



# SALT & LIGHT

a hope church publication

ADVENT 2021



NONPROFIT ORG.  
U.S. POSTAGE  
PAID  
HOLLAND, MI 49423  
PERMIT NO. 607

Hope Church  
77 West 11th Street  
Holland MI 49423



## CONTENTS

Advent, Road Trips, and Stopping Along the Way	2
Opportunities for Giving	3
The Invitations of Advent	4
Advent in the Worship Center	6
The Christian Story	8
Come Sit by Me	9
Major Actions by the General Synod of the RCA	10
Stress and Grief Meet the Holidays	13
The Pace of Change: Climate Edition	14
Poetry Corner	15

## OUR FAITH

*Hope Church is called by God and equipped by the Holy Spirit to be a witness to the unity, reconciliation, and justice given in the saving grace of Jesus Christ. These touchstones drawn from the Belhar Confession give voice to the historic Christian faith in our time and place.*



See how you can join us at  
[HopeChurchRCA.org](https://www.HopeChurchRCA.org)

## CONTACT US

Hope Church, RCA  
77 West 11th Street  
[616] 392 . 7947  
[HopeChurchRCA.org](https://www.HopeChurchRCA.org)

# Advent, Road Trips, and Stopping Along the Way

by *Pastor Jill Russell*

What is your strategy when you have a long road trip ahead of you? Are you one of those “buckle up and don’t drink too much because we aren’t stopping for the next 18 hours” kinds of people? Or are you up for stopping along the way to check out the sites and find the off-the-beaten-trail kind of treasures? Or are you more like me, who *wants* to be the stop- along-the-way kind of person but can get into the “let’s just push through to get where we’re going” kind of mindset?

As we sat down in August (yes, I said *August*) to start thinking about Advent as a Worship Ministry, the metaphor of the road trip came to mind. We were reflecting on the unending cycle this pandemic time has felt like for so many of us. We learned how to hunker down and step out of what was the relentless pace of pre-pandemic life. Then we started to venture out and begin to open up to connecting with people and gathering again. Then things shut down again, and we are back to masks in public and back on Zoom in some cases. Now, what is relentless is the not-knowing... not knowing what we can plan or how things will go or *if* they will go. What is relentless is the polarization of every living thing in the cultural and political landscape. What is relentless is the tension and the frustration and the disconnection. When the long journey feels like an unending cycle, maybe it’s time to pull off the road and explore these places you have only given a cursory attention to while flying by.

This all came to mind when we noted that this lectionary cycle gives us what are called the minor prophets. We get the big leagues on the first Sunday of Advent with Jeremiah, but then we turn to the minor leagues of Malachi, Zephaniah, and Micah in the weeks that follow. When cruising along with the destination of Christmas and incarnation in mind, we typically rush right past these minor prophets. Maybe this is the year to pull off the road, slow the pace, and see what these off-the-beaten-trail prophets have to offer us. And we were thinking about more than just worship and the minor prophets. What else is there for us to experience and explore that we have cruised right by in prior Advent seasons? What gifts are hidden in plain sight that we have missed receiving or giving because we were moving at break-neck speed? What might be available to us if we could enter this season with a more leisurely pace, a more open heart and mindset, and with less compulsion to Get.All.The.Things. Done that can so often drive our experience of the holidays.

You never know what might be just off the main road that you missed the million times you have gone speeding by.

Peace, *Pastor Jill*



## Opportunities for Giving

### Tree of Light: Gift Cards for Families

Hope Church is again supporting Christmas gift cards (our goal is 60) for families within our church and community, and your enthusiastic support is greatly appreciated. With gift cards, parents can make decisions together about gifts for their families and enjoy the experience of shopping for and wrapping presents. The gifts under their trees reflect their love, individual attention, and family Christmas traditions. Your personal greetings for the season are an important part of this project!

Here's how:

1. Remove a tag from the tree on November 28 or December 5
2. Purchase a greeting card and a \$25 gift card from Meijer, Target, or Walmart
3. Personalize the greeting card with holiday greetings and blessings for the New Year
4. Return UNSEALED envelope containing greeting card and gift card to church by **Sunday, December 12**
5. Hope Church will deliver all cards to Hope Church families and local ministries

God's blessings for your generosity in supporting this project, as we join together our gifts and prayers to express the love of God in our community.

