallACEburg, Ontario. I was familiar with then Calvinist Contact, having shared a subscription with a roommate the previous school year. Sometime that August, while visiting my good friends the VandenLaans, who lived across the street, I spotted in their copy of the publication a personal ad that intrigued me. A widowed man with three young children was interested in meeting a woman looking for marriage. I mentally copied the particulars of the ad. Modern day dating sites are now a common way of meeting a life partner and should carry no stigma, but back then I thought that answering an ad like this would be something to keep mum about.

Well, after increasingly frequent letter writing, Koos Christiaanse, who lived in Willowdale, and I decided to meet in Hamilton when I was attending a teachers convention there. Many more letters (phone calls were too costly!) followed and an invitation came to visit during the Christmas holidays. The result was that Wallaceburg had to find another teacher for the following school year. Koos and I married on a very hot summer day in 1969 in the Willowdale Christian Reformed Church. Sometime later our daughter was born and Koos and I had a happy marriage lasting 32 years.

In 2009, Christian Courier again played a role in my life after I had been alone for more than seven years and lived in Barrie. I responded to an ad that the Brampton Christian Travel Group had placed inviting additional people to join them on a trip to Ireland. That’s where Dan Van Beilen comes into the picture. I did not know anyone in the group. However, Dan, who had lost his wife the previous year, was on that trip. Taking in the beauty of the Irish country side, we spent lots of time together, a developing romance our fellow travellers couldn’t help but observe. We married in the fall of that year in CrossPoint Christian Reformed Church in Brampton in the presence of all our children and many grandchildren as well as relatives from the Netherlands. Dan says, “God put us on the bus and left the rest to us!”

You may understand that for the above reasons, and many more, I could never do without a subscription to Christian Courier.

Julie Christiaanse-Bijma
Brampton, Ont.

Congratulations Christian Courier!
The Christian Reformed Church Extension Fund has been a great supporter of CC for over 40 years and CC has been our main vehicle for reaching our CRC clients whether depositors, annuitants or borrowers. Our support of the CC will continue and we pray for your continued life in our community. We have been very impressed with the changes in (editorial) staff, type of articles and insights. You make a real difference to your readers. Keep up the fine work and may you continue to reach not only long time readers like our board members but also attract new readers and the younger generation. May blessings abound.

CRC Extension Fund
The Board

All of us need skylights

In early 1953, some visitors from Holland asked my husband if he wanted to be the editor of Calvinist Contact. He said “no,” because he was accepted at Calvin seminary and wanted that. But William stayed in contact by writing for CC. For years he wrote the “Skylights” column. I was sometimes called Mrs. Skylight! I still have them all.

Audrey Rang
Whitby, Ont.

Here is an excerpt from a column by William R. Rang (the father of current “Christ @culture” columnist Lloyd). It was published April 9, 1982.

When I was just a little boy, I enjoyed staying at my grandmother’s place. Hers was a house full of wonders: the grandfather clock, the Bible pictures on the frosted glass of the tea-warmer, the old things everywhere.

The greatest joy of it all was the little room where I used to sleep. The bed was filled with down and you snuggled deep into it under a pile of blankets. [After] “oma” came and put the light out, then I was alone in the big bed under the slant of the roof. I could hear the wind howl through the rafters above me. There was a little window in the roof. Sometimes I could see the stars, at other times, I could see the clouds going by. Usually the sky was just plain dark.

I knew that the Lord was here. Of course, he could see me, but I felt that I saw a little bit of him too, even if it was only a part of the place where he dwelt. Whenever I looked through that skylight, I wanted to talk to him, about everything that came up in my mind. I remember that one evening I told him about the salamander I had found.

Some evenings I just looked. Then I let my thoughts go, and I felt that he spoke to me. As my thoughts wandered, I fantasized that the Lord talked to me about a great many things. About my Oma and my parents, about himself most of all.

Half a century later, I realized that then I was not just talking to God, I was praying. Prayer is telling him everything. Yet it is, somehow, also a listening to him. I heard him in the wind and in many of the sounds of the night.

All of us need our skylights. Our children do too. More time to speak with him, more time to listen to him. More time to look up to him and feel happy, and thankful, and blessed all over.

Beloved photograph

Here is a picture of my parents-in-law, Popke and Jenny Veenbaas. This was taken quite a few years ago; some of the grandkids put a bow in “Beppe’s” hair and some clips in “Pake’s.” Mom loved to knit and Dad loved his Christian Courier. Most of us kids have this picture and I have one framed in our living room. They have had a Christian Courier subscription for many, many years. We love Christian Courier and pray that it will continue for many, many years to come.

Winny Riewald Veenbaas
Abbotsford, B.C.
Children’s picture book reviews

Sonya VanderVeen Feddema

**Clara and Davie: The True Story of Young Clara Barton, Founder of the American Red Cross**
by Patricia Polacco, Scholastic Press, 2014

On Christmas Day in 1821, Clara Burton was born in Massachusetts. Her 10-year-old brother, Davie, cared for and nurtured her, due to their mother’s poor health. When Clara was older, she helped Davie with his barn chores and instinctively knew how to nurse sick animals back to health. Soon it became evident that Clara had a “special way with critters” and that “she seemed to have healing in her hands.”

Clara, who lisped when she spoke, suffered punishment and taunts from family and peers. As a result, she became withdrawn and shy. Davie came to her defence again and again, and the bond between them strengthened.

When Davie had a terrible accident and broke both his legs, Clara nursed him back to health over a period of three years and encouraged him to walk again. Davie predicted then that someday his little sister was “going to be a very great lady.”

He was right.

In May 1888, Clara founded the American Red Cross and “is hailed in history as one of the most respected and beloved women of the century.”

With her distinctive artistic and narrative skills, Patricia Polacco brings to life for young children the true story of one of her ancestors.

**Bella’s Tree**
by Janet Russell
Illustrated by Jiran Marton
Groundwood Books, 2009

In this clever, humorous picture book narrated in Newfoundland colloquialisms, young Bella tries to help her grandmother, Nan, who has become “crooked” – frustrated, irrational and cranky – because her aging body hinders her from doing what she once did. She can no longer pick the berries which now lay underneath the snow. Neither can she go out into the woods and find a Christmas tree as she has in past years.

When Bella offers to search for a Christmas tree, Nan scoffs at the possibility because Bella is “not much bigger than an ax, let alone able to swing one.”

But Bella proves Nan wrong.

