Facing our own racism
Creative activism
Tolle lege in 2015
Mary Jo Leddy on the wounded church

How should Christians respond to Islam?
Insights amid uncertainty

Judith Dinsmore

Islam is Canada’s fastest growing religion, according to the 2011 National Household Survey. Currently at around one million believers in Canada, the number of Muslim Canadians is doubling every 10 years, estimates the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada, chiefly due to an influx of Muslim immigrants.

In other words, chances are pretty good, and only getting better, that your neighbour, your grocery clerk or your doctor is a Muslim.

But chances are also pretty good that when you hear “Muslim,” images of a shooter in Ottawa, a beheading in Mosul or an ISIS militant burning his Western passport pop in your mind. So how should Christians respond to the increased presence of Islam both in their everyday lives and in the often-shocking world news?

That is a question Greg Sinclair wrestles with daily. Coordinator of the Salaam Project, a collaborative Christian Reformed Church initiative for providing educational resources on Islam to Christians, Sinclair explained that the first step for Christians is to reach out to Muslims, here’s how you can.

"Originally I started going to churches saying, ‘Here’s how you can reach out to Muslims, here’s how you can engage,’” Sinclair remembered, “but people were reacting, ‘Wait a minute, we don’t know anything about Islam!’”

The Salaam Project seeks to encourage love and compassion for Muslims instead of fear and mistrust by promoting an understanding of Islam’s history, traditions and worldwide effect. Statistically, all of Canada – not just Christian Canadians – is under-informed about Islam.

In an email interview with CC, Khan specifically advised Christians not to solely read books or watch documentaries: “To better understand Islam and view Muslims more maturely, the best strategy is really to go out and meet them in person. Many mosques welcome visitors to come and see their facility and meet their Imams. . . . Just go in, take off your shoes and sit at the back.”

"Mistaken perceptions among all Canadians. In a recent editorial for the Hamilton Spectator, Khan was hopeful about the contrast between backlash on local Muslims post-9/11 and post-Ottawa shooting: “Canadian Muslims as a community are starting to become better known to mainstream Canadians as peace-loving and law-abiding, instead of knife-wielding, black-robed criminals,” he wrote."

"Face-to-face decreases fear"

Dr. Raza Khan, a Muslim and family doctor from Hamilton, is seeking to diminish these misconceptions among all Canadians. In a recent editorial for the Hamilton Spectator, Khan was hopeful about the contrast between backlash on local Muslims post-9/11 and post-Ottawa shooting: “Canadian Muslims as a community are starting to face Islam and interacting with their growing number of Muslim neighbours, Christians may yet still be thrust into cognitive dissonance when simultaneously considering the friendly mosque down the road and the thousands of persecuted Christians in the Middle East, especially as acclaimed authors like Robert Spencer draw a direct line between Islam’s ideology and ISIS’s slaughtering and between the Qur’an and acts of terrorism. Are killers like Michael Zehaf-Bibeau taking Islam to its extreme interpretation when they shoot unoffending men like Cpl. Nathan Cirillo? Khan responded by dipping into the global Muslim heritage. “Muslims worldwide are angered and hurt not only by the slaughter of . . . ."

"Quick definitions"

Islam is the religion founded by Muhammad. A Muslim follows the religion of Islam as outlined in the Qur’an. ISIS refers here to the “Islamic State of Iraq and Syria,” a terrorist group trying to create a separate Islamic State within (and now beyond) those countries.

"Churches left in the dark on changes to refugee policy"
How should Christians respond to Islam? continued

innocent people like Cpl. Nathan Cirillo and the runners in the Boston marathon, but also by the killing of innocent women and children in Afghanistan by drones piloted in foreign countries, by lands occupied by foreign countries, by illegal settlements being built on disputed lands, by sieges and aggressions and excessive, disproportionate violence and destruction of homes of innocents by apartheid ‘democracies’ propped up by Western governments,” Khan explained. All Muslims, 25 percent of the world’s population, bear a “frustrated ache over the injustice,” he said.

Collective anger

The result of this injustice, according to Khan, is violence. “A small minority of Muslims in the world will use this collective anger as well as portions of the Qur’an to justify retaliatory violence against the West, feeling they are doing so in the Way of Allah,” Khan concluded.

As the number of Muslims in Canada grows, chances are that minority will grow as well. In a report issued earlier this year, Canadian officials estimated that at least 130 Canadians are suspected of participating in terrorism-related activities abroad, according to CBC news. Most recently, a promotional ISIS video shocked Canadians by starring Ottawa-native John Maguire justifying violence against his own home. Former home, that is. Maguire’s passport has since been revoked.

Canadian radicalization, especially among young males, is once again due, Khan argued, to injustice. But he’s not sure he wants to call it radicalization. The phenomenon is not a proselytization, but a dissonance, a “lack of an ability to reconcile their religious identity with the Western one.”

“I believe that our young Muslims are feeling hopeless, helpless,” Khan continued. “They witness the negative press and the backlash in the comment forums and this increases their anger, frustration and disconnect. At a certain point, their loyalty to their own country (e.g. Canada) and even to their local Muslim community becomes eroded to the point that loyalty to the ‘powerful’ alternative (e.g. ISIS) becomes greater, and they decide to make the move.”

Changes to refugee policy continued

less than a year later, in July 2012. But now, more than two years since that interview and three years since the application was submitted, not only has the family not arrived, the sponsoring church has not heard anything from the Visa Office or Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC).

Supporting a family for one year usually includes raising between $20,000 to $30,000, depending on the family’s size. The funds this church raised now sit frozen in an account even with long wait times.”

Defining ‘power’

Sinclair also considers the concept of power when fostering better relationships between Christians and Muslims. Borrowing from Islam scholar David W. Shenk, Sinclair teaches about two very different journeys: Muhammad’s journey to Medina and Jesus’ to the cross. “Muhammad was seen as divinely favoured,” Sinclair explained in short, “because he was able to conquer Mecca – relatively peacefully, but he still conquered Mecca. Jesus went to the cross and died, which is our view of victory.” The Christian view of divine favour and of victory, then, is through suffering in Christ. “[These are] two very different views of power!” Sinclair exclaimed, juxtaposing conquering and suffering.

While maintaining the exclusive truth of Christianity, Sinclair is concerned about the movement among Christians to label Islam as an inherently violent religion. But at the same time, he confesses himself conflicted, because “there do seem to be many passages in the Qur’an that espouse a violent worldview.” Like many religious texts, he pointed out, the Qur’an is a complex document. “The problem is when you take a simplistic view and label all Muslims as violent, then you’re really doing a disservice to Islam, which I don’t think Jesus would want us to do.”

Within Islam itself, Sinclair concluded, there is a heated crisis going on to “reconcile its texts in a modern situation.” ISIS claims to be following the only true Islam and disowns Muslims like Dr. Raza Khan. The National Council for Canadian Muslims, in turn, categorically condemns ISIS. If there is such loaded and complex dissonance inside Islam, it’s no wonder that outsiders seeking to learn about Islam wrestle with the multiple interpretations of the Qur’an.

A quarter of the world’s population is Muslim.

But as Ed Stetzer writes in Christianity Today, “we cannot let the geopolitical realities undermine the gospel commands. […] You cannot hate a people and reach a people at the same time.”

As the Muslim population in Canada continues to grow, Christians will find increasing reason to sacrifice both pride and comfort by learning from, interacting with and evangelizing to Muslims. “Are we as eager to build bridges to reach Muslims,” Stetzer asks, “as we are to build walls to protect ourselves from them?”

Judith Dinmore is a freelance writer living in Pittsburgh, Pa.

Since private sponsorship began in 1978, more than 200,000 refugees have come to Canada through the Private Sponsorship of Refugees Program – the majority through churches and faith-based organizations. Churches, CPJ’s report concluded. The main government form has changed three times in the past three years. “People designing the forms have no understanding of the realities faced by refugees,” one respondent said.

In 2013, CIC announced that Canada would accept up to 1,300 Syrian refugees by the end of 2014. All but 200 cases were unilaterally allocated to private sponsorship – something churches didn’t initially realize. “We heard that on the radio,” said one survey respondent. “It was such a slap in the face. We didn’t even find out before the Canadian public”.

When the government implemented its new Blended Visa Office Referred (BVOR) cases, a hybrid sponsorship model that “blends” government and private support, there was no consultation with SAHs to determine if they had capacity for these new cases. It is exactly these types of actions that respondents cited when 88 percent of them reported concern about the decrease in consultation from the government.

An expression of faith

Many of the policies recently implemented by CIC make it more difficult for churches to bring refugees safely to Canada. For those who view refugee sponsorship as a response to Christ’s call, in Matthew 25:35, to welcome the stranger, these policies pose a direct challenge to how they express their of faith.

As a sponsorship agreement holder itself, World Renew is responsible for processing cases for Christian Reformed Churches across the country. According to Rebecca Walker, their Refugee Resettlement Coordinator, many churches have shown dedication and resiliency in the face of these new changes. “We respond to family members in Canada,” she said. “If the church has been approached by a family member in Canada, the church wants to assist and support this person [in helping family immigrate] in some way. They will take on the sponsorship even with long wait times.”

According to Walker, some churches submit several sponsorships at a time with the expectation that the arrivals will be staggered over several years. Others are using the BVOR program, where wait times are much shorter.

CC readers may remember an article on the age of dependency for children accompanying their parents, down to 19 years of age from 22 (“New year, new rules for refugees,” January 13, 2014). Last July, Dena Nicolai (“Canadian doctors and nurses fight for refugees’ right to health care”) explained federal cuts to refugee health care. In both of these cases, refugee sponsors were not consulted in advance of the policy announcements.

Social assistance for refugees

The federal government’s fall budget implementation bill announced that it would no longer require provinces to provide social assistance to everyone who qualifies, regardless of residency. This means that refugee
In my last column, “Stepping back from the firehose” (Dec. 8, 2014), I wrote about the different approaches Christians have taken to culture and how those approaches have worked themselves out in Christian education. I ended the column by saying: We need to step back from the firehose a bit – and ask ourselves what the world around us really needs. How can we, as Christians, help our kids to speak to the longings of a broken world that is bathed in bits, drowning in information and struggling to find meaning? If we can find the answer to that question, Christian schools will have found a new educational purpose – and the classrooms will fill up again.

I thought I could just leave it there, but the column generated a lot of email and discussion. And while I’m not nearly smart enough to answer the question: “what do Christian schools need to do next,” I figure since I asked the question, I should at least take a stab at it.

Asking “what does the world need?” is an important question – because it’s what God himself has done. After all, we read that “God so loved the world that he gave his only son.” The order of that transaction is very important. He loves the whole world – not just parts of it – and he responds by giving something he has that the world needs.

Often, in Christian education, we’ve worked through that transaction backwards. We’ve asked ourselves “what do we have?” or “what are we prepared to give of ourselves?” and then proceeded to deliver it to the world whether they need it or not. At our best, that’s led to Reformed critiques of art and literature and politics – which are nifty and all – but a little dry for public consumption. At our worst, we keep our ideas to ourselves – trying to hide our kids from the world in a safe little nest of Christian fundamentalism until they’re old enough to go out in the world themselves.