### Christmas Cookies for Caroling

Donate Christmas cookies (either purchased or home-baked) to share during Christmas Caroling! Sign up in the Gathering Area or online at [tinyurl.com/HopeChurchCookies](http://tinyurl.com/HopeChurchCookies) to donate two dozen cookies and bring them to the church by **December 12**. Thank you for making this season

special! If COVID changes any of our plans, the cookies will be shared with the Community Kitchen.

### Christmas Cards for Our Members

Enrich your Advent season by sharing Christmas cards by **December 19** with members who will receive caroling. Decorated gift bags for each name listed will be on pegboards in the Gathering Area to collect your card contributions.

### Christmas Card Mailing List

Betty Arendshorst  
 LeVada Bombe  
 Margaret Bos  
 Ted & Shirley Bosch  
 Jean DeWeert  
 Marjorie French  
 Michael Henry  
 Betty Hilldore  
 Joan Lalley  
 Tim MacLean  
 Justin & Stephanie Meyer  
 Rode Molla & Endrias Assen  
 Susan & Mark Rhoades  
 Rowland & Jane Van Es  
 Josh & Nicoloy Vis  
 Lila Vohlken  
 Lee & Joan Wenke

### White Gift Offering of Personal Care Products

On Epiphany **Sunday, January 5**, bring a personal care product for a child or woman, wrapped in white tissue paper. These gifts will be brought forward during the service and later given to **Resilience** (formerly Center for Women in Transition), a local agency assisting women and families caught in abusive relationships and empowering a hopeful future for them.

# The Invitations of Advent

**Advent in Art – Adult Education** All sessions are at 9:40 a.m. in the Commons. Masks are required.

The term “advent” derives from the Latin *venire*, which means “to come.” Prior to the introduction of Christianity, the word was used in connection to a public official entering a community. In three illustrated lectures, **Henry Luttikhuisen, professor emeritus of art history** and Hope Church member, will



examine four types of advent addressed in early Netherlandish painting: the Annunciation, events surrounding the Birth of Christ, Palm Sunday, and the Second Coming.

## **November 28: Pregnant Moments**

We will address representations of the Annunciation and Visitation, with special attention given to the Incarnation, Christ’s coming into this world.

## **December 12: Christmas Pageants**

We will discuss images of the Nativity and the Adorations of the Shepherds and of the Magi. Special attention will be given to the notion of epiphany, the manifestation of the divine.

## **December 19: Looking to the Unforeseeable Future**

We will briefly address depictions of Palm Sunday, Christ’s triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Most of the class, however, will focus on representations of the second coming, Christ’s place in the New Jerusalem.



Attributed to Heinrich of Constance, *The Visitation*, ca. 1310–20  
Polychromed walnut, with gilding and rock-crystal cabachons  
23 1/4 x 11 7/8 in (59.1 x 30.2 x 18.4 cm)  
New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art  
Gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 1917  
17.190.724

## **Early Worship Explores the Christmas Story**

Early Worship will hold two intergenerational services during Advent this year. On

**December 5**, everyone is invited to explore in various ways (art, story, writing, discussion, meditation) some of the characters from the

Christmas story. What might they be saying to us as we prepare to celebrate Christ’s birth? Resources will be provided to aid us as we ponder these familiar people and events—during the service and at home throughout Advent. On **December 19**, we will gather again to share what we have learned or created and participate in a musical celebration of Advent and Christmas.

---

## **First Night of Advent Intergenerational Activities**

**November 28 — 5 p.m.**

### **Advent Organ Recital**

Offered for Hope Church and the community in the sanctuary, the recital will feature settings of Advent and Christmas hymns for organ--well-known and newly discovered--as well as congregational singing.

### **Crafts for All Ages**

Individuals and families will make crafts together for the Advent and Christmas seasons. All materials and directions will be supplied for families to take selected crafts to their own space. Instructors will be available for any needed guidance. There will be projects for little ones and others for the older children to use their creativity.

### **Christmas Card Making for Youth**

Youth from Fish Club and High Hopes will gather to make Christmas Cards to share with older members receiving Christmas Cards and Caroling later in the season, as well as cards for recent high school graduates away at college.

### **Advent Candle Lighting for Everyone**

At 5:45 p.m., an Advent litany will be shared in the Gathering Area and the first candle of Advent lit.

## **The Traditions of St. Nicholas**

**December 5 — 10:15 to 10:45 a.m.**

This will be a time to remember the traditions of St. Nicholas, whose generosity reminds us of God's love and the many good gifts that God gives to us. This year we're not able to do a breakfast, so the gathering will focus on crafts and a story for children—and an appearance from St. Nicholas! Each child should bring an extra shoe or even a wooden shoe to place out to be filled with traditional treats. All ages are welcome to be present in the Commons to enjoy the festivities.