Bella brings home three trees, one after the other, but each time Nan isn’t satisfied and her “crookedness” intensifies. When Bella brings home a fourth tree, Nan is finally pleased, yet one problem remains. All the decorations have been placed on the three inferior trees. Surprisingly the bare and bleak fourth tree is decorated by fifty warblings, and “Nan’s Christmas tree began to sing.” Finally, Nan’s “crookedness” is banished!

Warm illustrations complement this heartening tale of a grandmother and her spunky grandchild.

**Star of Wonder**
by Leena Lane
Illustrated by Elana Baboni
Anno Domini Publishing, 2007

This uniquely illustrated retelling of the Christmas story begins with the visit of the angel Gabriel to Mary and concludes with the return of Joseph, Mary, and baby Jesus to Nazareth after their flight to Egypt. Illustrations employ vivid colours, sharply defined characters, and energetic movement to convey the joy, danger, praise, hardship and glory that surrounded the birth of the Savior of the world.

The author resists the temptation to sentimentalize the Christmas story, as is so common in children’s picture books, many of which supposedly show and tell of Christ’s birth, but rather present a syrupy story that seems to have nothing to do with Jesus being the saviour of sinners. *Star of Wonder* puts the focus on Jesus as God’s gift to the world for its salvation.

**My Name is Blessing**
by Eric Walters
Illustrated by Eugenie Fernandes
Tundra Books, 2013

In a Kenyan village, Muthini and his eight cousins live with their grandmother – their Nyanya – who is their sole provider. Each of their parents have either abandoned them or died.

Nyanya’s given name, Mumo, means grace. Muthini realizes that in his culture names have meaning. Sadly, because of a deformity – Muthini has only two fingers on his right hand and none on his left – his name means suffering. Muthini’s name is hard for him to bear.

Nyanya never seems to notice Muthini’s hands. He is grateful for her love and acceptance. His peers, however, mock him. Muthini tries to be brave, but finds it impossible to ignore their cruelty.

Nyanya, growing old and tired, makes a difficult decision and takes Muthini on a long journey away from all he knows and loves. No longer able to care for him, Nyanya brings Muthini to a boarding home for needy children. The headmaster greets them warmly, but says he can’t accept a child named Suffering into his home. He then gives Muthini a new name, Baraka – Blessing – and welcomes him into a loving community.

Based on a true story, *My Name is Blessing* poignantly portrays the world of a child who is able to overcome prejudice and disadvantages through the love of committed, caring adults.

**Over and Under the Snow**
by Kate Messner
Illustrated by Christopher Silas Neal
 Chronicle Books, 2011

A young girl and her father go cross-country skiing through a pristine winter wonderland. When the girl sees a red squirrel scamper by, then disappear in a crack, she asks her father where the animal has gone. He explains that the squirrel escaped under the snow where there “is a whole secret kingdom, where the smallest forest animals stay safe and warm. You’re skiing over them now.”

As they ski on, the girl learns about the animals – squirrels, deer mice, shrews, voles, and others – who live underneath the snow and marvels at the wonder of this discovery.

Author’s notes at the conclusion of the book further explain the subnivean zone – “a network of small open spaces and tunnels between the snowpack and the ground” – and give further details on each creature that survives there.

This informative picture book, illustrated in muted, earth-tones suitable to its subject matter, celebrates the wonder of God’s creation, as well as the tenderness and love between a father and daughter.

Sonya VanderVeen Feddema is a freelance writer living in St. Catharines, Ontario.
God of angel armies

Bert Slofstra

Given all the traditions and stories that have become part of our annual Christmas celebrations, it’s often hard to separate biblical fact from fiction. One such piece of fiction is that on the night Jesus was born a choir of angels sang a hymn of praise to God. But it’s in the hymnbook, isn’t it? “Sing, choirs of angels, sing in exultation . . . Hark! The herald angels sing . . . Angels we have heard on high, singing sweetly through the night . . .” The biblical fact, however, is quite different.

Luke is the only one of the gospel writers who reports the appearance of a host of angels. He writes: “Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God . . .” It’s the only time in recorded history that the angels have made a visible appearance in such numbers. Why, and what does it mean?

It’s crucial that we understand the correct image of angels. Too often we think of angels as soft and feathery; we picture cute cherubic beings who appear on Hallmark cards looking down from clouds like they’re having a slumber party. Parents gaze upon their children after a whole day of being reminded that their little ones were not conceived by the Holy Spirit but are now gently sleeping, and say, “What angels!”

Sword-wielding warriors

But biblical angels are most often frightening and disturbing. The first angels we meet appear as guards wielding flaming swords as they bar the gate back to Eden. The last angels we meet ride white horses with swords as they bar the gate back to Eden. Biblical angels appear as guards wielding flaming swords. The primary biblical image of angels is a military one, and that’s how Luke 2 describes them. The word “host” comes from the Greek “stratia,” a military term literally meaning “army.” This was no choir sweetly singing; in fact, singing isn’t mentioned anywhere. On the night of Jesus’ birth, with abiding shepherds as witnesses (that’s another story!), the heavens are suddenly filled with thousands of rough and ready soldiers of God, an army shouting – not singing – in unison!

As mentioned previously, this is the only time in recorded history they visibly appeared in such numbers. So why that night? Well, have you ever noticed how human governments behave when they commission new and powerful weapons or want to demonstrate their power and might? The military’s top brass show up; political leaders deliver sober speeches; bands play martial music; citizens are invited to observe all the hoopla, jack booted soldiers do a ridiculous sort of goose step, weapons are displayed, war planes fly overhead. Images such as the North Korean military parade designed to show off Kim Jong-un’s military might come to mind. All of it designed to somehow preserve peace either by preventing or waging war, a peace which in our broken world always remains a very fragile thing.

Shouting peace

But never in the biblical story – not when Israel carried the sacred ark of God into battle against their archenemies, the Philistines, nor when a young shepherd named David nailed the fearsome giant Goliath with one smooth stone – and never in all of human history before them or since, have heaven’s warriors shouted peace or cheered when nations sent armies off to war.

They know better. They know what the real war is – a war against sin and death and the devil; they know that winning that war is not a matter of politics or tanks or terrorist tactics or Star Wars technology. So they who, with God and us, long for peace have kept silent throughout all of history except once, except that first Christmas, as one of them (more likely Michael than Gabriel!) announces: “Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.” And because God’s angel armies recognize a final solution – the way to everlasting peace – when they see it, the moment Christ is born and his identity is revealed, a whole army of angels appears and shouts out a message for all the earth to hear: “GLORY TO GOD IN THE HIGHEST! THE WAY TO PEACE HAS COME!”