But what if we flip the transaction around the way God meant it to be? What if we start by loving the world?

The right questions

When you love someone, you respond to their needs. You don’t simply overlook their faults, or tolerate them – it means much more than that. It means that despite all the things that you don’t like about the other person, you’ve made a decision to care about them anyway, and put them first.

I don’t know about you, but I am terrible at this. For one thing, I’m slow to realize when someone has needs. Second, I’m selfish – so even if I do manage to realize the needs of another person, I’m slow to help. I may want to care, but I don’t always feel capable of it.

Still, this is what God calls us to do. He calls us to love one another. To love our neighbours as ourselves. I guess if it were easy, we wouldn’t need to meet once a week at church to talk about how to do it.

So what does this mean in the context of Christian education? It means that all the efforts to reform the “education” part of Christian education to make it more acceptable, or relevant or popular are completely misguided. What we need to do is reform the “Christian” part of Christian education.

That starts by asking: “If we Christians are called to love the world, what does the world need from us? What do we have that our world needs?”

What the world doesn’t need is a political stand on abortion, same sex marriage or euthanasia. It doesn’t need a seven-day creation model or the ability to proof-text from scripture. If the world wanted and needed those things from us, churches would be bursting at the seams – because that’s the stuff we ALWAYS talk about. Loving someone doesn’t mean judging what’s wrong with them and lecturing them on it – and loving the world shouldn’t either.

Revolutionary Christianity

What we can give, out of love, are two things that are in short supply: community and rest. And those aren’t just gifts we can give students but – perhaps more importantly – that we can give parents.

People live fractured lives. Divorces are skyrocketing. Communes are getting longer. Extended families don’t stay in the same place together anymore. The irony is that in a world of social networking, our real-world connections to one another are fraying. Church and school communities, on the other hand, offer an alternative. Participating in the life of a school with other parents means doing something positive together in a way that’s authentic and real. Christian schools offer parents a chance to bond over doing something worthwhile for their kids – and building something that will last. What could be better than that?

On the other hand, we also offer rest. When you’re participating in the life of a community, you’re away from all the distractions of social media and your phone – all the things that keep us busy, distracted and agitated. When you’re using lessons and school activities to comment thoughtfully on the spiritual needs of a generation, you’re helping young people find rest, too. And when you sponsor service projects to reach out to the people in your town or city, you’re showing love.

That notion of providing a place to rest – whether for parents in community events or students in a classroom – could be very attractive for all us folks living hyper-connected yet hyper-fractured lives out in the world, and would bring people into our classrooms. But more importantly, doing all of this out of love for the world would be truly revolutionary Christianity and would bring people into the pews.

Because what the world needs now is love, sweet love.

Lloyd Rang lives in Bowmanville, Ont.

Instead of asking what we have to offer, let’s start by asking what the world needs.

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Top 10 RRSP tips

Many Canadians understand the importance of contributing to their RRSPs, but are you sure you’re getting the full benefit? The countdown to retirement can be a smooth ride with a fine-tuned financial strategy. Find out if you’re taking advantage of the Top 10 RRSP Tips.

Consider attending this seminar if you want to:

- Reduce your taxes.
- Stop providing the government with what is effectively an annual interest-free loan.
- Prevent inflation from eroding your retirement savings.
- Increase your take home pay.
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Rekindling a passion for reformed Christianity

John Tamming

There are many ways to get fired up again for the muscular reformed Christianity of my youth. I did not think that a speech at the Toronto Sheraton bar would be one of them. But here I am with court the next day and an hour to kill and I am sitting next to a rather loud Canadian Auto Workers union VP, making small talk. I play ignorant and ask if he has ever heard of the Christian Labour Union of Canada (CLAC). Has he ever, I am told, and he tells me how if CLAC had its way, unions would never look the same. I smile and find it easy to nod my agreement, thinking how Wayne Drost (my high school principal, former CLAC President and an intensely intelligent debater) would have had some fun with this guy.

There are moments, as one enters one’s fifties, when all that shaped you comes at you again, sideways and unpredictably. These are moments of gratitude.

Today it was this bar. Two years ago, it was the swearing in of an old friend of mine as a judge, of gratitude. Would have had some fun with this guy. CLAC President and an intensely intelligent debater (Wayne Drost (my high school principal, former CLAC President and an intensely intelligent debater))

I stop short of full adulation. For my loonie, there are many whose first positive thoughts on Roman Catholics were engendered by a Vandeveldt lecture years ago on the impec- tive of dialogue with Rome. There are scores of others who, thanks to this movement, know that a Jew wearing Head Tefillin. Not all things stick.

The enduring Refomational small ball

Certain of my kids don’t seem to have an ear for any of this refomational movement. I speak to them of the great initiatives of their grandparents’ generation in labour, education and the arts and the look of uter buffaloon. I may as well be an orthodox Jew wearing Head Tefillin. Not all things stick.

There was a time when I was just 17. I wish to tell them, when on hot, August long weekends kids drove to Niagara for something other than the Falls. There was a time when, as I got off the Netherby exit, I could not wait to sit in on lectures at my Troth.

John A. Tamming is a barrister and solicitor in Owen Sound, Ontario.

Who should rule the ‘Republic of Imagination’?

Angela Reitsma Bick

In the first recorded plea for freedom of expression, the playwright Euripides argued in 460 B.C. that free men deserve to speak freely. It was then, as now, a controversial statement; not everyone agrees that such freedom is in the best interest of the public. Plays about anything? Wouldn’t it be better to showcase stories that support society’s moral codes and political goals? Anything else could be . . . dangerous.

Censorship has shadowed art like a self-righteous bully ever since, ready to cover up or crack down on unsuitable material. The trouble is, of course – who decides what’s suitable?

Typically, each government decides for its own citizens. That’s why you can’t watch Pirates of the Caribbean in China; it’s been banned for an unflattering depiction of Chinese people. Zoolander was barred from Malaysia for showing sweatshops full of impoverished Malaysians. Indonesia didn’t allow the movie Noah to be released in its predominantly Muslim country for “religious reasons.” And The Da Vinci Code was banned on the largely Christian Solomon Islands for its critique of the Catholic Church.

In each of these cases, governments were concerned about exposing a certain stereotype or storyline within their own borders. Late last year, however, a dictatorship in one small country tried to enforce what people halfway across the world could watch.

Satire scare

On November 24, every computer at Sony Pictures Entertainment in Culver City, California seized up; the image of a creepy red skull and long skeletal fingers filled black screens behind the words “Hacked by #69G.”

All Sony phones, computers and email accounts were frozen for days as the terrorist group calling itself GOP – Guardians of Peace – started making demands.

Mid-December, the online hackers threatened Sony with 9/11-style bombings unless the movie premiere of The Interview was cancelled. The satire shows the (successful) attempt of two Americans to assassinate North Korea’s “Great Leader” Kim Jong-un. Fearing liability, Sony Pictures did first cancel the movie’s release but then reversed the decision and released it in select theatres and online.

Every year, North Korea is near the top of the Most Censored Countries in the world, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists. It has no independent journalists, and every radio and TV is locked to government-specific frequencies. A UN report released last winter revealed the extreme political repression that ordinary North Koreans suffer, including “deliberate starvation, forced labour, executions and torture.” The government also enforces complete veneration of Kim Jong-un, not only within its physical borders but in what activist Azar Nafisi would call the “Republic of Imagination.”

Inside every story

Salman Rushdie describes that realm as the Story Sea. He wrote Haroun and the Sea of Stories for his son while in hiding, life endangered for authoring The Satanic Verses. Yet Haroun is a lively, comedic fable. The title character is the son of a famous storyteller named Rashid. When Rashid loses his wife and then his voice, Haroun sets off like Gulliver to strange lands in search of the Story Sea that Rashid claims is the source of his gift.

Haroun and his father discover that the Sea is being poisoned by the Prince of Silence – the tyrant Khattam-Shud, whose name means “completely finished.” His followers do not speak, making their dark and soundless country a fictional North Korea: “a place of shadows, of books that serve as airwaves and textbooks but of imagination. According to him, anything anything?

But why do you hate stories so much?” Haroun asks when he finally meets the despot. “Stories are fun.” “The world, however, is not for Fun. . . . The world is for Controlling,” Khattam-Shud says.

Inside every single story, inside every Story in the Ocean, there lies a world, a story-world, that I cannot Rule at all.”

Kim Jong-un, like Khattam-Shud, strives for ultimate control – not only of airwaves and textbooks but of imagination. According to him, anything else would be . . . dangerous.

But freedom of speech has to include every kind of expression, even stereotypes or storylines that may be insulting. Even, to quote some early reviews, the “childish toilet humour” and “buffoonery” of The Interview.

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The narrow paradigm of Generous Spaciousness

The book review “Ditch the Tape Measure” (Dec. 8, 2014) was a well-worded window into the complexities of same-sex attraction. In Generous Spaciousness, Wendy VanderWal-Gritter has indeed given the church a hard-won “apologetic of compassion,” to quote your reviewer’s fitting analysis. There is deep engagement of Scripture in it, and a sharp and healthy rebuke of the church’s lack of love toward sexual-minority persons. Sadly, culturally-informed revaluation to gay practice left us treating those struggling with their orientation at arm’s length or worse. With cruel phrases like, “That’s so gay” to describe anything we didn’t like, many LGBTQ people were shown the relational door long before coming out.

Yet suddenly the church is at risk of another culturally-informed revaluation: intolerance to gay practice. Having thanked Wendy for her book, I’ve nevertheless shared my concerns with her. As your reviewer noted at the outset of her article, VanderWal-Gritter claims, “This book is decided not about the right answer or theology along the way, some of it seriously considered. Yet ironically the end-game is to help the world around us really needs.” Well, the world needs Jesus and it needs to see Jesus as Lord of all. But that is the essence of Niebuhr’s Christ transforms culture, or Christ restores the creation, a more useful formulation. Redemption seen as the restoration of the creation does not come just from Abraham Kuyper. No-square-inch Kuyper is but an echo of the New Testament, particularly the fourth Gospel. “For God did not send his Son into the world (cosmos) to condemn the world (cosmos), but to save the world (cosmos) through him” (John 3:17).

What’s new in Rang’s proposal? Rang’s lament is less about Niebuhr’s Christ transforms culture than our frequent failures to practice it. And the failure of parents and classrooms to practice it is the failure of the pulpit to preach it. That is how I see the problem Rang raises, which is real and serious.

Nick Loenen
Richmond, B.C.

Who should rule the Republic of Imagination?

Speaking up

For too many people around the world, the live drama between Sony and the #GOP is not a news story but painful reality. Malala Yousafzai experienced this type of oppression. Her childhood in Pakistan’s beautiful Swat Valley was marred by the Taliban’s escalating tyranny as fanatical followers ofmuljah Fazullah abolished Western CDs, DVDs and radio stations, then books, Bollywood movies, girls’ schools and independent thought. Despite the danger of speaking out against a regime that killed people every day for far less, teenage Malala advocated for the education of girls. (See page 13 for a column on this topic.) In 2012, she was shot in the face and evacuated to England for multiple surgeries.

Today Malala is still a Taliban target, unable to return to Pakistan. She remains committed to making education a basic human right for both sexes. She seems uncowed and remarkably optimistic – already a strong character herself in our global imagination.