## **Christmas Caroling**

**December 19 — 3 p.m.**

As a part of Congregational Caroling, you can share the spirit of celebration and joy with those who

find it difficult to join us. Poinsettias, gift bags, and cards will be delivered as we carol. You don't need a great voice, just a smile to share. Families and persons of all ages are encouraged to participate, and we will use COVID precautions including being masked while singing. We'll organize caroling a little differently this year; please sign up at [tinyurl.com/Carolingforchristmas](http://tinyurl.com/Carolingforchristmas), by calling the church office, or by signing up on the sheet in the Gathering Area.

## **Christmas Eve Services**

**December 24 — 5:30 & 11 p.m.**

### **Christmas Eve Worship Service & Children's Pageant**

During the Worship Service and Pageant at 5:30 p.m., Christmas carols will be sung and the Christmas story told as we worship the Christ child together. The pageant is a wonderful way for the whole community to celebrate the music and meaning of this season as the children act out the events of the Gospel story. All children, toddlers through fifth graders, are invited to be a part of the presentation of the Christmas story during the family service. Costumes will be available December 12 and 19 and at 5 p.m. on December 24—or wear a costume from home. We are gathering angels, shepherds, magi, and sheep. Costumes can be very simple, and Hope Church has lots of accessories to augment. Children, visiting family, and friends are welcome.

### **Candlelight Christmas Eve Service**

Candlelight Worship at 11 p.m. is a time of scripture lessons, carols, and music in celebration of the birth of Christ. At the conclusion of the service in the sanctuary, we will greet Christmas morning outdoors in the parking lot with candles to welcome the Christ child. (Communion will be celebrated if the COVID task force determines it is safe to do so at the time.)

## **First Sunday of Christmas**

**December 26 — 11 a.m.**

The Christmas Worship is a service of carols, scripture, poetry, Christmas celebration, and reflection.