Why were they so sure? Because this baby, Jesus, was their commander-in-chief, the Son of God, God himself. And his presence on earth was the appearance of the most awesome weapon ever: a lamb. “Behold,” John the Baptist announced as Jesus began his public ministry, “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” “Behold, the Lamb of God whose life of loving obedience and service, whose sacrifice for sin on a cross, and whose victory over the devil and death in his resurrection guarantees the coming of a day when this world’s sorrow and cruelty will be a thing of the past, and peace will reign forever.

Whom shall I fear?
The angel armies of God have spoken – once. But once is all we need to hear. This means that the Christian claim that there is an age of eternal peace in the future of planet earth is no pipe dream. In Jesus, it is a sure and certain promise. The angel armies of God have spoken! And the name they have spoken, the God of angel armies, Jesus, is the only name under heaven given to humanity by which we, and our world, can be saved. And so we sing, yes, we sing loud and clear again this season in a world where fear is the only thing that humanly speaking seems to make sense. As the words of Chris Tomlin’s popular worship song so appropriately say: “Whom shall I fear? The God of angel armies” – our Saviour, Christ the Lord – “is always by my side.”

Bert Slofstra is senior pastor of Gateway Community Christian Reformed Church in Abbotsford, B.C., and has served there in his primary roles of preaching and pastoral care since 1990. He is married to Diane Schaafsma, and together they have 5 married children and 13 grandchildren.
Features

A different kind of white Christmas

Monica deRegt

I have never been one to dream of a white Christmas. Bing Crosby may have longed for the treetops to glisten, but I much prefer to see them covered in colourful blossoms. As dawn and dusk creep closer together each day, squeezing out the daylight, I begin to dread that chill in the air that warns of cold, dark days ahead that will soon suffocate life with their swirling white blankets.

But snow is fun, some people say. Winter is cozy, right? Embrace every season! Christmas is a happy time! As someone who grew up in northern B.C., where our seasons consisted of eight months of winter, two months of muddy roads and two months of “poor sledding,” I definitely experienced my fair share of cold. Walking home from the bus stop at 4 p.m. in the dark, wondering if every shadow was, in fact, a moose cow or her cubs (at times it was!); blowing hot air onto the frozen cuffs of my sopping wet mittens to ease the stinging pain in my wrists; slamming the car into the icy ditch more than a few times while driving in white-out conditions – these experiences are not the memories dreams are made of.

Green and blue

Of course there were many warm and fuzzy memories too, but most of them didn’t involve snow. I still remember the awe of my first green Christmas, my first Christmas away from home – no snow on the ground by December 24 in central Alberta? It was almost too good to be true! It’s a little odd to call such a phenomenon “green” because almost everything was brown and very lifeless, and the farmers were quite clear about the future ramifications of a low snowfall. Certainly the landscape was not as pretty as the pristine snow that arrived a few days later, but I still reveled in being free – at least for a few more days – from the claustrophobic feelings that usually arrive with the first snowfall.

It was many years later that I was first introduced to the concept of “Blue Christmas” – and no, it has nothing to do with jazz music or Elvis Presley. For many people, the holidays can bring on or intensify mood disorders such as depression and anxiety. Research shows lack of sunlight from shorter days can have a direct impact on mood, causing decreased Vitamin D levels and limiting our ability to get physical activity – both important factors in releasing the feel-good hormones that keep us cheerful and happy. Another part of the problem, according to Adam K. Anderson, Ph.D., an associate professor of psychology at the University of Toronto, is the bombardment of media during the holidays showing images of smiling families and friends. This can contribute to feelings of loneliness or a sense of inadequacy regarding one’s personal relationships. Individuals may see other people spending time with friends and family and ask themselves, “Why can’t that be me?” or “Why is everyone else so much happier than I am?”

Additionally, the Christmas season can be a painful reminder of the past for some people. This is especially true for people who have experienced a significant loss of a loved one, or for those who might have experienced a traumatic childhood and prefer not to walk down memory lane. For broken families the holiday season brings with it the extra baggage of tough decisions like choosing where to spend Christmas morning, how to juggle multiple Christmas dinners or sitting through awkward family photographs.

Some churches, like Immanuel CRC in Hamilton, Ont., are responding to this reality by hosting a “Blue Christmas” service during Advent, where members are invited to mourn, privately or publicly, the loss that is felt so keenly during this time. Pastor Henry Kranenburg explains, “A blue Christmas service is a way to face Christmas with integrity, and admit the loss or the negatives and maybe in that way be better enabled to embrace the positive of Christ and community more genuinely; to recognize and give permission to talk about the person or loss or grief, and then to invite all of us to bind our wounds as best we can and celebrate that we have a saviour, and we have hope even when there is still grief.”

Black and blue

The materialism of the season can leave some of us feeling empty as well – literally, as we spend everything we have in an effort to buy the happiness that we are assured will be produced by full stockings, large gift boxes and the most Pinterest-worthy decorations to adorn our houses, yards and even – where will it stop? – our cars. We know in our hearts it’s not about the perfect tree or the newest toy, but somehow we feel like we’re missing out if the gift we bought our child doesn’t produce the same “ahhh” as the TV ad promised it would. And so we buy into the Black Friday mentality that more is better, not realizing that the blackest part is the gaping hole in our spirits that can never be filled by the things money can buy.

Carel Geleynse, Director/Pastor of Pastoral Care at Community CRC in Kitchener, Ont. says it like this: “Many people are unable to connect with ‘fake cheer’ because that is not what they are experiencing in life. I think often of this manufactured cheer and the real reason Jesus came. We celebrate Jesus’ birth and his incarnation, but it was all part of his suffering. Behind the wonder of the incarnation is the shadow of sin and death. Thinking about this ought to make us lament the darkness, thefallenness, the sinfulness of this world. In Advent we have a heightened sense of the mess of this world and what the Lord is doing to correct it and to make all things new.”

Seeing red

And there is no shortage of cause for lament this year. In a world that has Christians arguing over a red coffee cup and whether or not Starbucks has waged a war on Christmas by removing any obvious Christmas symbols from their new design, maybe we should be longing for a different kind of White Christmas. While social media profile pictures are painted red, white and blue in support of the people of France, but whose status updates tinge yellow at the thought of opening our borders as we claim there’s no room in our inn for innocent people fleeing from that same violence, perhaps we begin to grasp the need for a Saviour to be born. As the number of pink and blue flags representing aborted babies grows by thousands each year, and as we wear ribbons of every colour in hopes of finding a cure for deadly cancers, it is hard not to cry “Come quickly, Lord Jesus! Turn our darkness into Light!”