“If one man can destroy everything,” she says, “why can’t one girl change it?”

Angela Reitsma Bick is Editor of Christian Courier. She lives with her family in Newcastle, Ont.

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Should the pulpit shape the classroom?

Lloyd Rang wants to re-evaluate what Christian schools are about (“Stepping back from the fire hose,” Dec. 8) and suggests Richard Niebuhr’s classic “Christ transforms culture” has served its time. In its place we need to, “ask ourselves what the world around us really needs.”

Well, the world needs Jesus and it needs to see Jesus as Lord of all. But that is the essence of Niebuhr’s Christ transforms culture, or Christ restores the creation, a more useful formulation. Redemption seen as the restoration of the creation does not come just from Abraham Kuyper. No-square-inch Kuyper is but an echo of the New Testament, particularly the fourth Gospel. “For God did not send his Son into the world (cosmos) to condemn the world (cosmos), but to save the world (cosmos) through him” (John 3:17).

What’s new in Rang’s proposal? Rang’s lament is less about Niebuhr’s Christ transforms culture than our frequent failures to practice it. And the failure of parents and classrooms to practice it is the failure of the pulpit to preach it. That is how I see the problem Rang raises, which is real and serious.

Nick Loenen
Richmond, B.C.

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Why do you love Christian Courier?

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• “My faith and point of view are challenged.”
• “CC is solidly yet winsomely Reformed.”
• “It covers every area of our unfolding culture.”
• “Multi-generational contributors.”
• “Perfect [publication] schedule: I can just get through it every two weeks and another appears in my mailbox!”

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Thank you so much for the gift subscriptions you sent to family and friends. Your support means a great deal to us. This first issue of 2015 is a milestone for CC – it’s our 3,000th issue of creative, independent Christian journalism!
Chile:
Study shows outlawing abortion positively effects maternal lifespan

SANTIAGO, Chile (BCN) – “Outlaw abortion and abortion won’t stop. Women will just do it illegally and women will die.” That’s the argument frequently made by advocates who want widespread access to abortion. But the data show a quite different result in Chile, where abortion was made illegal in 1989.

According to new research from the MELISA Institute, since Chile’s ban on abortion, not only has maternal health improved but the number of women seeking illegal abortion has plummeted. Since 1989 and the passing Chile’s law against abortion, the number of maternal deaths decreased by a very large margin: from 41 to 13 per 100,000 women (a 69 percent reduction). That now puts Chile just behind Canada and the United Kingdom (each at 12 per 100,000) in terms of maternal mortality rates.

Prof. Elard Koch, a molecular epidemiologist and lead author of the study, says that educating women enhanced their ability to access existing health care resources. And since those resources included skilled attendants for childbirth, that directly led to a reduction of maternal deaths during pregnancy and childbirth.

As Dr. Koch explains, “It is a unique natural experiment conducted in a developing country.” During the 50-year period under study, the overall maternal mortality rate dramatically declined by 94 percent, from 270 to 18 deaths per 100,000 live births, making Chile a leader in maternal healthcare outcomes in the Americas.  

Rick Warren preaches final sermon at Driscoll’s Mars Hill Church

Marian Van Til, with files from Christian Post

SEATTLE - Pastor Rick Warren (The Purpose-Driven Life) was given the unenviable task of preaching the last sermon at Seattle’s huge, multi-campus Mars Hill Church a few weeks ago.

The famous church was caught up for several years in the drama and controversy surrounding their even more famous but divisive pastor and founder, Mark Driscoll. The church decided to dissolve after Driscoll resigned from Mars Hill in October (see stories in CC, Sept. 22 and Nov. 10, 2014). In the end, Driscoll admitted his divisive leadership and acknowledged the “chaos” that Mars Hill had faced in the last year. The various campuses of Mars Hill became independent churches on January 1, and the Mars Hill name is no longer used.

Warren told the congregation to “trust Jesus and give grace to its leaders,” including Driscoll. “Refuse to be bitter about what’s happened.” Warren warned, “If you hold onto bitterness you’re only hurting yourself. Bitterness prolongs the pain.” He also admonished the congregation to “refuse to blame anybody” and to “refuse to gossip or judge.” He also urged, “Be grateful: be grateful for all the ways that God used Mars Hill Church – and Mark Driscoll.” But above all, “Keep your eyes on Jesus.”

Warren praised the numerous members of the congregation who were still there. He said, “You know, anybody can follow Jesus when it’s a party, but the real test of spiritual maturity is how you handle the storms of life, the difficulties and even the changes that you didn’t ask for. It is important to know what to do when God changes your plan.”

U.S.: Pastors support wholly separate civil, church marriage

(CBN) – A new LifeWay Research survey on marriage and an online pledge drive shows support for a movement to separate church and state roles in marriage in the U.S.

Six in 10 responding to the survey said the government should not define or regulate marriage. More than a third also said that clergy should get out of the civil marriage business.

LifeWay researchers interviewed 2,000 Americans and 1,000 Protestant senior pastors.

Only a quarter of the pastors surveyed agreed, however, that clergy should give up on performing civil weddings. Right now, most American clergy are able to sign legally binding marriage licenses. But hundreds of other joined an online pledge saying they will no longer sign the licenses.

First Things was founded by Richard John Neuhaus and is published by the Institute on Religion and Public Life, an “inter-religious, nonpartisan research and educational organization.”

The pledge states, “We will ask couples to seek civil marriage separately from their church-related vows and blessings. We will preside only at those weddings that seek to establish a Christian marriage in accord with the principles articulated and lived out from the beginning of the Church’s life.”

Decline in marriage rates related to pornography use, says research

BONN, Germany (WI) – In a study from the German Institute for the Study of Labor (IZA), researchers have found that the consumption of pornography leads to declining marriage rates.

In a study that asks, “Are Pornography and Marriage Substitutes for Young Men?”, researchers Michael Malcolm of West Chester university of Pennsylvania, George Naufal of IZA and Timberlake Consultants analyzed data from 1,512 surveys completed by American men aged 18-35 between 2000-2004.

What they found is that pornography makes marriage unappealing to men, as they can find “low-cost sexual gratification” outside of it. “Traditionally,” the report says, “one of the reasons to enter into a marriage was sexual gratification. But as options for sexual gratification outside of marriage have grown, the need for a marriage to serve this function is diminishing.” Pornography, as well as the acceptance and prevalence of premarital sex, mean that men can appease their sexual desires without entering into a marriage first.

The researchers attribute the proliferation of the internet to the increase in porn consumption (because of the increasing ease of access), and the decline in marriage. In 2010, 71 percent of Americans had an internet connection in their homes, compared to 50 percent in 2001 and only 26 percent in 1998. Between July 2009 and July 2010, close to 15 percent of all internet searches were for erotic content. Four percent of the one million most heavily visited sites are porn sites.

Malcolm and Naufal found that the rate of marital formation dropped 39 percent between 1950 and 2010, with a 17 percent drop in the decade 2000 and 2010 alone. The percentage of men between the ages of 25 and 34 who have never been married is more than six times higher today than it was in 1970, and more than four times higher for men between 35 and 44 years old. Those who do get married are twice as likely to divorce than they were in 1950.

In an additional finding, the study revealed that heavy internet usage in general, whether pornographic or not, leads to lower participation in marriages in all cases but one – when men are looking at religious websites. In those cases, men tended to be pro-marriage, and themselves were married or wanted to be married.

Major Van Til, with files from Christian Post
Israel: Synagogue Jesus may have preached at discovered

JERUSALEM (TCP) – The Catholic group the Legions of Christ announced at Christmas time that they have uncovered a first-century synagogue in the ancient town of Magdala in Israel, where they say Jesus Christ is likely to have preached to the people. “Eighty percent of Jesus’ public life was here,” Father Eamon Kelly said about an area that is in the north of modern-day Israel.

Kelly revealed that his organization uncovered the synagogue after starting archaeological excavations at a site in the town of Magdala, believed to be the home of Mary Magdalene. The plots of land excavated are intended to be used to build a pilgrims’ hotel, inter-faith chapel, a restaurant and a women’s shelter.

“This is the first synagogue ever excavated where Jesus walked and preached,” Kelly said. It is “hugely important” for both Jews and Christians. Experts have reportedly agreed that it is highly probable that Jesus would have preached at the Magdala synagogue, which is believed to have been built in year 1 A.D., before being upgraded in the year 40 and destroyed by the Romans sometime in 67 or 68. The town was located along an ancient trade route running from the Mediterranean to Egypt and Syria.

About the prominent location Kelly said, “If you walk from Nazareth to Bethsaida to Capernaum, you’re going to come out here.” He added that in ancient times, townfolk would gather at synagogues for meetings. “So if a strange rabbi came to town, a new rabbi, a new preacher, a new teacher, the logical place was to meet here.”

The other discoveries at the site include a “Magdala Stone,” a menorah, fishing pools and Jewish ritual baths. “Actually what the archaeologists are saying now is we’re digging up an entire 1st century city,” Kelly noted.

Ontario: Evangelical Fellowship urges premier to enforce new prostitution laws

C.G. Staff, with files from EFC

TORONTO – In response to December news reports that Ontario might not enforce Canada’s new prostitution laws because they could be unconstitutional, the head of the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada (EFC) expressed that group’s “deep concern,” and urged the province’s premier to rethink her government’s position.

In a carefully reasoned letter to Ontario Premier Kathleen Wynne, Bruce Clemenger pointed out that the new prostitution laws (Bill C-36) were crafted by the federal government in response to the Supreme Court of Canada’s ruling in R v. Bedford, and after consultation with a broad base of Canadians: “survivor organizations, women’s groups, law enforcement officials, front-line and service organizations, and a number of national groups such as the Native Women’s Association of Canada.”

Clemenger noted that in crafting the new laws “great care was taken to consider and weigh the evidence and the realities of the commercial sex trade.” Those realities, he said, are that “the vast majority of individuals in prostitution are not there because of truly free and informed choice, and most would get out if they felt they had a viable alternative.”

Even where people make a choice and the individual is not being directly coerced, “the choice is constrained,” Clemenger asserted, meaning that “the choice to prostitute is made out of dire economic necessity – quite often the choice between feeding your children or putting a roof over their head, or not.”

In addition, both research and anecdotal evidence has revealed that nearly everyone in prostitution has a history of sexual abuse. That being so, such individuals should not have to accept a lifetime of further abuse in commercial sexual exploitation, Clemenger said. He pointed out that the new laws directly address that. They aim to decrease sexual exploitation.

The laws also “represent a paradigm shift in law and policy, and eventually we hope in public attitude toward prostitution,” he added. What he meant is that in the new laws, prostitution is no longer treated as simply a public nuisance but as sexual exploitation and violence against women.

Changes to refugee policy continued from page 2

claimants, unable to work while they wait for their cases to be heard, will be left out.

The purpose of the budget implementation bill is to put into practice the policies announced in the annual spring budget. Yet when Jim Flaherty rose to present his final budget in March of last year, no mention of social assistance for refugees was made.