# Advent in the Worship Center

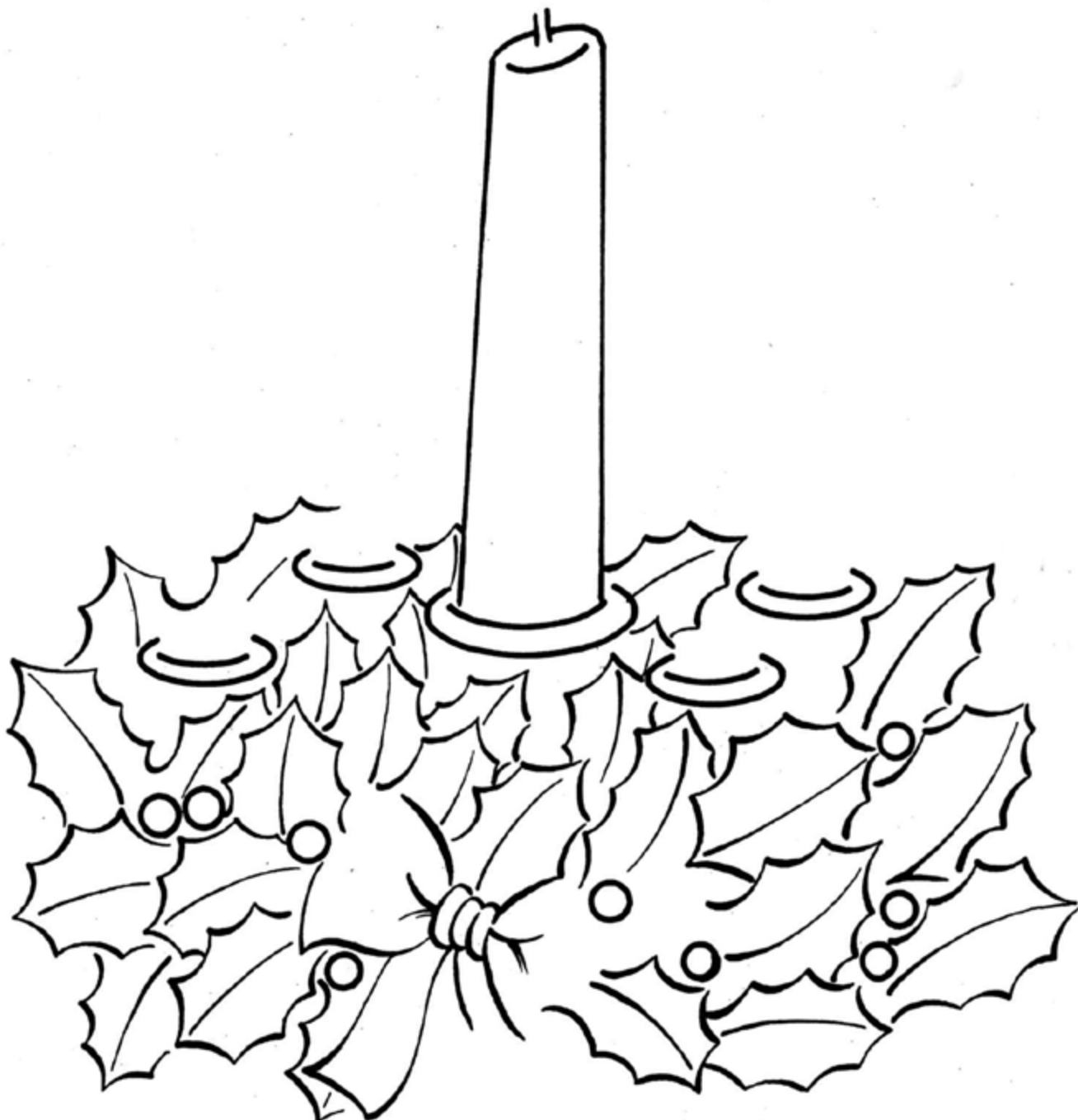


*Jocelyn Van Heest, Children's Ministry Director*

The excitement for Christmas may have begun weeks ago, but the children in the worship centers know that the Advent season is also a time of waiting, preparing, and anticipating. It is the time when we have many ways to thoughtfully prepare for the coming of the Christ child, the Light of the World. Each week, the children hear and respond to a story that helps us prepare. The prophets show us the way, Mary and Elizabeth share the joy, Mary and Joseph help us learn to wait, and the shepherds rejoice with us. Each week another candle is lit, and the light grows as the Light of the World draws near.

The children also may spend time with their families reading and using their Advent calendars, participating in the Sunday Advent activities of making crafts together, learning about St. Nicholas, caroling, and being a part of the Nativity pageant. These traditions are all important ways that the children can learn to prepare their hearts for Christmas.

Not all of the children of Hope Church have been able to return to worship together in our relocated worship center. Each week, though, every one is remembered in prayer. Each of them also has the opportunity to join Advent activities from home if desired.



**We** can use an Advent wreath to get ready for Christmas. An Advent wreath has four candles, one for each week of Advent. Draw three purple (or light blue) candles and one pink candle around the circle of the wreath. The large white candle in the middle of the wreath stands for Jesus and is lit on Christmas Day.

# “The Christian Story”



by Lois Maassen, Hope Church member

As part of his sabbatical project, Pastor Gordon developed a video that is especially relevant in the Advent season. Called “The Christian Story,” it shares with simple language and materials what Gordon calls “the heart of the Christian story.”

In sharing the [video](#) on social media during his sabbatical, Gordon explained, “I wrote this story in 2019, and it remains a very personal and important creative expression of my faith and my theological convictions. Now I plan to have this video be a part of a website I am working on, a website that will have a collection of resources for congregations to use, all reflecting a gracious Christian faith that connects to compassion, justice and love.”

About the story video itself, Gordon explains, “This is a story written for children but meant for all ages and really meant for all, whether a person of Christian faith or not. It may sound a bit bold, or presumptuous, to title

something “The Christian Story”; I am okay with bold but I don’t mean to be presumptuous. What I am bold about is sharing the beauty and power of a Christian narrative that creatively reflects God’s love for and restoration of the world through the life of Jesus.

“This story is part of my Doctor of Ministry work, which draws on the theology of Rene Girard and James Alison to express the heart of Christianity as God breaking the chronic cycles of human brokenness through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. I believe it offers a biblical faith story that resonates with Christians whose hearts know that the fabric of God’s love is woven with compassion, justice, and grace. And I desire it to be a story that could also resonate with people of other faiths and of good will—a story in the language of ‘help, love and life’ that all could hear—a Christian story that connects rather than divides.

“This story is written in the style of Children in Worship stories (pioneered by Jerome Berryman and Sonja Stewart), which I have deeply appreciated and used throughout my ministry as a profound children’s pedagogy resource.”