So as we wait in this scarlet red mess, our longing deepens for the One who can transform it, and us, to become as white as snow. No more death, no more tears, no more pain. I’m dreaming of that kind of White Christmas.

*December* by Hannah Mostert. Hannah is a Grade 12 student at Hamilton District Christian High School. She is a member of Immanuel CRC (Hamilton, Ont.). Hannah hopes to continue her studies in Art History with the goal of being a museum curator.

Monica deRegt is the features editor for Christian Courier. One of her favourite ways to combat the Christmas blues is by listening to (and singing along with) Handel’s Messiah.
Wonder

Bonnie Beldan-Thomson

I remember stepping outside the back door of an old brick farmhouse. The storm had passed and the snowy yard lay bright in the silver light of a quarter moon.

The cold stillness was almost a sound, the silence an echo.

The drape of white made a mound of the daphne bush beside the gate. Pristine. Tidy. But that smooth orb contained an uncountable number of tiny snowflakes. How was it possible for those little bits of snow to cover a three foot shrub? What kept them from falling between dry brown leaves onto the ground?

And then there was the sky. The Milky Way scattered brightness across the centre, a contrast to the deep black spaces between the stars on either side. Some were a round, steady light, some flickered brighter, then dimmed, some clustered to make a bulge of light.

Did those same stars shine on the grains of sand in the desert where camels plodded on the pilgrimage to Bethlehem? Did they gleam on the blue and red of Magi turbans, copper, brass and silver of the camels’ harness and saddles?

Those stars, the same then as now. Long ago. Far away. But the same.

And beyond them is the mystery of God, who formed them, who knows them, who calls them by name.

How does the earth fit into the scale of the universe? Is it the equivalent of one little snowflake, one grain of sand? And if the earth is one little snowflake, what are we? And how wondrous it is that he chose to become one of us – the Creator becoming microscopic in his own universe.

The stars sang when the earth was born. They must have been singing when Jesus was born. Back-up choir for the angels. They were likely still singing as the shepherds pelted down the path to Bethlehem but their song was drowned out by the thud of feet on the hard earth and the gasps of men not used to running.

It was a long time ago that I stood in unspoiled whiteness and purple shades outside that old farmhouse, when I looked at stars that winked through the velvety darkness. I remember that just before the tingle in my fingers sent me back into the house, I heard them. Just for a moment, I heard the stars sing. ...

Bonnie Beldan-Thomson is a musician, writer and educator who lives and works near Toronto.

Fanfare

With all the herald trumpets of your heart, praise God! Stand tall, point the gleaming brass skyward, and blow (with full-puffed, ruddy-checked spirit) a clarion fanfare:

_Hosanna! Hallelujah! High praise to Him!_

Flourish an ancient hymn of faithfulness,
Improvise a psalm on today’s mercies,
Proclaim Him across the landscape of your life – over the sunwashed morning of your joys, over the shadowed ravine of your tears, over the hazy horizon of days-to-come:

_God is good! God is worthy! God is my God!_

With all the herald trumpets of your heart, praise Him!

_Sandy Mayle is a freelance poet who lives with her husband, Dave, in Erie, Pa._
Deep in the darkness

Christmas. We are tucking into our warm homes, lighting candles and fireplaces, and singing about peace on earth. And the world is so full of darkness, so bent with ugliness and evil all around. Lord, has it always been like this? Has the dark always been so heavy, have our prayers always rung so small? I love the richness of this season, and its joy and excitement are amplified with a little girl running around the house singing botched carols at the top of her lungs: “Born is the king of Israel.” But this year the darkness feels like it’s pressing in, and the suffering of humanity – meted out in endless war, terror attacks, the deprivation of basic human rights through hatred – feels closer than ever. Is there room for joy and celebration in the midst of it? Has the dark always been so heavy, has humanity would ever know.

Poet and playwright T.S. Eliot also pondered the wise men and wrote one of his most profound later poems about their journey. In the last stanza of “The Journey of the Magi,” one of the Magi says this: “All this was a long time ago, I remember; And I would do it again, but set down This set down This: were we led all that way for Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly, We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death, But had thought they were different; this Birth was Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.”

And although we have been mercifully insulated from most of the unrest here in Canada, perhaps discontent reveals the Christ child at work, proves that this birth has changed us and made us long for a new dispensation in which the weak are honoured and the dispossessed restored. Maybe this discontent can deepen celebrations so easily coopted by culture and push us into action that reflects the work of Jesus: caring for the weak, providing shelter and clothing and food for the dispossessed, and praying for peace from beyond this world.

Emily Cramer lives in Barrie, Ont., with her husband, James, and daughter, Clare. She teaches in the Liberal Arts department at Georgian College and is just finishing up a biography on Hannah Whitall Smith by Marie Henry.

Sharing faith and Christmas at Micah House

Anna Bolton

When images of the body of a three-year-old Syrian boy who washed up on a beach in Turkey went viral in September, the Syrian refugee crisis became a lot more personal. These images put a face to the crisis, as Aylan Kurdi’s story spoke to the severity and desperation of what millions of refugees are experiencing. Now, three months later, the crisis is far from over.

But this is not a new crisis, and it extends well beyond what’s happening in Syria, say Matt and Sarah Snider, night managers at Micah House in downtown Hamilton, Ont. Micah House is a privately funded Christian organization that houses refugee claimants and helps them settle in Canada.

“It’s not enough just to take people into our country,” Sarah expressed. That is why Micah House not only provides shelter to refugees but also helps orient them to life in Hamilton and continues to offer support for their guests after they’ve moved out. Sarah, a fourth-year social work major at Redeemer University College, discovered a passion for serving the refugee population when she did an internship at Micah House last winter. So when the night manager position opened up this summer, she felt it was the perfect opportunity for her to continue to serve there, now accompanied by her husband, Matt.

Building community

Matt and Sarah live at Micah House and provide 24/7 support for the guests. “We facilitate community,” Sarah explained. “We connect everyone in the house together, and build community with people outside the house too.” A lot of that connection happens during dinnertime each day, as the Micah House guests, the Sniders and “meal hosts” (volunteers who provide the meal) come together to talk and eat. Matt and Sarah act as liaisons – a point of connection between the guests themselves as well as the different meal hosts who arrive to help.

“Every person brings something different to the house,” Matt said. “We definitely feel like we’re part of a family here.” The Micah House family is diverse and always changing. Since they opened their doors almost 10 years ago, Micah House has seen just over 700 refugees come through their doors. The house can hold up to 12 guests at a time and they can stay for up to two months. Families and individuals of all ages come through the house, each bringing different personalities, cultures, languages and religions to the community. In the four months that Sarah and Matt have been there, they’ve met people from Hungary, the Bahamas, Iraq, Nigeria, Sudan – the list goes on.