This strange process meant there was no opportunity for groups to give input before the announcement was made. In November 2014, a letter was sent on behalf of 160 organizations to Joe Oliver, the new Finance Minister. Among the signatures were several Christian groups including World Renew, the Mennonite Central Committee Canada and Citizens for Public Justice. Many of these groups also submitted briefs to the House of Commons Citizenship and Immigration Committee.

Advocacy: Private or public?

Many SAHs believe that these current policy shifts may make private sponsorship prohibitively difficult. But others fear that raising their concerns publicly will put their role as private sponsors at risk.

According to CPJ’s report, over two-thirds (68 percent) of church-connected SAHs have written to or met privately with politicians. Meanwhile, 96 percent of them are part of the Sponsorship Agreement Holders Association, which regularly meets privately with government officials. Yet even the SAH Association’s correspondence to the minister often goes unanswered.

Meanwhile, less than half (44 percent) of these groups sign on to public statements or open letters. World Renew is one of the latter group. It often issues its own letters to politicians with the support of the Christian Reformed Centre for Public Dialogue, collaborates with the Canadian Council of Refugees and calls for sponsoring churches to get engaged themselves, by writing and meeting with their own MPs.

Advocating privately can be a very effective method. But when the government bluntly ignores your concerns, it is critical to take your message public. Unless public opinion changes as well, there is little incentive for the government to change course. The most uncommon method of public engagement among SAHs was with the media through op-eds and letters to the editor (eight percent).

Churches are looking for the best avenue to make sure their concerns are being heard. While it is encouraging to see churches exploring a variety of avenues to influence public policy, more can still be done.

Brad Wassink is the Communications Coordinator with Citizens for Public Justice a member-driven, faith-based public policy organization in Ottawa.
Why authority is not only conservative

In this introductory courses I ask my students who has authority in the classroom. Invariably a few raise their hands and indicate that I, as the instructor, have this authority. After all, it is I who set the terms of the course, composing the syllabus and assigning the marks. My students take the course on my terms, not theirs. If they don’t like the terms, they are free to drop the course and take another instead.

This isn’t the whole story. The students themselves have authority in the classroom. To be sure, it’s not the same authority as that of the instructor, but it is authority all the same. As Victor Lee Austin has correctly observed, to have authority is to be under authority. The authority of the instructor is dependent on that of the school where he is teaching. The school itself derives its authority from the board and perhaps from the parents whose children or young people are entrusted to its care. All human authority is derived authority.

It’s ubiquitous

Similarly, citizens have authority within the state or political community. As a citizen of Canada, I am subject to all its laws and governmental institutions. I am not prime minister or a member of parliament and thus have little, if any, input into the making of these laws. Nevertheless, I do bear undoubted authority within the context of this country’s political life, along with my fellow citizens. Because Canada is a democracy, I have the right to vote in freely-contested elections. Along with this comes a responsibility to keep informed on the great issues of the day and on the efforts of our governments to address them. I have the authority to bring my concerns before our rulers, either directly or indirectly through print or electronic media. Taken as a whole, citizens have the authority to render a binding verdict on our governments’ conduct of office. When and if Stephen Harper’s government is defeated later this year, he will be obligated to accept the decision of the electorate and step down.

This ubiquity of authority is something that Einstein managed to comprehend when he said: “To punish me for my contempt for authority, fate made me an authority myself.” Except that it’s not fate. God himself has conferred authority on all human beings and has equipped them with the various capacities enabling them to carry it out.

So, yes, authority can be conservative in the sense that it endeavors to work within established institutions and procedures. But even challenges to specific authorities are necessarily based on other authorities thought to take precedence. In defying the racial segregation laws of the American southern states, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King was not questioning authority in general. He was, rather, appealing to the greater authority of the U.S. Constitution and biblical revelation. As it turns out, both the defence of institutions and the challenge to these same institutions depend on authority.

David T. Koyzis is still teaching politics at Redeemer University College and is the author of We Answer to Another: Authority, Office, and the Image of God.
An author retrospective: Penelope Fitzgerald

Philip Christian

Historical novels generally work by immersion. Like Pixar movies or the better sort of video game, they bludgeon you with detail, distracting you with endless small strange facts from any thought of the world as we know it. This is a perfectly sensible method, yet the layers and layers of explanation can implicitly acknowledge, and thus reinforce, the reader’s sense of distance from the very world into which these details initiate us.

For a few chapters, Penelope Fitzgerald’s The Blue Flower (1995) pretends to be this kind of book. Jacob Dietmahler, a German student, arrives at the estate of his friend Georg Philipp Friedrich Freiherr von Hardenberg, who will become a major German Romantic poet and, through his impact on George MacDonald and C.S. Lewis, a formative influence on modern fantasy literature. It’s laundry day when they arrive, so we pick up a few details about what minor German nobility of the late eighteenth century wore, and how often it got cleaned (only once a year, in the Hardenbergs’ case: a massive, daylong operation). One by one, conveniently, the Hardenburgs introduce themselves to Dietmahler, who will be, it seems, our point-of-view character.

Sixteen pages in, the bottom drops out. Dietmahler disappears, and we don’t see him again for over half the book. Orderly sequence of event gives way to potted biographies, short out-of-context conversations, poetic asides, scene-setting details for scenes that barely arrive, and all of this cheek-a-jowl on the page, sometimes together in the same paragraph. Constantly, Fitzgerald plays with our distance from the time period, at times speaking of the characters with great and easy intimacy, and at times turning essayist or intellectual historian, throwing details over her shoulder that none of the characters could possibly know: “It was at this time, when Fritz was emptying the sick room chamberpots, and later . . . that he was first described in a letter by the critic Friedrich Schlegel.” Who in the story knows this? Where is this narrator talking from? By the end of the book, we have been Fritz’s friend, his fiancée, his protective and confused mother, his eventual readers, his intellectual heirs. He exists for us on many levels at once, as does – we realize with a gasp – the mystical, neoplatonic world that his works describe: a world in which brokenness and perfection somehow live together in a companionable, elderly-German-couple silence.

The Blue Flower is the most obviously experimental of Fitzgerald’s nine novels, but it shares with its predecessors her amazing subtlety, her humour, and her predilection for meditative rather than chronologically linear structure. Most of all, it shares their attachment to the sorts of characters that Hermione Lee, in her excellent new biography of Fitzgerald, describes as follows: “[D]ecent chaps who struggled and did not succeed . . . women who were always interrupted . . . vulnerable children . . . people who loved silently and without much hope.” She writes of defeats so small, so decorous, and so final that at least some of the characters barely register them as such. The hero of The Bookshop (1978) opens a bookshop in a provincial English town, and is ruined by the aspersions of an obnoxious blue-blood. Offshore (1979) concerns a romantic relationship that never gets around to existing except in the minds of its two principals. Human Voices (1980) and At Freddie’s (1981) concern themselves with required and unrequited love affairs, respectively, both equally doomed. And so on, through the series of historical novels that capped her career – Innocence (1986), The Beginning of Spring (1988), The Gate of Angels (1990), and The Blue Flower, her recognized masterpiece. Only God could lavish more loving attention on losers than Penelope Fitzgerald does.

There are two things about Lee’s biography, meticulously researched and marvelously organized as it is, that make the book hard to finish. First, it shows, in pitiless detail, that Fitzgerald loved, and was, these people in life, not only in art: her husband was a well-intentioned failure, an ineffectual drunk with whom she’d stopped sleeping by the early ’60s, a period that she spent too busy to write (!), caddying a living from ill-paying jobs, raising too-thin children on a leaky houseboat. Which sank. I would not wish Fitzgerald’s midlife on a bank robber, let alone on one of the greatest postwar English novelists. Secondly, when Fitzgerald does at last “succeed,” she is still subject to the most appalling male condescension this side of Mad Men. Her first publisher refers to her backlist of woman-written novels as “a branch of gynecology.” Literary journalists call her “shy Penelope.” After she wins the Booker Prize for Offshore, she sits, bemused, through a BBC panel discussion devoted to the proposition that the judges picked the wrong book. (They didn’t.)

Such is often the fate of the smart, compassionate, epigrammatic female author who puts up more of a fight with the men than they do with her on the bookshelf. It is only partial compensation to see these books enjoy the sort of gradual triumph that culminates in the sort of fat, loving, judicious biography that Hermione Lee has written. But the lateness of Fitzgerald’s reward only reinforces the insight, ultimately theological, to which this quietly devoted Anglican writer’s novels bear witness: Humans are too hopelessly ill-adapted to this life for it to be the only one.

Philip Christian writes and teaches in Ann Arbor, Mich. He is the editor of the Michigan Review of Prisoner Creative Writing.

Love in the time of interstellar travel

Tom Smith

Interstellar is big. BIG. There are big names, big visuals, and big scope. The latest offering from perennial Oscar favourite director Christopher Nolan – of The Dark Knight trilogy and Inception fame – is as ambitious a blockbuster film as you can get. Interstellar is the story of humanity’s last desperate hope to escape our dying Earth, discover a new planet that will allow for colonization, and provide our fallen hero a chance to fulfill his, as of yet unrealized, potential.

Featuring Matthew McConaughey, Anne Hathaway, and Michael Caine, the glittering ensemble is so weighted down with various accolades that the film simply had to take place in outer space to enable them all to get moving. Interstellar is a film in three acts. Act one is the exposition. Here we learn that Earth has succumbed to various calamities – global warming and human warfare – eradicating the population and inverting the social caste system. The poisoned landscape has erased the need for governments and military personnel, elevating the lowly farmer to celebrated status. With cinematography reminiscent of Depression-era “Dust Bowl” documentaries, it is some time before the audience realizes these are in fact images of the future and not the past. These conditions give rise to the philosophical underpinnings of the film: mankind’s ultimate nature and purpose. Faced with the challenge of scraping sustenance from the dust-choked fields, humanity has ceased to look to the stars with wonder and ambition and, instead, stare downwards to scrawl in the dirt. As one character laments, “Mankind is meant to be explorers, not caretakers.” As stewards of God’s creation with a divine mandate to do just that, care for this world, Christian audiences will find more within these conversations to digest than Nolan seems willing to allow.

Act two is your typical space adventure film. We realize McConaughey’s character was once an engineer training for NASA’s space program before the unspecified catastrophes smothered his enthusiasm for such pursuits. Through some mysterious supernatural intervention, this one-time pilot stumbles upon what remains of the preeminent space agency and their hallowed Mary attempt to save the human race. Desiring to reclaim his true calling, as well as save his family, he signs up to fly with the mission. Fans of science fiction and fellow Trekkies such as myself will feel right at home within this segment, and McConaughey and Nolan do a wonderful job of making these scenes gripping. So does Anne Hathaway, playing the naive yet passionate scientist learning the realities of her theoretical knowledge of space travel. Experiencing the small crew in their tiny spacecraft juxtaposed with giant planets that don’t fit into the frame is moving.