The video is a centerpiece on an entire website, [TheChristianStory.org](http://TheChristianStory.org), which will go live as this issue of Salt & Light goes to press. Beyond the video, the website contains additional resources, notably a three-year cycle of prayers for worship and links for further study and reflection. Pastor Gordon will share more about his sabbatical project, the website, and “The Christian Story” video itself in an Adult Education presentation in February 2022. In the meantime, you’re invited to explore the [website](#), share it with friends, meditate on it, and respond if you choose.



## “Come Sit by Me!”

by Beth Carroll, Assistant Pastor of Discipleship

During the first GIFT (Growing in Faith Together) class of the year, I watched as a new student shyly entered the Youth Room. We all know that feeling, don't we? Whether it's a memory from childhood or even an anxious experience as an adult, showing up to a space where you know no one can be so intimidating. However, for the new GIFT student, the insecure feeling was short-lived. No sooner did they walk into the room when they were met by a gregarious “veteran” student who exclaimed “Come sit by me!”

What a joy it has been for youth to gather and grow together in person again! I had forgotten how kind our youth are. One of the aspects of our Hope Church youth ministry that is special is the diversity in school backgrounds. In our sixth through twelfth grades, we have five school systems represented. One of the gifts of this is that it provides plenty of practice to initiate conversation and relationship with people who are new.

This year we have several new youths joining us. I love watching our youth, unprompted by me or others, invite new kids to sit by them or ask them questions to include them in conversation. Watching the God-given gifts of hospitality at work is deeply powerful. In fact, just a few weeks ago as we played an introductory ice breaker game, the youths automatically offered their pronouns in addition to their names as an act of inclusion to the youths in our midst who identify as non-binary.

There are so many stories adults hear in the media about bullying or the isolation teens experience in part because of prevalence of video games, cell phones, and other technology. Certainly, these are important issues to be engaging and addressing. However, I also think it's important for us adults to hear stories like this, too! My prayer for our youth is that this light of God's spirit that offers hospitality to others at church will burn even brighter. That this warm inviting glow will be a source of love to other kids in their schools, their communities, and even the world as these teens continue to grow and mature in their confidence and talents. What a gift our youth are to our church and our lives!



When you know the story of Jesus living and dying and being alive again, then you

know and trust some important things that are true about God's world. You trust that **harm** is not the strongest. It is still there. But Jesus teaches us to be a part of **help** in God's world. You trust that **suffering** is not the strongest. It is still there. But in the life of Jesus we see that God's **love** is always stronger. You trust that forgetting about God and **feeling alone** are not the strongest. They are still there. But in the risen Jesus, God's way of love and **life**, God's gift and blessing are with us always. This is good news.

—Gordon Wiersma,  
“The Christian Story”

# Major Actions by the General Synod of the RCA

Compiled by Rev. Dr. Larry Schuyler

The General Synod of the RCA met on October 15 through 19 in Tucson, Arizona. What follows is a summary of the actions as reported by Room for All, with explanation or further comment from Larry Schuyler, the recently retired Holland Classis coordinator, from the October 27 Holland Classis meeting, and from the Adult Education General Synod review, presented by Jim Brownson, retired WTS professor, Carol Bechtel, WTS professor, and Dan Griswold, current Holland Classis coordinator.

A summary of General Synod decisions can be found at [RCA.org/synod](http://RCA.org/synod). The major topic for many was the report of The 2020 Vision Team, which proposed avenues for the denomination to move forward in light of differences that have been cast in increasingly sharp relief.

Room for All summarized the actions taken based on the report this way:

**Recommendation 1 (passed):** To form a team to study the restructuring of the denomination “with a view to optimizing the RCA’s sustained spiritual and organizational health.” This team may include affinity classes around human sexuality (or affinities around myriad ways of doing ministry). Questions around who makes up this team and ensuring LGBTQIA representation remain and continue to require prayer.

**Recommendation 2 (denied):** To form an independent nonprofit organization that would take on the RCA Global Missions programming, along with a chunk of the RCA Global Missions budget. There were concerns that this would effectively “outsource” RCA missions, about the cost and long-term efficacy of such an organization, and what would happen to mission partners around the globe who are only welcome in their host countries by virtue of a longtime RCA presence and mutual trust.

**Recommendation 3 (passed):** To create a streamlined denomination-wide path and process for those congregations who continue to feel called to leave the RCA. While we already have a constitutionally mandated process for this, this new process ensures it is carried out equitably in all classes, providing a “mutually grace-filled” off-ramp for these congregations to continue doing ministry in their new chosen home. There remain

some questions around how this action affects the churches left in newly-diminished classes, and how grace will be shown to them by those leaving. Prayer is still needed as this process is bound to be heavy and difficult, even if “grace-filled.”