Despite all of these differences, the guests usually get along, showing curiosity for the other cultures represented within the house. This curiosity extends to Canadian culture as well, and Matt and Sarah are only too happy to help refugees experience it. Guests are encouraged to become involved with the goings-on in Hamilton, and the Sniders, who are relatively new to the area, get to “explore and show the city at the same time.”

Continued on page 16
Culture shock

The big yellow moving truck lurked a few yards from our front door. It reminded me of Jonah’s whale, about to spew something important onto the beach. But this behemoth’s belly was full of our household belongings, stacked floor to ceiling inside.

Three men worked with ant-like diligence, carting in furniture, miscellaneous possessions and countless stacks of boxes.

“Did you guys stop along the way and pick up somebody else’s stuff to add to mine?” I asked. They just smiled, shook their heads and continued the relentless parade of worldly goods.

Hours later it was impossible to make a straight path into the kitchen, let alone get close to the counter. Cupboard doors were inaccessible. The truck and workers left. I looked at the mountains of stuff everywhere and seriously wondered where it had all come from. Worse yet, where would I put it all? Suddenly my sleepless night and long day caught up with me. The tears streamed down my cheeks.

“How is this even possible?” I asked.

“Oh dear,” said Jack. “Let me take you out for a burger. You need something to eat.”

Later on, by some minor miracle I located a set of sheets, pillows and blankets for the bed. Overtired and discouraged, I lay there berating myself for having allowed so much unnecessary junk to accumulate in our home. I felt lost and overwhelmed.

The next day I began unpacking, sorting and organizing. Every empty box represented a little victory. But it was a long war. Now, a few weeks later, the house is functional and most of the important stuff has surfaced. I can usually find the right light switch in less than three minutes. Sometimes I only have to open and close a few drawers before I find the kitchen utensil I’m after. And I’m learning to focus as I go upstairs so I remember why I went up there in the first place. We’ve come a long way from that first Sunday morning when we actually sat at the end of the drive-way and wondered which way we should go to church.

Disoriented

I’m hoping this might be the closest I’ll ever come to culture shock. I learned that was more than a concept from someone who had served as a missionary in Kenya. One day she had a panic attack in the grocery store, realizing that she didn’t recognize most of the food items in front of her. She was a stranger to the simplest social conventions, had limited command of the language, didn’t understand the money and couldn’t even name the trees along the roadway. This woman of formidable intelligence suddenly felt totally incompetent. The disorientation eventually resulted in debilitating headaches and nausea.

Resilient as the human spirit may be, most of us don’t do well when suddenly plucked from all that is familiar.

In this season of Advent I’ve been thinking of what it must have been like for Jesus to leave his heavenly home, take on full humanity and voluntarily submit himself to the constraints of life on earth. He traded the ivory palaces for this dark and broken world, coming into it as we all do – naked and helpless. He endured the full spectrum of human experience as one of us, knowing firsthand pain, fatigue, hunger, temptation, loneliness and betrayal. Talk about disorienting!

In the words of the Apostle Paul, “He made himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow.” (Phil. 2: 7-10). He who knew no sin was made sin for us. The Prince of Peace was viciously mocked and beaten by the very people he came to save. The King of Kings was slaughtered like a criminal. Through death he defeated death. In his humility he is exalted above all creation. In a life full of paradoxes he accomplished the most significant victory in all of history.

As I dig out familiar Christmas decorations and hang up greenery and baubles in our new home, far be it from me to minimize the greatest gift of all. When I consider that sweet baby in the manger, the coloured lights and tinsel cannot trivialize where Christ came from and what he suffered for my sake. Because of him, the uniquely qualified God-man, I will one day experience a culture shock like no other – passing from a world of pain and problems into the very presence of Almighty God.

O come, let us adore him. ➤

Heidi Vander Slikke (hmvanderslikke@hotmail.com) lives in Mapleton Township, Ontario.

Kuyper’s moment

Nearly a century after his death, Abraham Kuyper’s moment may finally have arrived. It was a long time in coming.

I find it odd to recall a time when I myself had not heard of Kuyper. My ignorance of the great statesman and polymath might be surprising because I grew up in an Orthodox Presbyterian congregation with many Dutch and Frisian surnames among its members – CRC expats I would imagine. In fact, I discovered much later that the father of an elderly widow in our church had delivered groceries to Kuyper back in the Netherlands. And still I somehow managed to avoid hearing his name.

Until just short of my twentieth birthday, that is. I was studying at a Christian university in Minnesota and had switched my major from music to political science several months earlier. The Turkish invasion of Cyprus the previous summer had forced my paternal relatives from their homes, and I was suddenly interested in seeing justice
Christmas, doubt and faith

The year my son turned four he had two experiences that caused him to doubt. In Sunday school he was asked to draw a picture of God. Matt drew what he thought of as wind. His teacher redirected him to draw a man. When Matt said God is a spirit, not a man, the teacher said he was wrong. Then, a friend told Matt Santa is real. Matt pointed out that there were many Santas all over the place, so Santa could not be real. The friend responded that Santa, like God, was able to be in several places at once.

God as a man; God as the wind; God as Santa. For a four-year-old, who is to say? Children can doubt, and dealing with their doubt can be hard for parents who also struggle with doubt from time to time.

Help my unbelief

Christmas is hard for me because it reminds me of my own doubt. A virgin birth – really, Joseph? A baby born in a manger? When Matt said God is a spirit, not a man, I couldn’t prove anything to them because faith isn’t subject to proof. It is a leap. And some people have a harder time with the leap than others.

My own struggle comes sporadically. I’ll have faith for years and then doubt will hit. Doubt is frightening and cannot be reasoned away. For me, for my students, for my son at age four, doubt must be lived through until God’s presence is made known again.

In the midst of doubt I find two sources of comfort. The first comes from Mark 9 when Jesus is talking to the father of a convulsing boy said to be possessed by evil spirits. When Jesus says anything can be done by those who believe, the father responds “I believe; help my unbelief.” The order of this sentence is important for me. I believe; at the same time I have unbelief and I need help with that. Jesus gets this; God gets this. Times of unbelief are human. Second, people as diverse as popular minister Rob Bell and physicist and theologian Sir John Polkinghorne remind us to look at the very big and the very small. Polkinghorne says though we can’t understand the sacred we might see it when we work to perceive the “veiled presence of God” in Creation.