Act three is where things get strange. It’s all advanced physics and theories of relativity, with shifting realities and talk of 4th and 5th dimensions. Without here giving away his means, Nolan uses this final act to demonstrate that humanity has within its potential greatness the ability to at once be the cause of our woes and the cure as well. When open to exploration, intuition and inspiration, the human race is capable of such acts of universal import as we cannot even fully fathom in our present state. Reformed folk who ascribe to the doctrine of total depravity may find this theme difficult to square with much of what the Bible teaches. There is one tiny thread throughout Interstellar that, given its due, could have provided the film more theological cache. Several times throughout the film love is granted special attention as the one thing beyond human calculation, science or even time itself. One cannot help but hear hints of a greater universal truth here: God’s love is, in fact, the only thing that does weave through the small crew in their tiny spacecraft juxtaposed with giant planets that don’t fit into the frame is moving.

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Philip Christian writes and teaches in Ann Arbor, Mich. He is the editor of the Michigan Review of Prisoner Creative Writing.

Tom Smith is a teacher in Barrie, Ont.
Friendship with God: Meaning and mystery

Joel E. Kok

Writer Brent van Staalduinen speaks for many when he describes his struggle in relation to the claim “Jesus is my friend” (July 14, 2014 Christian Courier). Until recently Van Staalduinen’s struggle paralleled my own, and in some ways it still does, since I find the claim audacious. Mostly, though, van Staalduinen prompts me to offer a response rooted primarily in the book A Friendship Like No Other, by Jesuit spiritual director William A. Barry. Barry claims that friendship is “the best analogy for the relationship God wants with us” (xv). The double claim implied in Barry’s title—that God doles out friends and yet the mystery of God makes that friendship unique—that double claim convinces me that God is too high and too holy for us to cozy up to as a pal” (161). With theological consistency Smedes applies the same circumspection in his approach to Jesus. When a friend asked Smedes what he would do if he saw Jesus coming down the street, Smedes replied, “I would either fall on my face or run and hide” (162). Smedes also indicates that his healthy theological humility regarding friendship with God is somewhat distorted by an unhealthy psychological burden of self-contempt. Smedes wonders how God could find anything to admire in him since Smedes can find nothing admirable in himself. Yet Smedes recognizes that the gospel tells us that Jesus calls his followers his friends, and therefore self-contempt cannot be the whole truth or the final truth for any disciple of our Lord. Therefore, with the help of good human friends, Smedes slowly finds admirable qualities in himself and, by grace, hobbles “on shaky legs into a friendship with God” (165).

Intimacy as in Eden

What Smedes hobbles toward, William Barry embraces in A Friendship Like No Other, which carries the sub-title Experiencing God’s Amazing Embrace. Barry knows that for many people, friendship with God plays little if any role in their understanding or worship of God. He also recognizes that serious people rightly reject trivial notions of friendship with God. Despite this, he states that “I have become convinced that the best analogy for the relationship God wants with us is friendship” (xxv). Barry bases on this claim not only on the John 15 passage, in which Jesus calls his followers his friends, but also on a survey of the Bible as a whole. For example, the portrait of God in the Eden story indicates that God enjoys getting together with human beings in the cool of the evening after a hard day of work (Gen. 3:8). “This is an image of friendship and intimacy, of cooperation in creativity and in relaxation” (15), writes Barry. Then he urges his readers to “inhabit” that image to see if it elicits feelings of friendship with God. Barry also points out that when we see how adult children can become friends with their parents, we can see also how mature children of God can become friends with God. This insight regarding adult children connects the rare biblical image of being God’s friend with the pervasive biblical image of being God’s children. In these and many other ways, Barry makes an excellent case for friendship with God as a fitting and fruitful analogy for our relationship with God.

Biblically-imaginative dialogue

The strength of Barry’s case for friendship with God lies not only in the teachings of his book but even more in the exercises he suggests. Calling on his Jesuit training as a spiritual director, Barry regularly urges his readers to pause after reading a biblical passage and to open their minds to how God’s Word can carry an overture of God’s friendship. For example, Barry directs his readers to the gospel scene in which a man runs to Jesus, kneels, and asks, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” (Mark 10:17). Filled with love for the man, Jesus instructs him to sell what he owns, give the money to the poor and then follow Jesus. Disconcertingly for many readers, the gospel reports that, when the man heard this, “he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions” (10:23).

Most people I know find Jesus shocking by Jesus. Like Smedes, we can feel tempted to run and hide from Perfection calling us to perfection. Yet Barry urges us to recognize Jesus as a friend, even when he dismays us with difficulty. Barry also encourages us not to fear Jesus but instead to engage him in a dialogue based on biblical imagination. For example, Barry imagines the man in the story [or the reader of the story] saying to Jesus, “I cannot give away my wealth, but I wish that I could. Help me” (65).

So, dear Christian Courier reader, do you think Jesus would engage in such dialogue with you as a Friend? Do you think Jesus helps you in your weakness and extends forgiveness to your fears? If so, you have a friend in Jesus. As a friend, Jesus does not answer all our questions or solve all our problems. Jesus is not our imaginary friend. Instead, Jesus brings us joy in our struggles and mystery in all our relationships. Jesus is truly a Friend like no other, and when we know Jesus as a Friend we know God as a Friend.

As adult children befriend their parents, so, too, can mature children of God become friends with God.

“The Jesus and St. Menas,” a 6th century painting, is one of the oldest known icons in existence.

Healthy humility?

From a different angle, Lewis Smedes both resists and then finally accepts the reality of friendship with God. In his memoir My God and I, Smedes includes a chapter called “God and I, Almost Friends” [emphasis mine]. Speaking out of his confessional heritage, Smedes emphasizes the otherness of God and states, “If there is anything we Calvinists understand, it is that God is too high and too holy for us to cozy up to as a pal” (161). With theological consistency Smedes applies the same circumspection in his approach to Jesus. When a friend asked Smedes what he would do if he saw Jesus coming down the street, Smedes replied, “I would either fall on my face or run and hide” (162). Smedes also indicates that his healthy theological humility regarding friendship with God is somewhat distorted by an unhealthy psychological burden of self-contempt. Smedes wonders how God could find anything to admire in him since Smedes can find nothing admirable in himself. Yet Smedes recognizes that the gospel tells us that Jesus calls his followers his friends, and therefore self-contempt cannot be the whole truth or the final truth for any disciple of our Lord. Therefore, with the help of good human friends, Smedes slowly finds admirable qualities in himself and, by grace, hobbles “on shaky legs into a friendship with God” (165).

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Features

Racism, terrorists and the wounded church: An interview with Mary Jo Leddy

Angela Reitsma Bick

Mary Jo Leddy is a writer, speaker and social activist. In 1975, she became founding editor of Catholic New Times, an independent national newspaper (published from 1976-2006). She is the recipient of several honorary doctorates, the Human Relations Award of the Canadian Council of Christians and Jews (1987) and the Order of Canada (1996).

But Dr. Leddy, author of over 700 articles and six books, is most widely known for the “text” of her life: her advocacy for refugees and the founder (as well as resident and now Director of the Romero House – a community home for refugees in Toronto.

Christian Courier editor Angela Reitsma Bick had the honour of interviewing Mary Jo Leddy in December.

The Conservative government has said it will “prioritize” religious minorities in deciding which Syrian refugees to accept into Canada. Do you think that’s a helpful strategy?

No, I don’t. In fact I was just at a meeting last night with a Jesuit priest who is the head of Jesuit refugee services in the Middle East, and he’s Syrian. He lives in Damascus and works there.

He said, “As a Christian really listening to the gospel, how can I possibly say ‘I will look after you because you believe this and I won’t look after you because you believe something different’? That’s not even the gospel on the most basic level.”

Everybody is suffering in Syria, and we must respond to those most in need. Sometimes that’s Christians and sometimes it’s Muslims and sometimes it’s Jews, but if there are any choices to be made it’s where the greatest need is.

Many people I’ve lived with [at Romero House] have been Muslims, and I know their suffering and I know their needs.

Issues connected to another kind of profiling – racial profiling – have triggered protests in the U.S. recently. President Obama says that “better is good” in American race relations – things are better now than 50 years ago. Do you think that’s true?

Not living there, it’s difficult for me to estimate whether things are better or worse. I realize it’s a very deep, complicated thing. On one level it looks like things are better, but on another level [events have] revealed the depths of the racism that exist there.

Are we free from racism in Canada?

Oh no.

But would you say progress has been made in Canada, as Obama emphasizes it has in the U.S.?

We’ve issued official apologies for the ways we’ve treated Aboriginal people, Japanese Canadians during the war and Jewish refugees desperately trying to come here – so that’s progress. And in our legislation there’s been progress, but at the same time I see that many of our immigration policies are profoundly racist. Much has been gained, but there are still problems. For example, the Sri Lankans who came on the Sun Sea and Ocean Lady [in 2010] were treated almost automatically as terrorists, which is profoundly disturbing to me.

Do you think Canadians too quickly cry “terrorist”?

Yes I do. It’s become almost hysterical. And unfortunately some politicians have catered to this. I do believe there are real terrorists in the world. I don’t believe our present security services are really capable of identifying them, or dealing with them, and so they tend to focus on innocent people. Real terrorists exist, but to categorize whole groups of people as potentially terrorist is a really disturbing trend. Being a terrorist has to do with [choosing to] injure innocent people for political reasons. Simply being a member of a certain religion or race doesn’t make you a potential terrorist.

You can be a leader by catering to the fears of people and promising to protect them, or you can be a leader by reminding people about their capacity for goodness and decency and tolerance.

How has our time been “diminished by terror,” as you say in one of your books?

It’s completely distorting who we are as people, because if you define yourself by what you’re against or who you’re against, very often you become like what you’re fighting against.

Our task as a country and as human beings is to define ourselves [instead] by what we’re for, what we value, what’s important and significant to us.

What does it mean, and why does it matter, to “do theology locally”?

When we think globally, we can become very abstract and general. Wendell Berry says we have to always be rooted and located somewhere, or else we drift off into meaningless lives. For Canadians, that’s a particular challenge because we’ve been very shaped by our experience of always being a colony of some empire – French, British, American. The characteristic of people who live in a colony is that we find it very hard to take “here” seriously. We’re always thinking in terms of “some place else.”

As Northrop Frye said, “Where is here?” Until you are able to name where you are with all of its challenges and all of its burdens, you can’t really live there.

Every sermon I’ve heard on the parable of the Good Samaritan has been a call to behave less like the Pharisee and more like the Samaritan. But you turn that upside down by seeing the church today as more like the wounded man – cast down by the side of the road. If the church is in that position, what factors will influence its future?

Because of sex abuse scandals and the general insipid quality of some of our churches, the church itself has been wounded and discredited. Every church, even if it’s not big scandals, has been wounded by conflict and difficulty. If we could pause and think of the church that way, it can take on the figure of what Hugo Simberg calls “The Wounded Angel.”

One way of interpreting this painting is that when the church allows itself to go among those in need, that’s how the church will become healed itself.

In my experience, it’s the people who are in great need – the elderly, the poor, young people, refugees – who really want the church to become strong again. They need it to be strong again. When we begin to hear those voices summoning us to action and to thought, we will really find out what we’re supposed to do.

Do you see signs of hope for the church in Canada today?

Obviously there are lots of problems, and people moan and groan about fewer numbers and smaller bank accounts. But I do think that there are churches who reach the point of saying, “We have nothing left to lose. Let’s give it all we have.” I know one group of nuns who were [dying out], so they sold everything and gave their money to the Canadian Council for Refugees. I find people are willing to do things they never would have considered before – like offering sanctuary to refugees – because they’re not holding on to some stupid image of what it means to be properly Christian. They’re saying, “We have nothing left to lose. Let’s go where the Spirit leads us.” And that’s a wonderful freedom; I think it’s the beginning of life.