In the Adult Ed review, these additional explanations were provided.

*Regarding Recommendation 1:*

- **Carol:** A restructure team is to report at the 2024 General Synod. The team will look at things like ordination and marriage being determined by a classis; the viability of regional synods; and possible creation of affinity classes. Carol’s view is that affinity classes can be problematic because people who disagree simply don’t face one another. It shatters the concept of family working together to work out differences or living with differences. What happens with the next “big” issue?
- **Dan:** Note that General Synod wasn’t going to decide the issue of human sexuality. The Vision 2020 role was to address the reality that we are not together in conviction. How can we go forward?
- **Jim:** The next years’ General Synods will be significant because realignment matters. Jim doesn’t affirm affinity classes, saying that churches close to each other need to deal with each other. The topic of “affinity” was referred for study and report to the Church Order and Theology Commissions.

*Regarding Recommendation 2:*

- **Jim:** The fact that the recommendation was denied by a significant margin affirms that global mission remains important to the RCA.

*Regarding Recommendation 3:*

- **Jim:** Churches may leave more amicably, but the recommendation didn’t change the Book of Church Order. Approval suggests that issues between classes and churches, if appealed, may indicate how General Synod will act. Churches that owe money will need to take care of that before leaving and pay assessments for a time. Jim also



Thomas Goodheart and Sarah Palsma present the Vision 2020 Report at General Synod.

notes that 32 new churches were organized since General Synod last gathered.

- Among the questions from those attending the Adult Ed review was how many churches are leaving. The best guesses of the presenters ranged from a third to ten percent. Dan is unaware of any churches in the Holland Classis that are actively planning to leave.

While The Vision 2020 Report dominated many conversations, there were additional actions taken, as summarized below by Room for All, with Hope Church member comments following.

**Overture 10 (referred):** Colloquially known as the “two-Synod overture” (denomination divided into two synods, one synod affirming and the other not so), the overture was ultimately referred to the team that will be formed to handle 2020 Vision Recommendation 1 (above) along with the Commissions on Theology and Church Order.

**Overture 11 (denied):** This overture, aiming to craft a “Truth and Grace” commission to seek out and discipline ministers not adhering to

conservative views of human sexuality, was rejected by the General Synod (this overture was denied by a resounding 160–41 vote, for context).

**Affirmed and Celebrated Paper (referred):**

The paper, *Affirmed + Celebrated: A Reformed Theology of Inclusion* coming from New Brunswick Classis, was referred to the Commission on Theology for study, as requested.

- **Larry** calls attention to this as an amazing step.

**Western Theological Seminary (referred):**

The request from WTS to move to an “affiliate status” with the RCA (similar to Central, Hope, and Northwestern Colleges) was referred to the General Synod Council in consultation with the Commission on Church Order.

- **Larry** affirms that this means there is no change in WTS for now.
- **Carol** (Adult Ed review): Following General Synod, she sees less need for WTS independence from General Synod. At this

# Major Actions by the General Synod of the RCA

(Continued)

point, she stated, it could be well for General Synod to have more control over the school.

- **Jim:** This idea arose in the Board of Trustees, without faculty engagement. The move may have been motivated by non-RCA students, and a desire for WTS to appeal to Alliance of Reformed Churches (ARC) students.

**Vice President Elected:** The **Rev. Dwayne Jackson** of Second Reformed Hackensack, NJ, was elected as Vice President of the General Synod. Sitting Vice President, **Rev. Phil Assink** of First Reformed Oak Harbor, WA, was elected President.

- **Larry** notes that **Dwayne** holds a moderate to supportive view of full inclusiveness. His election marks a wonderful change from the past years.

**Other News:** All ten of the Commission on Christian Action's recommendations were passed. These include calls to support our Indigenous and Tribal communities (amended to include annual land acknowledgements for our meeting spaces), crafting a liturgy of lament for the roles the RCA and her members have oppressed the Black, Brown, and Indigenous peoples of North America, items relating to climate change and energy-efficiency in GSC buildings and vehicles, requesting the Congress of the United States repeal the 2002 Iraq War Powers Authorization for Use of Military Force, and annually print a 9-point guideline for civil discourse based on the fruits of the Spirit.