Powers of ten

In January NASA released an image taken by the Hubble telescope. It is the largest and most detailed picture ever taken of a piece of the Andromeda galaxy, millions of lightyears away. This picture is so sharp it shows 100 million stars like grains of sand. Google it. It is unbelievable.

To further blow your mind google the Florida State University Powers of Ten site. It has a 40 slide pictorial starting 10 million lightyears from Earth, way outside our Milky Way Galaxy. Each picture is 10 times smaller than the next. The slides take us from space, through our galaxy, to Earth, to a town, to a tree, to a leaf, to a cell, to an electron, to a quark. Again, it is unbelievable. So unbelievable that every time I see it my belief is renewed, as counter-intuitive as that may seem. Polkinghorne says that everyone has an unexplained starting point in their understanding of who we are. This world is either chance or it is of God. We can’t prove it either way so we have to take a leap. For him, as a scientist looking at the universe, the divine seems a better explanation than the “brute fact” of matter itself. It takes a leap to say this, but the leap might be easier when we see pictures of the very big space and the very small quarks in the Powers of Ten.

I show these pictures to my students. They derive some comfort from them but their struggles continue. As do mine.

God made his presence known once before through stars – and wise men followed. I believe; help my unbelief. Merry Christmas.

Julia Stronks is co-author, with her mother Gloria Goris Stronks, of the new book Teaching to Justice, Citizenship and Civic Virtue.

Country Living

Meindert Vander Galien

One of the wonderful things about Christmas, and winter, is the chance to enjoy favourite traditional foods and to try new ones. Many of the popular foods we eat on special occasions began as peasant fare – food our ancestors lived on.

Last December in northern Québec, a group of us outdoory folks ate a meal of wild game meat. The bear balls were not what I thought they’d be. They were made from ground-up bear meat mixed with hamburger, and still rather strong tasting. I also tried small portions of caribou, venison, moose and fish. Caribou was my favourite.

Moose meat can be very dry and tough. Friends of mine shot a calf moose during this hunting season and invited me over when they feast on it. I’m sure it will be good eating.

I went to a Robbie Burns Day Scottish evening last January and had haggis for the first time. It was a very delicious dish and I went for seconds. Haggis, Scotland’s national dish, began as a peasant food. Folks back then couldn’t afford to let any part of the sheep go to waste, so they made a hearty meal by boiling scraps of heart, liver and lungs in stomach lining. It’s somewhat similar to making headache from the head of a pig.

Sauerkratt, bawstyng, and schnitzels are popular German foods and if you’ve been to an Oktoberfest celebration, you’re sure to enjoy these foods, the beer and the entertainment.

Pierogi, or perogies, were considered provincial food in eastern European countries (Poland, Ukraine, Russia) going back to the 17th century. Made of unleavened dough, usually shaped in a semi-circle and most commonly filled with mashed potatoes, the now-popular perogies play an important role as a cultural dish. At one Polish festival, 30,000 pierogies were consumed daily.

I’ve eaten Indonesian dishes in Amsterdam that were very hot and spicy, and mild dishes such as the popular Nasi Goreng (fried rice).

Hearty winter meals

The Dutch immigrants in Canada ate mostly Dutch foods, at least at first. At local Bazaars you may still be able to order Stamppot (boiled potatoes mashed with vegetables and served with a meat or sausage), Hutspot (potatoes, carrots, onions and rookworst – smoked sausage), Andijiestaampot (raw endive mashed with hot potatoes, served with diced fried spek – a kind of bacon), and Zuurkoolstamppot (sauerkraut, potatoes, fried bacon or a sausage: my favourite). Boerenkoolstamppot, curly kale mixed with potatoes and rookworst sausage, is one of the oldest and most popular Dutch dishes. Boerenkool (farmer’s kale) was mentioned in cookbooks in the 1600s. And don’t forget snert (pea soup), a pea soup so thick you should be able to stand your spoon upright in it.

Herring has been a staple food source in many countries for centuries. There are numerous ways the fish is served and many regional recipes: raw, fermented, pickled or cured by other techniques. I’m a big fan of pickled herring and always have a jar of the store-bought variety in the refrigerator. I buy salted herring in the winter months.

Pickled herrings are part of Scandinavian, Nordic, Dutch, German, Polish, Baltic, Eastern Slavic and Jewish cuisine. Most cured herrings use a two-step process. Initially, the herrings are cured with salt to extract water. The second stage involves removing the salt and adding flavorings, typically a vinegar, salt and sugar solution to which ingredients like peppercorn, bay leaves and raw onions are added. The practice is strong in Scandinavia, The Netherlands, Iceland and Germany.

Isn’t it wonderful being able to try all the great traditional foods of different nations? What is your favourite?

Prettige Kerstdagen (Merry Christmas)! Enjoy the Oliebollen and Advocaat! !

Meindert van der Galien grows a dozen curly kale plants in his garden every summer and makes stamppot borenkool in the winter. He farms near Renfrew, Ont.
Sharing faith and Christmas

Continued from page 13

Guests will often join Sarah and Matt for church, either out of an interest to learn about Christianity or simply as a place to socialize. Church is “a huge place of connection for our guests,” Sarah said. But church is not the only place where guests experience Christianity. Matt describes what they do at Micah House as “a relationship-based ministry.”

The Sniders have lots of opportunities to share their faith with guests. Matt said the conversation about Christianity comes up naturally, and Sarah added that it’s often an exchange of faiths. Guests share their religion, and Matt and Sarah get to share theirs in return.

The Christmas season is a great time for these exchanges. Since many of the guests are not Christians, the first time they will hear the Christmas story is at Micah House. Together with a local supporting church, Micah House hosts an annual Christmas party every year for all of the past and present guests volunteers.

“We create intentional space for our guests to share with us about their traditions which also allows us space to share about ours. Because many of our guests are not Christians, their holidays look a lot different then we might be used to. It is so beautiful to share the Christmas story with people for the first time.” Sarah added that the fact that Mary and Joseph would be considered refugees by today’s standards makes the story all the more powerful.

“By today’s Canadian definition of a refugee, Mary and Joseph would have fit that criteria – fleeing their home in fear for their lives and the life of their unborn son (our Saviour). I feel like that is a really important message for Christians to remember this Christmas season, especially given recent global events. We are called to welcome the foreigner and serve the least of these. Refugees truly are ‘the least of these’ and I believe that despite our fears we are called to welcome everyone into our country and serve them when they arrive here in order to help them be able to call Canada home.”

The Sniders urge others to engage in their multicultural community, and to take the time to learn what it means to be a refugee and resettle here. In their position at Micah House, Matt and Sarah get to know the individuals behind the numbers. They urge others to do the same.