When churches stop calling in consultants and just get on their knees and pray, it’s amazing what starts to happen.

Thank you for putting up with this background noise from my kids! I’ll finish with a question about them, moving from macro issues to a micro one: Do you have any advice on how to raise kids to love Christ with authenticity?

We have a summer camp for families and children – we take 50 refugees up north for a week – and during that week I have two responsibilities: cook and teach the kids how to fish. Over the years I’ve been kind of astonished at how much kids like the fishing thing. It’s very counter-intuitive; they’ll stand there for hours casting, being patient – and these are kids used to being on the internet, listening to music.

Last summer one girl said “I love fishing,” so I asked her why. “Because it’s my quiet time,” she said. I think we underestimate and forget how much children do need quiet time – their own contemplative life. Do whatever you can to keep open that space – that’s where things flourish and are born.

Angela Reitsma Bick is Editor of Christian Courier. She lives in Newcastle, Ont. with her family.

Dr. Mary Jo Leddy.
**Features**

**Dressember: Dignity for all women**

**Judith Farris**

In 2009, Dressember was born, a quirky fashion movement in which women challenged themselves to wear a dress every day for the month of December. Some women even chose to wear the same dress every day, accessorizing it in 31 different ways for 31 different looks.

In 2013, the fashion challenge took on an activist edge. Participants wore dresses every day for a month and enlisted sponsors, raising funds for the International Justice Mission (IJM). IJM works with victims of violent oppression, including their rehabilitation and aftercare, and strengthens justice systems, particularly related to human trafficking and the sex trade. The IJM Canada office is in London, Ontario.

The Dressember Foundation takes some inspiration from “November,” in which men grow moustaches for the month of November. While Movember raises funds for men’s health, Dressember, in the words of its founders, leverages “fashion and creativity to restore dignity to all women.”

**Hannah Cavey of Winnipeg, Manitoba, took part along with her then-four-year-old daughter Grace in 2013.**

Grace loves to wear dresses and enthusiastically selected one each morning. Hannah doesn’t identify as a “dress person” in general, but she says that the moments of discomfort she experienced, such as ruining a dress while reaching to catch a slipping toddler, helped her to appreciate her many freedoms.

In her words, “God would allow these circumstances to remind me of how easy and free my life is. I have a plethora of clothes from which to choose; I feel safe walking around in a dress, or otherwise, in my community; my attire is not dictated by law; I have the same rights and freedoms as anyone else in my country.”

Hannah also found that the inconvenience of wearing a dress in temperatures below minus 40 degrees Celsius led to dozens of conversations about the reason for her clothing choice. When people noticed that the mother and daughter were “unusually fancy,” Grace would grin widely and explain, in her four-year-old voice, “It’s for the International Justice Mission,” an easy segue into a conversation about the work that IJM does.

**Courage to act**

Natasha Piersma of Bowmanville, Ontario participated in Dressember in 2013, and she took part again this year. She commented that participating in the heat of Australia’s summer, where she was stationed with Youth with a Mission (YWAM) in 2013, was simpler than wearing a dress in the cold of a Canadian winter this time. Natasha notes, however, that slight discomfort—which she has chosen to take on—reminds her of the many women who suffer every day.

Natasha also expressed her feeling of solidarity with women who are trapped in difficult circumstances. As a participant and leader in YWAM’s Discipleship Training School, Natasha travelled to Thailand, Russia and Latvia, where she befriended women who work in the sex trade, offering coffee, tea, conversation and prayer. Many of the women she met bore the pressure to financially support family and felt that they had no other option. Natasha spoke of how encouraged she felt to receive an email a year later from one woman who had found a way out of the sex trade.

When faced with enormous and seemingly intractable issues such as slavery and the sex trade, it takes courage to take action. Taking up the challenge of wearing a dress for a month offers a simple way to respond to a complex issue. In the words of the prophet Isaiah, it is the courage to put on “a garment of praise / instead of a spirit of despair” (61: 3). And courage is contagious. In 2013, the campaign raised over $165,000 for IJM.

Natasha spoke of the hope that in this, the twenty-first century, slavery will at last be abolished: “I would love to see that happen.”

Until such a time, she hopes to take up the Dressember challenge each year, an Advent season to wait and to hope.

**Skinny legs**

**Julia VanHuizen**

I have never had skinny legs. Until recently. And I don’t even know if you could call them skinny now, because I still wouldn’t be caught dead in a pair of leggings.

But the other day, I caught a glimpse of my nakedness in the bathroom mirror and had to do a double take. My legs. Looked thin. Ish.

I say thin-ish because although I’m petite, I’m not the kind of gal who has long, thin legs like Barbie. I’d say they’re more like Sammy Sam’s: Short. Broad. Muscular.

I’ve never loved my legs. And I don’t love them now. But I am lovin’ them more today than I ever have.

*What have I done to get these skinnyish legs?* I wondered to myself as I shampooed my hair. I wasn’t dieting. I wasn’t working out. I did nothing, although I am currently on a very easy calorie-reduction “diet” — breastfeeding. *Could it really all be breastfeeding?*

And then I knew.

I had been rocking my legs into shape! Not Mick Jagger rocking.

**Baby rocking.**

You see, I have a baby who doesn’t sleep all that well. He refuses to sleep unless the conditions are perfect: the room must be dark. And not just dark, but pitch black. No noises. The tiniest little “ahem” will jolt him awake. And he must be rocked. Oh, he must be rocked. And rocked. And rocked.

And not just any old rocking. No, I must be standing. I must have his head pressed tightly into the crook of my arm. And then I have to do this sort of bouncing, pendulum rocking with my legs and arms. Then, only then, will I finally hear him begin to moan and see his eyes start to blink closed. Mr. Sandman on his way.

I probably do thousands of reps of rocking a day. Some days I swear I have spent practically the whole day in a dark room doing nothing but rocking back and forth, back and forth. And I think, “What a waste. Nothing has gotten done today. I’ve made no progress.”

But unknowingly, something had been happening. I had been working out! I had been toning my legs for the past five and a half months!

**Baby steps**

I’m not trying to brag or make others feel bad about their body image (trust me, I have my own set of body image issues). No, I share this story because I was surprised by how such a little movement applied daily had made such a difference in my legs. It was such a small thing. And the transformation so subtle.

It reminded me of an article I read recently. It was about a married couple coming to a therapist, seeking help for their troubled marriage. The couple was sure the therapist was going to give them lots of work to do — you know, make massive changes if there was to be any hope for their marriage.

But they were wrong. The therapist didn’t suggest a one-eighty. Instead, he told them to make a simple change. A two-degree turn. Commit to giving each other a kiss at the door after a day of work. Having a daily cup of tea together while asking each other how their day had gone. Praying together before bed.

Like a car stuck in a tight spot, they couldn’t do one huge sweeping turn in their marriage. But a whole bunch of tiny little turns could get the marriage going in the right direction.

Sometimes I look at myself, my life, my relationships, in all their sheer nakedness. And I see some pretty ugly stuff reflecting itself back at me: bad habits. Wrong thinking. Major faults.

I want them gone. And I want them gone fast.

And like my baby who refuses to sleep until the conditions are perfect, I sometimes flat-out refuse to begin making changes until all the stars are aligned. Because sometimes it all seems so overwhelming.

And I make no progress.

But baby steps, baby movements? I can do that. I can make a two-degree turn. Because every little turn I make gets me moving a little bit further in the direction I want to go. And that’s better than staying stuck and not moving at all.

**#youcandoanythinginadress**

Instagram shows a community of Dressember participants who cheerfully assert that #youcandoanythinginadress, such as change a flat tire or go ice skating at the local arena.

Hannah described her daughter playing floor hockey and herself playing basketball in dresses, as well as a more-formal-than-usual family road trip to Tennessee.

Natasha’s #youcandoanythinginadress moment came at a Young Life leader’s retreat she attended in December 2014. She was given the opportunity to send a child to summer camp for free if she did a “polar dip” in the ice-cold water of Clearwater Lake at Ontario Pioneer Camp. As shown in the picture on this page, she proved herself up to the challenge.

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I am Malala

Malala Yousafzai recently accepted the Nobel Peace Prize. At 17. What has she accomplished...!

Before that Talib boarded her school bus and shot her in the forehead, she was already blogging against the Talib’s systematic oppression of girls’ education. All through her painful recovery, through death threats and intimidation, she was not silenced. Even now, trying to quantify the importance of her ongoing advocacy and obvious success is daunting: the Nobel Prize looks small by comparison.

On her 16th birthday, less than year after the shooting, Malala stood in front of the UN and stared down her in the forehead, she was already blogging against the Taliban’s systematic oppression of girls’ education. All through her painful recovery, through death threats and intimidation, she was not silenced. Even now, trying to quantify the importance of her ongoing advocacy and obvious success is daunting: the Nobel Prize looks small by comparison.

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Outcomes

Malala has been compared to Ayaan Hirsi Ali, author of Infidel – a memoir of her journey away from Islam. A fascinating comparison: Ali renounced her faith while Malala is still a practicing believer. Understandably, emotions in the Muslim world are high when Malala’s future faith prospects are discussed, especially the possibility of her leaving Islam. Like Christians, Muslims often lack the social language to explore the abandonment of belief or the renunciation of one’s faith without resorting to fear or panic. Much to the satisfaction of those for whom education is the natural precursor to any of the -isms that take God out of the equation, prominent atheist Richard Dawkins gleefully tweeted, “Of course Malala is religious now but give her time, she’s only 17 & getting the education she fought for on behalf of girls like her.”

But is losing one’s faith the worst outcome? I’m not sure. This distinction might instead belong to the perpetuation of a frightened, unlearned faith that ignores the scriptural assurance that God is – and our faith can be – unbreakable against anything we could learn. One that falls back on the easy safety of assumptions, platitudes and dogmas, repeating them without knowing or learning what they really mean. One that spreads in this manner across generations, discouraging true discourse and discovery, shadowed by ignorance.

#strongerthanfear?

Yet even our heroes are not beyond scrutiny. On thehomepage of the UN’s Global Education First Initiative, Malala holds up a placard with the #strongerthanfear hashtag in bold, black letters. She does so with her head covered.

Malala was asked about wearing hijab and the veiling of women: “It’s a woman’s right to decide... if a woman can go to the beach and wear nothing, then she is being hypocritical, weak, culturally insensitive or, to be fair, none of the above.

There are some, however, who will refuse to do so because they are fearful that what might be revealed might fragment or shadow her image or, worse still, cause them to question themselves. Christians do this, too; we avoid persecuting and learning about our toughest issues because we worry that our very faith, our salvation, is at risk.

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As the New Year begins I once again pick up my Bible and start reading from page one through to the end. I don’t know how many years I’ve done this now. I do recall a point in my life where I was prompted to do it. Within the same week I heard two sermons from different preachers and read an article all centred on the theme tolle lege. It’s a Latin phrase previously unknown to me. It means “take up and read.”