- **Jim** (Adult Ed review): How unusual for this to happen! All assemblies (regional synods, classes, consistories) are urged to conduct anti-racism events.

---

*...the RCA experienced a shift in rhetoric and in climate this year over against the previous years.*

---

- **Dan:** Holland Classis has a Racial Justice & Reconciliation Committee) to address this issue.
- **Carol:** A proposal to fund a full-time RCA staff position for anti-racism was denied by a close vote, apparently based on funding concerns.
- **Larry** notes that all documents are available on the RCA website.

The Church Growth Fund's request to continue loans to former RCA congregations was approved, both to embody grace-filled separation and for the long-term financial health of the fund.

Finally, Larry shares some of the discussion at the October 27 Holland Classis Stated Session, which was a time for Classis members to reflect together and decide whether actions were needed. (Note that in recognition of the limitations of a Stated Session, the Executive Committee scheduled an additional discussion opportunity on November 11.)

**Rev. Leigh VanKempen**, a member of the General Synod Council, said that the council struggled to find a way for Synod to gather to discuss the Vision 2020 report. Leigh offered a devotional in which she offered that going to Synod, she expected the dissolution of the denomination, but "experienced hope, not fear; unity, not brokenness; peace, not disharmony." She came away with hope for new things and bowed before the mystery of the Holy Spirit.

**Pastor Jon Brown**, a Holland Classis delegate, said that he prepared for Synod sensing suspicion, concern, and confusion around what votes would occur. He found that the Vision 2020 report was about structure and organization. The question left to be addressed from the Synod is "What does affinity mean?" He noted that it was generally agreed that worship during Synod was used as a bully pulpit telling delegates that they need to hold the non-inclusive view. The use of worship in

this way was not appreciated. Jon added, we were grateful for the hospitality found in Tucson. It was a bastion of hope. We have grief and sadness over churches leaving the RCA; whatever we would do, we knew this would happen.

So, Larry summarizes, the RCA experienced a shift in rhetoric and in climate this year over against the previous years. There was good debate on the matters at hand, yet the decorum between and among delegates was respected and let the body act as a body of the whole rather than in splintered divisions. The most common sentiment Larry heard from staff and delegates at the end of General Synod is, "There is hope."



## Stress and Grief Meet the Holidays

---

by Ginger Clark RN, Parish Nurse

Several factors contribute to the anxiety and difficult emotions during the holiday season: grief, fatigue, unrealistic expectations, over-commercialization, and financial constraints. It's also difficult to cope with not being able to celebrate with our friends and family due to COVID restrictions, illness, distance, and relationship struggles.

Stress hits our body with anxiety, depression, heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes, body aches, inability to sleep, and irritability. Holiday stress can be overwhelming and demanding. Here are a few suggestions meant to put some joy into this special season:

- **Simplify your to do list.** Cut down on your gift list, prioritize your special events, and limit some of the activities.
- **Watch your diet.** The more stressed we are, the more we crave seasonal drinks and holiday treats. The more of these we have, the more stressed we get because of how the brain responds to the sugars and simple carbs we are taking in. Among foods that promote mental health are salmon, chicken, whole grains, avocados, spinach, yogurt, nuts, olive oil, and beans.

- **Cultivate a sense of humor.** Laughter can relax our bodies, improve cardiac health, and boost our immune systems. It cultivates optimism, improves mood, and protects us from negativity, fear and panic.

Perform works of kindness and commit yourself to the service of others. Acts of altruism are strong antidotes to depression and anxiety.

Grief or loss can be a time of sadness, pain, anger, and dread. It can be difficult to cope—especially when you see the sights and sounds of holiday happiness around you. This can definitely magnify holiday stress. Self care at this time is especially important. What are your coping skills? Breathing, a walk, yoga, journaling, music, or time with a supportive friend or family member can be especially helpful. Getting enough rest is key to facing each day. Ask for help and plan ahead to fill emptiness felt during the holidays. Avoid unnecessary moments of grief, but allow your emotions to be present and offer yourself some grace through it all. Honor some old traditions and begin to make new ones together with those who share your grief.

May the gifts and promises of this season be yours!

# The Pace of Change: Climate Edition

by Peter Boogaart, Creation Care Ministry



*Pinus longaeva* / Great Basin bristlecone pine

Climate change and aging are much alike. They both creep up on you. What? Really? I'm 72? When did that happen? I don't feel any different than I did 15 years ago!