Anna Bolton is a third year English major in the writing stream at Redeemer University College. She is originally from Selwyn, Ontario, a small township just outside of Peterborough. For more information on Micah House and/or how to get involved, visit their website at micahhouse.ca or send an email to info@micahhouse.ca.
Obituary

On November 17, 2015
the Lord took unto Himself His child
Cornelis Gerard Van Ginkel
Sept. 1, 1926 – Nov. 17, 2015
Beloved husband of the late Dini Zoer (43 yrs) and of Lenie Van Ginkel Holwerda-Luyt.(19 yrs).
Dear father of
DonnaLee (Mitchell), Eleanor (Douglas), Jeanne, Joyce (George), Ildefon, ON Jeanne, St Catharines, ON Eleanor (Douglas), Victoria, BC DonnaLee (Mitchell), Cowichan, BC And their seven children, their spouses and 12 grandchildren.
Beside many nieces and nephews Cor will be missed by his youngest brother Anton and wife Audrey from Oshawa. Cor enjoyed living at Holland Christian Homes for 15 years. He continued serving the Lord by volunteering at HCH and the church as he had in Oshawa and Willowdale until Alzheimer’s disease made that impossible. A memorial service in celebration of Cor’s life was held Saturday, December 5th at Zaagman Memorial Chapel, 2800 Burton St. SE, Grand Rapids, MI. In lieu of flowers, the family is requesting donations be made to Calvin Theological Seminary or the National Multiple Sclerosis Society.
Services provided by
Zaagman Memorial Chapel, 2800 Burton St. SE, Grand Rapids, MI 49546.

Obituary

Rev. Andrew Kuyvenhoven
went to be with his Lord.
Born March 24, 1927 in The Hague, he grew up in the Netherlands. He immigrated to Canada in 1952, in order to marry his beloved Klazina (Ena) Heerema. For over 56 years they were devoted partners in life, ministry, and service to God until she passed away in February 2009. Rev. Kuyvenhoven served churches in western and eastern Canada.
He served as Director of Education for the Christian Reformed Church. He is most widely known for his role as Editor-in-Chief of The Banner, a position which he held for nearly a decade. He also authored several books, study guides and devotionals.
His warm and insightful opening of Scripture came from a keen mind, and a joyful dedication to his Lord. He loved the Gospel. He also loved people, and was an encourager. This did not change even when he was under Hospice care.
His devotional Daylight has been through 10 printings and been translated into a number of different languages, blessing thousands by shedding light on what it means to “live in the presence and promises of God.” This theme was played out beautifully in his own life. Rev. Kuyvenhoven is survived by his six children and their spouses: Johanna (George Hope) Kuyvenhoven; Joyce (Hal) Maring; Phil (Lori) Kuyvenhoven; Margaret (Frank) Holland; Cora (Martin Spencer) Kuyvenhoven; and, Leonard (Sue) Kuyvenhoven.
He is also survived by 15 grand-children and six great-grand-children, all of whom brought him much love and joy. They together give thanks for the legacy of a man who lived with integrity, and showed what love for God and devotion to others could look like. A memorial service took place place Saturday, December 5th at Woodlawn Christian Reformed Church, 3190 Burton St. SE, Grand Rapids, Michigan.

Obituary

Fenny Luymes (Roffel)
entered her heavenly home on November 20, 2015 after a short and intense struggle with lung cancer.
Lovingly remembered by her children: Grace & Pieter vanDuderen (Bolcaygon, ON) Alan & Vivian Luymes (Peterborough, ON) Wayne & Cheryl Luymes (Barrie, ON) Ken Luymes & AvneeDuroxx (New York City, NY) And adored by her grandchildren Sister of Shirley & Dirk Verkuyl (Cowichan, BC) Jack & Ruth Roffel (Belleville) Helen & Leo Westerhof (Trenton) Rita & John Rhebergen (Edmonton) Liz & Nico Wyngaarden (Stoney Plain) Aunt Fenny was a favorite to her many nieces and nephews. Fenny is predeceased by her husband Jan William (Willy) in 1986.
A memorial service was held in Barrie on November 26. Fenny supported “The Voice of the Marty” and “The Christian Blind Mission” for many years.
“Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”

Obituary

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For more information please contact John Demk at 905-679-4869 or send your CV to office.mthami@bellnet.ca

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Willowbrook Nurseries Inc.,
Attention: John Langendoen
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Fenwick, Ontario. LOS ICC or email:
john@willowbrooknurseries.com

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We thank you for your application, however only those considered will be notified.

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For the job description and full church profile please visit the website www.wncrc.ca.
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Who can add to Christmas? The perfect motive is that God so loved the world. The perfect gift is that he gave his only Son. The only requirement is to believe in him. The reward of faith is that you shall have everlasting life. ~ Corrie Ten Boom

~ Frederick Buechner
It's comforting to come home.

“Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God.”

2 CORINTHIANS 1:3-4

It is our hope that the message of the Gospel of Comfort gives you peace and hope this holiday season, and that you feel warmth and support as you gather with family and friends.

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For some, Christmas this year might be ANYTHING BUT MERRY

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Crazy for cows:
Children’s alphabet book gets sponsorship from Dairy Farmers of Ontario

Krista Dam-VandeKuyt

Amos and Adi are antsy. Gertie gets giddy. Urma is unctuous. Who are these capricious characters? They are some of the cows found in Look at Those Cows! An ABC Book of Cattle, illustrated by artist Julia Veenstra and written by her daughter Rachel Cuthill. And thanks to the sponsorship of the Dairy Farmers of Ontario, over 4,000 school libraries will be receiving a copy of the book this school year.

The colourful pages invite rhyme lovers of all ages to curl up in a corner, read the lifting lyrics aloud and take the time to admire Veenstra’s illustrations. And her studio is just as inviting. Nestled in the heart of the James Street North art district, Veenstra’s studio is filled with vibrant pieces. It’s a comfortable space. Colours on the canvases jump off the walls with bold, daring brush strokes.

Veenstra studied illustration at Sheridan College in Oakville but this is the first book she has worked on. The works displayed in her studio are mostly landscapes, pieces with vibrant contrasts. For Veenstra, positive space is as important as negative space. She paints with an impressionist style, slightly more abstract than her earlier work but still representational.

She is drawn to relaxed images that feel like home. She had a turbulent childhood, which means that her “sense of home is rooted with God, rather than an earthly idea of home.” As Veenstra says, “The Lord has transformed me and it comes out in my paintings.”