Later I learned that Augustine attributed his conversion to the same phrase. Having heard a child-like voice say it, he took it as a divine command to pick up his Bible. He turned to the book of Romans and turned away from his sinful life.

I’m not in the theological league of Augustine. But I do take the conviction to read the Bible in its entirety seriously and I’ve been doing it ever since. Some mornings the fog in my head refuses to lift and I don’t absorb much from the page. When I return the next morning I might have to look back and try to remember what I actually read. That doesn’t stop me. I ask God to forgive me for being so dull and pray that the Holy Spirit will help me take in today’s passage. There’s nothing ritualistic or legalistic about it. I am not a better Christian for having spent the first half hour of my day reading the Bible. I am, however, better off having invested 30 minutes of quiet time with the Maker of time.

Genesis provides a magnificent start to the New Year. I read of the astounding beauty of God’s creation and am wonderstruck by his generosity. This is no stingy God. Heaven and earth burst with light and life. The rivers, lakes and oceans teem with creatures great and small. At the end of each day the Lord pronounces his benediction—it is good—in the purest sense of the word.

Tolte lege.

Take up and read!

I’m starting to think it’s possible that I have a strong-willed child. The term has been rattling around in my head for a while now, planted by several “challenging” weeks we’ve had since September. Things will be moving happily along, me and my little blonde buddy, and then, bam! Some kind of switch flips and we have a truly awful, push-me-to-the-brink, marriage-threatening, sanity-threatening, hang-my-head-at-bedtime kind of day. Or several. Even a week or two. Unlike all the wonderfully patient, selfless mothers I’ve encountered, I do not handle this well. I’m patient to a point and then suddenly, with no warning, I go a little crazy. I yell and sometimes scream and threaten and hate my life and wish I could just walk away and not come back. I think about what a bum deal this parenthood thing is. You imagine a cuddly baby, a little life to nurture and influence and inspire to good, and end up with a raging, wild, intractable, wailing beast who wants to oppose every idea, suggestion or action before you have time to think it.

Case in point

I’m not sure how one goes about diagnosing a strong-willed, but here are some dispassionate observations of my recently-turned-three-year-old daughter in the last week or so:

1. She is hungry for crackers and cheese until I prepare them. Then she is hungry for toast.
2. When she wants something, she will ask for it repeatedly, even if I’ve said no. By repeatedly, I mean a minimum of 45 times, and that’s a good day.
3. Saying, “Clare, don’t do that,” is somewhat like assassinating the Archduke of Austria. Just watch what happens next.
4. Breakfast. Her response to the warm plate of fluffy scrambled eggs I set in front of her? “I don’t yike that, and I’m not going to eat it.” End of discussion.
5. Her hair must be done in “princess braids” daily (so named last year when she refused to wear them). Just TRY to do a “princess ponytail.” She will rip it out of her hair with two pudgy little hands faster than you can blink. Unless it’s ballet lesson night, then a ponytail is fine. Thankfully, these dreadful weeks aren’t all that frequent. They usually happen when she’s brewing a cold or behind on sleep, and otherwise she’s an agreeable, even pliable, little girl. But my mom did pick up a copy of James Dobson’s The Strong-Willed Child for me the other day. Just saying.

What makes good soil ‘good’?

After these ruminations over the last few months, my ears perked up in the sermon this morning when our pastor, Carey Nieuwhof, mentioned the title of that very book. He said it in the context of the parable of the sower: some seed falls on the path (hard-heartedness), some falls among weeds (anxiety) and some falls on good soil where it produces an abundant yield. And what makes the good soil good? His suggestion was that it is “surrender-edness,” the state of having a will surrendered to God and his work.

And then it hit me. I am a strong-willed child. My poor little one comes by it honestly, genetically even. It is so hard for me to yield to God, and suddenly I see myself in my bad-day, three-year-old behavior:

1. I receive God’s gifts with skepticism, often dissatisfied because of another coveted something, real or imagined.
2. I have trouble accepting “no” as a legitimate answer, and I certainly don’t accept it with grace.
3. A prohibition, even a divine one, can be like a challenge.
4. I would often rather walk away than hear reason.
5. When things don’t go my own irrational way, I react. I rip out that proverbial ponytail by the roots, even if it hurts me.

Unfortunately, this revelation about myself did not come with a corresponding handbook on parenting. But isn’t it said that knowing is half the battle? I wonder if the mysteries of parenting this child are illuminated somewhere in the struggle to submit myself to God. And I wonder—and not for the first time—if she, my most treasured gift, is also my crucible. At least as long as she’s in the terrible three’s.

Emily Cramer lives in Barrie, Ont. with her husband and daughter and teaches in the Liberal Arts department at Georgian College. She is finding Shilipi Somayaj Gowda’s Secret Daughter a bit tiresome (sandbanksgirl@gmail.com).
On my way to town last week, I drove by a house that has a sparkling new, green riding lawn mower sitting in the snow by the driveway. It’s fairly common to see motorized equipment just sitting out in all kinds of weather – not covered.

I frowned when I see farm machinery like balers and combines parked outdoors all winter. And when I see round bales of hay stacked in a pyramid and not covered with a tarp, I can’t believe that a farmer would go to all the bother and expense of making hay and then letting the rain ruin it.

I’ve been making and storing round bales of hay since they were first introduced in the early 1980s. Hay is best when it’s stored inside, but if that’s not possible there are ways to store it outside that work quite well. Rainfall soaking right through the bales can be avoided.

Just recently I saw a huge pyramid stack in a field (three bales on the bottom, then two bales and one on top) and behind this stack was another one from previous years that had sagged in and was obviously rotting.

The pyramid is easy to make and very common. You grab a bale with the front end loader prong, run over to the stack, tip it in, go grab another one, run over to the stack, tip it in. It’s very handy and it doesn’t take all the yard space up to do it.

But if stacked bales are left uncovered, rain or moisture that lands on the top bale of the pyramid runs down between the bales into the middle layer. The same thing happens when moisture from the middle layer moves down to the bottom layer.

Quite often I see hundreds of round bales stored in a flat area of a field. If the farmer doesn’t use or sell the hay, he’ll stick more in the following year. That hay may sit there for years – and rot there. It’s unbelievable!

**Tips and tricks**

This is my rule of thumb for making and storing hay: to reduce storage losses, make the bale dense (very tight) and evenly formed. This encourages rainfall to run off rather than settle in depressions and soak into the bale. Store bales on a well-drained site (a slope) with air spaces between bales to allow drying after rain. Do not stack any kind of bales unless they are covered with plastic.

Move round bales to a storage location soon as possible after baling. The area should be on a slight hill or slope. That formation is what helps keep moisture out.

Put the bales in long north-south rows. The north-south orientation allows maximum drying. Once hay is baled, moisture is its enemy. Run the rows up and down the slope, not across. Rows stacked across the slope will trap moisture as it moves downslope.

But the bales end to end. Tightly! End to end bales will thatch as a single roll and reduce the loss on the ends.

Leave space between the rows of rolls, preferably three feet. Again, this allows hay to dry out after dew or rain fall.

Don’t store round rolls under trees. I see this occasionally. Trees prevent drying.

And finally, make sure bale stacks are not in areas subject to flooding.

Another popular method is to stack round bales in a mushroom shape (one bale with the butt down and the second bale over the top like a T) and that works well if the bottom bale is a smaller diameter so the top bale sheds the rain completely away from the butt bale. Making a smaller bottom bale means the operator has to make two different size bales. If both bales are the same size the sides of bottom T bale will have moisture fall on it.

Farmers have a lot of machinery and equipment to look after and store inside. It shouldn’t be that hard for the average person to park a lawn mower inside or cover it, should it?

Meindert van der Galien has beef cows that winter all winter in the pasture field. They eat round bales of (inside stored) hay in the feeder, which he moves 10 feet each time so it scatters the cow droppings. The cows can go inside during inclement weather.

Meindert Hoekstra

**Winter-proof hay**


**The meaning of technology**

The book of Genesis opens with the creation account describing a beautiful world of sea, earth, sky, plants, fish, birds and other animals. And then God places a man in the garden.

Immediately following this part of the story is a curious verse, which at first seems out of place. The verse is Genesis 2:12, which parenthetically mentions that “The gold of that land is good; aromatic resin and onyx are also there.” A small footnote suggests that aromatic resin might refer to pearls. Why is this significant enough to be included in the creation account? As an engineer, I wonder whether these raw materials – latent in creation – have any implications for the role of technology.

Curiously, the materials gold, onyx and pearls which appear in the second chapter of the Bible reappear in the second last chapter of the Bible. Revelation 21:20 describes the Holy city, the new Jerusalem, a “city of pure gold” and one decorated with precious stones, including onyx, and with gates made of pearls. In between Genesis 2 and Revelation 21 we read that these materials are not always used to God’s glory. In Genesis we read of how the “treasures of the Egyptians” were given to the people of Israel as they fled Egypt. St. Augustine wrote about how unbelievers can also uncover “gold and silver” dug up from “certain mines of divine Providence” that Christians can also take and use. However, later, in Exodus 32, we read about how Aaron fashioned Israelite gold into a golden calf. Later in Daniel 3 we read of how King Nebuchadnezzar made an image of gold and forced people to worship it.

But there are other references to gold, pearls and precious stones throughout the Bible. A few chapters following the golden calf incident in Exodus 35 we read about Bezalel, who was “filled him with the Spirit of God, with wisdom, with understanding, with knowledge and with all kinds of skills – to make artistic designs for work in gold, silver and bronze, to cut and set stones, to work in wood and to engage in all kinds of artistic crafts” (Ex. 35:31-33).

Furthermore, Bezalel along with Oholibah were given the ability to teach these skills to others so that the tabernacle could be built. These skills were put in the service of God in the construction of the temple.

Refiner’s fire

After the birth of Christ we read about how the wise men brought gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh (Matt. 2). Here, the gold noted in Genesis is one of the materials presented as a gift to the Christ. However, Christ was later betrayed by one of his followers with another precious metal: 30 pieces of silver.

In 1 Corinthians 3:9-17 we read about how our works are compared to “gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw” and that they will be shown for what they are when fire tests the quality of each person’s work. If our work is built with gold it will survive the flames and we shall receive a reward, but if it is built with straw it will be burned up and we will saved but “only as one escaping through the flames.”

The mention of gold and precious materials in Genesis 2 is not simply a superficial detail of the creation account. These are the materials latent in creation with which we forge cultural artifacts, ones that may be directed away from God or towards him. We can use these materials to build golden calves or to build temples that honour the Lord. We can use them as a gift to the Lord or to forge our own idols. Colossians 1:16 reminds us that all things were not only created through Christ, but also for him. The implications of this are significant: all things in creation, including the raw materials we fashion, have meaning and purpose (telos), and that the purpose is found in Christ. That includes technology which also has a meaning, and the meaning of technology is found in service to God.

Derek Schuurman (dschuur@cs.redeemer.ca) was sad to learn that Redeemer University has recently decided to close its computer science program due to budget cuts. After the completion of the next academic year he will be seeking a new place to serve the Lord, ideally in a place where he can continue to teach others.