Everything in this world moves along and changes. I've got the Priority Health bills to prove it. Nothing there to complain about, though. Aging happens. It's part of being human. Ancient wisdom recognized the pattern and came to terms with it: "...the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord."

Nature changes too. But the process is more elongated. Consider these life spans: Greenland shark—272+ years, Bristlecone Pine—5,000 years, Glass sponge—10,000 years, and *Turritopsis dohrnii* (ever heard of them? me neither)—potentially immortal. Looks like old Turri gets to turn out the lights when the party's over.

The wrinkle here is that our current experience of changing climate isn't happening in an elongated way. It's moving at a more human-like pace. The

first alterations appear around 1750 with the advent of industrialization and the initial use of fossil fuels. Because these changes are being driven by human inputs, scholars are referring to this geologic age as the Anthropocene.

Scripture frames the moment differently: "...cursed is the ground because of you..." Much like Adam and Eve, we're contributing to our own demise. Changing climate is displacing us from a pretty good place to live. It's going to be a struggle from here on out.

The trend lines don't look good and there isn't a rainbow in sight. Any faith in humanity's ability to pull back doesn't look too good either. Despite the pandemic-driven economic slowdown, 2020 was the worst year yet for emission of greenhouse gasses. The Paris Climate Accord generated some optimism, but there's barely a country anywhere that is keeping its promises.

So, what to do? Despair is one option ("eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die") but that's not an acceptable option for a Christian audience. We are the people who know that God said: "I will never leave you nor forsake you."

We are also the people who know that God is engaged in what Thomas Berry called the Great Work of renewal and restoration. Our blessing is in being called to participate with God in the renewal of all the earth.

That's all high-minded, high-level stuff. How it plays out in daily life is another matter. Jesus' parable of the Pearl of Great Price offers some guidance. As you review your calendar, plan your budget, and clean your closets, the challenge is to discern value. What's worth holding on to? What's holding you back? Where's the line between enough and too much?

The Creation Care Ministry intends to place a focus on climate change this year. Indeed, the RCA is now asking for us to do exactly that. It's not an overstatement to say that, globally, lives hang in the balance. The moment calls for a rapid withdrawal from fossil fuels and deep change in our economic structures. There are positive, life-affirming ways to do that. You can expect to hear more from us as the year progresses.



Image: Jonathunder - Own work, CC BY-SA 3.0

## Poetry Corner

---

*Hosted by Rhonda Edgington and Randy Smit*

When Rhonda asked me to submit poems for the Advent issue of *Salt & Light*, I remembered a poem I wrote several years ago following an Advent worship service. Some of you may have been present on this particular Sunday in 2014.

—Sharon Nelson Arendshorst

### **On This Third Sunday of Advent**

*By Sharon Nelson Arendshorst*

A couple leads the Advent candle lighting liturgy.  
The woman holds the brass candle lighter  
with its graceful arc and bell snuffer.  
She lights one candle, then two  
as the congregation prays,  
Come, Emmanuel, God with us.  
We long for your light to shine among us.  
She moves the flame to the third candle,  
the pink candle, the candle of joy.  
The flame flickers out.  
She extends the wick and tries again.  
The congregation holds its breath, anxious  
for light to shine in these dark times.

A burst of flame, a collective exhale,  
laughter, applause, a Yes! to joy.



## Poetry Corner *(Cont'd)*

---

*Hosted by Rhonda Edgington and Randy Smit*

This second poem is written as a poem of address, a letter to the labyrinth that I mowed into the field beside our home this summer. Walking a labyrinth may be a meditative practice and a journey of discovery. What might we discover in our Advent journey and as we walk into the new liturgical year?

—Sharon Nelson Arendshorst

**Dear Labyrinth,**

Your seven circuits invite me  
to follow your mown path through  
the grass of the field into the heart of you.  
Before I step forward, I pause  
to slow my breath and still  
my distracted mind to focus  
on each foot's sole plant on the earth.  
Your path leads me over the dirt mounds  
of mole tunnels, across spongy mosses,  
and through brushes of tall grasses.  
Each turn requires my attention.  
Today, I delight  
in three bright orange mushrooms,  
tiny white wildflowers on a thin stalk,  
a bee buzzing around a patch of clover,  
the canopy of trees,  
the warm fragrance of summer.  
Your path approaches the center  
then again turns away. Yet,  
you are not the Minotaur's labyrinthian  
prison, a dark maze of forever wandering.  
Your turnings are an invitation to trust  
each new direction and to pay attention  
to the gifts on the way  
to my own heart's elusive center.