Name that cow

Veenstra, a Hamilton, Ontario artist, has been painting cows for a while: “I paint cows because they are fun. They loosen me up, free up my strokes so I can get to more serious work.” She won the 2013 poster contest for the Royal Agricultural Winter Fair in Toronto, Ontario for her painting entitled “Celeste.”

Cuthill, also living in Hamilton, is a teacher of art and English. Even as a child, she loved words. “It was Mom’s idea to do an ABC, which provided the creative constraint that I needed,” she says.

The concept of partnering on a book had been in the back of their minds for some time but didn’t take shape until two years ago, when layout artist Lynn Walma offered her services. Realizing then that publishing her own book was feasible, Veenstra started paintings cows on 12x12 and 24x24 canvases.

In January 2015, they made the project a priority and it was ready for publishing in half a year. They started crowd-funding in May, using Indiegogo to raise enough interest and money for a short print run of 1,000 books. As part of that fundraiser, contributors could choose to purchase an advance copy of the book, sign up for art classes or name one cow for the book and receive a full-sized painting of the cow you named.

As names were selected, Cuthill came up with fanciful verses while Veenstra brought the words to life with her fun, lively cows. It wasn’t long until the Dairy Farmers of Ontario (DFO), after seeing one tweet about the campaign, took an interest in it. Recognizing Veenstra’s work from the Royal Agricultural Winter Fair, they responded with a request for 4,200 books, one to be donated to each public elementary school in Ontario.

The first edition of Look at Those Cows was released in September 2015. The book is written in iambic tetrameter and the illustrations, depicting the original cow art pieces, complement the whimsical alliterative verses. When a new cattle breed is pictured, there is short informational piece under the verse, vetted by the DFO. Other than verifying species information and accuracy, the DFO did not impose and Veenstra and Cuthill maintained complete creative control of the book.

International venture

Will there be more books? Counting cats perhaps? Veenstra and Cuthill have some ideas, but in December Veenstra has another mission. Her studio has joined with artists in Tanzania and Kenya in an initiative called the Wild Hope Artisan Project.

The Wild Hope Artisan Project is in partnership with Julia/Veenstra Studio and artists in Tanzania and Kenya to make and sell Fair Trade products. Veenstra comes up with designs and women from Tanzania and Kenya use their traditional beadwork talents to manufacture artisan ornaments and train more women as well. During the Christmas season, Veenstra promotes the products at craft sales and finds retailers to sell them as well. This partnership empowers the women in Tanzania and Kenya, allowing them to provide clean water, education, medicine, goats and other animals for their families.

Veenstra, who lived five years in Africa with her family, knows how vital one animal in particular is for the Maasai people of Kenya: cows. “I paint cows because they are fun. They loosen me up, free up my strokes so I can get to more serious work.” She won the 2013 poster contest for the Royal Agricultural Winter Fair in Toronto, Ontario for her painting entitled “Celeste.”

Dear kids,

In our recent Bible study we have been looking at the book of Amos and how it relates to us today. The first thing we discovered was that Amos, as Yahweh’s spokesperson, points his finger at a number of nations surrounding the Kingdom of Israel. Israel was put on the hook too because they broke their covenant with God. They were only interested in their own self pleasure at the expense of others. They had lost all sense of justice and forgotten what Yahweh expected of them. These other nations did not have a covenant with God but were condemned for the lack of respect for human life and lack of justice. One of the lessons we learned was that God values justice from all people and from those that know HIM even more is expected.

The author C.S. Lewis, well-known for the Narnia series, has used his imagination as a gift from God. Lewis once said something like this, that God has given mankind an imagination to understand what our relation could or should be with him.

The theologian Walter Brueggemann writes “human transformative activity depends on transformed imagination.” He goes on to say that if we allow ourselves to be reigned by the status quo we allow our imagination to be numbed and have not “embraced the imagination of God” (The Prophetic Imagination). Our imagination can liberate us from being buried in our consumer corporate orientated society and enchanted by the barrage of Walmart-like ads.

What’s the point of all this? I hope that this Christmas you can sit down with at least your spouses and hopefully your children before selecting $50+ items from the World Renew Catalogue.

Perhaps you can begin with an imagination discussion. What is it like to live in a Syrian Refugee camp or in Kenya with crops failing because of irregular weather patterns? Can you breathe the air and smell the dust? What other smells can you imagine? Can you feel the hunger pains? Can you feel the cramped space? Can you feel what it is like to live without hope? Does this give you a passion for justice and peace? Perhaps time can also be spent in prayer before making your final choices.

Last year World Renew processed $1.4 million of gift catalogue orders to help developing countries. Dad and Mom’s contribution is a small drop in the bucket but that is what it takes to have an impact. There are many other NGO organizations that also use gift catalogues: Mennonite Central Committee, World Vision, Good Samaritan Purse, etc.

The following words from I Cor. 4:15 tells us how giving this is for our benefit, allows God’s grace to reach many people and ultimately it brings praise to God.

“All this is for your benefit, so that the grace that is reaching more and more people may cause thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God.”

We look forward to seeing you all at Christmas in Surrey.

Stelton, Dad and Mom

Sandi and John Franken, Smithers, B.C.

Krista Dam-VandeKuyt

Krista lives in Jerseyville, Ontario. She enjoys using her passion for research and writing as a part-time news writer and loves her full-time job as a wife and mom. At this time, the ornaments are available for purchase at Goodness Me, Gospel Lighthouse or online at wildhope.ca.

Veenstra also partners with artists in Kenya, helping to sell Fair Trade products here.

Dear kids,

In our recent Bible study we have been looking at the book of Amos and how it relates to us today. The first thing we discovered was that Amos, as Yahweh’s spokesperson, points his finger at a number of nations surrounding the Kingdom of Israel. Israel was put on the hook too because they broke their covenant with God. They were only interested in their own self pleasure at the expense of others. They had lost all sense of justice and forgotten what Yahweh expected of them. These other nations did not have a covenant with God but were condemned for the lack of respect for human life and lack of justice. One of the lessons we learned was that God values justice from all people and from those that know HIM even more is expected.

The author C.S. Lewis, well-known for the Narnia series, has used his imagination as a gift from God. Lewis once said something like this, that God has given mankind an imagination to understand what our relation could or should be with him.

The theologian Walter Brueggemann writes “human transformative activity depends on transformed imagination.” He goes on to say that if we allow ourselves to be reigned by the status quo we allow our imagination to be numbed and have not “embraced the imagination of God” (The Prophetic Imagination). Our imagination can liberate us from being buried in our consumer corporate orientated society and enchanted by the barrage of Walmart-like ads.

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