**Country Living**

Meindert Vander Galien

The right way: sloped rows

Uncovered pyramid

Mushroom stack

**Wild Horses**

Obama pledges to normalize diplomatic relations with Cuba
continued from page 20

James C. Dekker
[Why did this sea change take so long?]

Second, waves of Cubans have fled their homeland over the decades. After Castro’s 1959 victory, thousands left for Miami. The 1980 Mariel Boatlift started with a few people requesting asylum in the Peruvian Embassy. Between April and October some 125,000 ended up in south Florida. Not a few were miscreants Castro released from Cuban prisons to rid his nation of troublemakers.

Since then thousands have dared the treacherous crossing on the Straits of Florida in all kinds of crafts, many not seaworthy. Cuban Navy apprehended many early in the voyage; others drowned en route. One windsurfing instructor in Varadero, though, sailed north one day, landing near Key West 17 hours later.

Why the endless flight north? Shortages of staples, low-paying jobs and the ubiquitous security apparatus that tried to force Cubans to spy on each other all made Cuba an unpleasant home. Latin America’s best medical care and universal education were not enough for many who feared for their families or simply yearned for freedom and good jobs. For its part, the U.S. welcomed Cubans to risk their lives with promises of immediate residency, all the while trying to keep Mexicans and Central Americans out.

Finally, as the Cuban exile community grew in south Florida, it became an articulate and influential centre of anti-Castro political action. Only in recent years with gradual loosening of restrictions has the heated opposition begun to cool. Still, the day President Obama announced intentions to normalize diplomatic relations, Florida Senator Marco Rubio declared he would oppose all such attempts.

Yet this process should have begun years ago. In his announcement about State Department initiatives soon to begin, John Kerry candidly admitted, “Not only has this policy [of the last 54 years] failed to advance America’s goals, it has actually isolated the United States instead of isolating Cuba.”

What has changed?

In short, a great deal has changed with this announcement. Even though some manic Republicans have accused President Obama of overstepping his authority, they only reveal their ignorance of U.S. government with its checks and balances. (Or are they lying to gulillible constituents?)

Under that system the State Department, under the President, determines diplomatic relationships. Thus Kerry will send Assistant Secretary for the Western Hemisphere Roberta Jacobson to Cuba “to lead the U.S. Delegation to the next round of U.S.-Cuba Migration Talks.”

These talks will change immigration policy. The focus of this sea change will aim at eventual placement of full embassy staffs in Havana and Washington. Since 1960, the U.S. Cuban Interests Section, located steps from Havana’s famed Malecon Promenade, has been a target of billboard protests against “imperialismo yanqui.” Soon a more hospitable public diplomatic ecosystem will evolve, perhaps not as warm as the nations’ shared Gulf Stream, but at least imitating that God-given climate-changer.

Before that, however, the seventh Summit of the Americas on April 10-11 will include a Cuban delegation for the first time. Host Panama boldly invited Cuba after the 2012 meeting when member nations threatened future boycotts if Cuba were not invited. Cuba has confirmed that “the highest level of government will attend.” Whether Raul Castro will attend is uncertain. If Castro and Obama were to meet, that second personal encounter would follow the public handshake at Nelson Mandela’s funeral.

Soon Cuba’s gorgeous beaches and foreign-built hotels will be open to U.S. tourists. Long a favourite winter destination for Canadians and Europeans, Americans will join the ever-growing crowds. More hotels will change the skylines on Varadero, Holguin and other resorts.

New jobs in tourism will lure Cuban doctors, lab technicians, lawyers, engineers, teachers and more. As state employees, their official pay won’t be more than what they earn in all professions. The possibility of tips in hard currency as they clean rooms, tend bars, wait on tables or drive taxis and buses may cause a labour shortage in crucial parts of Cuban health, education and social infrastructure.

Oh yes, don’t forget the cigars. U.S. tourists will be permitted to return with $100 of tobacco, plus $300 of whatever they can find in markets or Duty Free.

What has not changed?

President Obama cannot lift the commercial embargo against Cuba except his promise to appeal to Congress to alter policies. Truly, though, that purported economic sanction has served more as convenient political charade in both nations than as the storied severe economic claimed by the U.S. and blamed by Cuba.

Constantly trumpeted by Cuban officials as “el bloqueo” (“blockade”), intransigent official U.S. policy has given the Cuban government five decades of excuses to fault the U.S. for its own grossly inefficient economy. Though Cuba’s astonishingly fertile land could produce all its food, huge expanses of land lie fallow, victims of centralized (mis-)allocation and stingy permits for private agriculture.

Meanwhile, under a policy called the “Trade Sanctions Reform and Export Enhancement Act of 2000,” the U.S. has exported foodstuffs for US$4.5 billion cash between 2001 and 2013. As well, in today’s global economy, many U.S. corporations are reputed to be deeply integrated with construction and exploration ventures fronted in Cuba by other nations’ entrepreneurs.

Regardless, any effort to lift the official embargo requires congressional approval. Given the intransigent Republican antipathy towards anything Obaman, that won’t happen until the Democrats control both houses of Congress or until senescent Republican leaders (young or old) realize that soon U.S. demographics will put visible minorities – whom they have spurned – in the angry, if not yet voting, majority.

So what?

Meanwhile, the U.S. Guantanamo Bay Naval Base – and prison – remain a constant reproach to Cuban pride. It continues to blot the U.S. reputation as a vision of U.S. adventurism in the Americas and Caribbean. Is December’s prisoner exchange a harbinger of a process that can eventually heal that open wound? Determined actions of candour, honesty and justice practiced among the community of nations of which the U.S. and Cuba are significant members might not be a hopeless dream.

James Dekker will supplement this article in our next issue with a modest exploration of what churches and Christians in Cuba might anticipate as some results of the pending changes in U.S.-Cuban immigration and diplomatic policy.
**Classifieds**

**Birth**

With thanksgiving, we thank God for the safe arrival of a son


A son for Mark & Sara Hanemaayer, brother for Hailey and Daniel, third grandchild for Doug and Pat Ranson and eighth grandchild for Bert and Agnes Hanemaayer.

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**Kornelis Vording**

Passed away peacefully at his home, Shalom Manor, Grimsby, with his daughter Jane by his side.

On Saturday December 6, 2014, in his 99th year.

He is now in heaven with Jesus, singing praise with his late wife, the former Hendrika Van Wezel (nee-Schipper). Loving father of Fasto (late Rietje), Lucas & Freda Schipper (Dunnville), Annie & late Albert (Clara), Depeuter, a child of God. Predeceased by his beloved wife Janie (nee-Schipper) earlier this year.

Brother-in-law of Lucas & Freda Schipper (Dunnville), Annie & late Albert (Moes) Komoka, Luchien (late Jannes) Timmerman (Holland), Hendrik & Dina Schipper (Holland). Predeceased by his parents, Roelof and Lutgertje Vording, his siblings, Albertje & Hendrik Oldenwening and Jannes & Grietje Vording.

A celebration of Dad’s life was held at the Covenant Christian Reformed Church, Woodstock on December 13, 2014.

Correspondence address:
Ralph Vording,
45 Treadwell St., Aylmer ON N5H 3B7
or e-mail: vording@hotmail.com.

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**Obituaries**

**1933 Gerald Hessels 2014**

Peacefully at Bethell Hospice in the morning of December 12, 2014.

After a brief illness and confinement to home in the care of his family, Gerald has passed away in a sure Christian faith. He was the loving husband to the late Janet (2002), the father of John (Bill), Tracy (John), Ron (Mary Lou), and Eric (Nili), grandfather to Rosanna (Dave), Tobin (Jennifer), Rebecca, Jessica, Daniel, Jeffrey and Jodi and great-grandfather to Ian.

A private family interment took place and a Celebration of Gerald’s life was held on December 19th in the Georgetown Christian Reformed Church.

In lieu of floral tributes, please consider World Renew [formerly CRWRC] or a charity of your own choosing.

**Annie (Alberta Johanna) Tuininga nee Schoonekamp**

March 22, 1915 – December 15, 2014

On December 15, 2014, eager to go home and be with her Lord Jesus, having lived a full and blessed life, Annie Tuininga of Edmonton passed away peacefully at the age of 99. She was pre-deceased by her husband Cecil William Tuininga on July 11, 2008, and her sister Jenny (Roy) as well as 28 living grandchildren and 92 great-grandchildren (five deceased), six great-great-grandchildren, sister Ruthie Nanninga & brother Albert (Clara).

A Memorial Service was held at the Orthodox Reformed Church, 11610 - 95A Street, Edmonton on Friday, December 19, 2014.

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James C. Dekker

President Barack Obama called his December 17, 2014 phone conversation with Cuban counterpart President Raúl Castro a “frank discussion.” By that time, Allan Gross and Rolando Sarraff Trujillo had been released from Cuban prisons and returned to the U.S., in exchange for three Cuban prisoners who were also freed and flown to Cuba.

Gross, a private contractor for USAID, had been imprisoned for espionage after allegedly trying to set up a Twitter-like network to stir up dissent. For five years he was jailed in a Cuban military hospital, losing 45 kilos, five teeth and much of his vision.

Trujillo, once a leader in Cuban intelligence, was held in a Cuban jail for 20 years after being caught supplying intelligence to the U.S. President Obama praised him for “provid[ing] America with the information that allowed us to arrest the network of Cuban agents” spying among the Cuban exile community around Miami.

The most stunning news, however, was Obama’s pledge to normalize U.S. diplomatic relations with Cuba.

A long road leading to Dec. 17 headlines

Years of small steps by Cuban and U.S. intermediaries loosened the hard soil of enmity between the two nations. Gradually, travel restrictions for relatives in both nations were lightened and limits on cash remittances to Cuba increased. Recent interventions by other nations kept building the pressure to change. Canada provided a neutral place for secret discussions. Notably, even Pope Francis encouraged irect relations. Altogether these created an impetus that official spokespersons of both nations could no longer brush off publicly.

In his official statement, Secretary of State John Kerry recalled how three presidents had worked to re-establish full relations with Vietnam less than 20 years after the U.S. ended its disastrous Southeast Asia campaign. Many people over 50 will remember Richard Nixon’s diplomatic and foreign policy coup, when he shocked the world with his daring and visionary visit to China. That trip resulted in today’s close, sometimes controversial, trade relationships between the two nations.

What took so long?

Both Vietnam and China are still communist-ruled, as is Cuba. Both are hardly heroes in promoting human rights. Why did this sea change take so long with Cuba? Three main reasons stand out.

First, Key West and Havana are separated by a mere 150 kilometres of ocean; no other communist-governed nation has ever been so close to the U.S. Cuba represented a psychological, if not actual threat within the U.S. sphere of influence in the Caribbean and the Americas.

Thus in April 1961 the CIA sponsored the Bay of Pigs invasion that failed spectacularly. In 1962, the Cuban Missile Crisis took the U.S. and the Soviet Union perilously close to war. During the Castro brothers’ 54 years of authoritarian rule, the CIA tried often to assassinate Fidel Castro. (In espionage Cuba was no innocent bystander.) Over all those years the U.S. imposed a supposedly complete commercial ban on Cuba.

Continued on page 16

Although it doesn’t affect the commercial embargo against Cuba, President Obama’s announcement will change U.S. immigration policy and Cuba’s tourist industry.

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