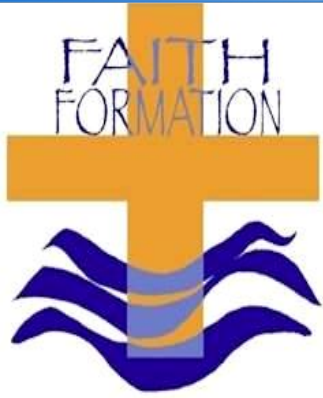


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FOURTH REFORMED CHURCH

## The 4th Focus

This March 15, I (Branson) will be officially starting my work on staff here at Fourth as Director of Faith Formation (DFF). But I can imagine many people asking: so what exactly *is* faith formation? Here I want to offer a few brief reflections on faith formation.

**What's the goal of faith formation?** Jesus' words in Matthew 28:19-20 ring in my ears here: "Go and make disciples, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you." Sometimes Christians use this verse to emphasize missions and evangelism, which is good—that is part of what Jesus says here. But notice that he says **make disciples**, not **make converts**. And what does a disciple learn? To observe—**listen and obey**—all that Jesus teaches us. That's quite a task! And notice that Jesus commands his disciples to be **intentional** about this. This fits with Jesus' own method of making disciples. He doesn't just wait for people to show up and follow him; instead, he intentionally tracks them down and says, "Follow me!" Part of my goal as DFF is to help us find ways to grow in our intentionality, because disciples are not born, they are made.

**What's the difference between information and formation?** Sometimes churches focus a lot on providing faith *information*. They might think, "We only we pack more facts about Jesus and the Bible into people's heads, they'll grow spiritually." Now, I love Bible facts, church history, and Christian doctrine! But *formation* and *transformation* mean that we have to engage not only our minds, but also our hearts, our actions, and our whole lives, especially as we seek to train up young disciples. This explains, for example, why being a Christian parent is so hard. It's easy to talk the talk and pass on Bible facts; it's harder to walk the walk and pass on a whole way of life. Think of the contrast between an apprentice and someone just memorizing facts: the apprentice learns by hearing and by doing, following not just what the teacher says but what the teacher does.

**Why is faith formation often so difficult?** It's difficult because our faith is being formed and shaped in the midst of a culture that wants to shape us in the image of its gods. The Holy Spirit wants to form us into a unified body that cares for and depends on each other; the individualism of our culture wants us to believe we are self-sufficient and don't really need each other. The Holy Spirit wants us to recognize that we are bound to one another in Christ; the consumerism of our culture wants us to stay at a church only until a better option comes along. The Holy Spirit wants us to make priorities based on God's kingdom; the materialism of our culture wants us to make decisions based on considerations of my finances, comfort, and ease. The Holy Spirit wants me to redeem the time by putting God's kingdom at the center of my life; the entertainment culture wants us to fill our time with good things—sports, vacation getaways, movies, TV, social media—in order to distract us from the best things. So faith formation doesn't take place in a vacuum. We work to make disciples of Jesus in a world where individualism, consumerism, and materialism are also trying to make disciples out of us.

**So faith formation automatically produces disciples, right?** Wrong. We love easy formulas and programs, don't we? If you follow steps 1, 2, and 3, you will automatically get this result! But life doesn't work that way. *People* don't work that way. Our church is called to be faithful to the task of disciple-making, trusting that the Holy Spirit is at work. But God's grace goes before us, behind us, above us, and beneath us. We work knowing that it is God who is at work to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose (Phil. 2:13). To God be the glory!

- Branson Parler



Calvin College Symposium on Worship. I have attended one other time and was looking forward to being refreshed and replenished with God's Word, worship, and fresh ideas.

This year's conference was amazing. Each and every session I went to was useful and gave me lots to think on. I attended sessions on faith formation, using spoken Scripture well, dressing your church for the seasons, children and worship, etc. One of my favorite sessions was one on Inclusive Worship by Barbra J. Newman. Barb works at the CLC Network, which is where our very own Becky Tubergen also works, and helps churches to look at themselves and find out how they can be inclusive of everyone. In the past this was known as handicap accessible but there's really so much more to it than that. How can we worship in a way that includes everyone - no matter their abilities or struggles? Barb explained that we ALL have pink and green areas in our lives - we each are a puzzle piece- one side green, one side pink. The greens are the things that are easy for us to do, and the pinks are the things that are a struggle. Each of us - despite our inabilities or abilities have these. When looking at the church as a whole, what are some things we can do so everyone is included in worship?

One of the things you may have noticed here at Fourth are the new icon bulletins. These are NOT just for kids, although they are a helpful tool for kids. Reading is a pink for some people and by just looking at these pictures, one can see what is coming in the Sunday morning service. I know how many of us rely on that bulletin for what's coming next - well that's important to those who struggle with reading as well. I'm continuing to study in this area and hope to keep assessing what we can do to be even more inclusive for everyone - from the person who's pink area is paying attention all the way, to the person who is blind or uses a wheel chair to get around and more.

Barb writes in her book *Accessible Gospel, Inclusive Worship*, "Another lesson of these puzzle pieces is that they link together. Places where I am strong, I can come alongside of you. Places where you are strong, you can support me. We fit together like a puzzle in the body of Christ. Not only did God hand-craft each individual, He also takes time to arrange them into communities. 1 Corinthians 12:18 says, *But in fact God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as He wanted them to be.* Your presence in a community or family is no mistake. You have been beautifully designed and then PLACED by your creator. I look forward to seeing how each of our puzzle pieces fit together to make a beautiful picture of this thing we call church!

- Julie Schalk

## Birthdays

### March

- 1 - Scott Schalk
- 2 - Noreen Reitsma
- 7 - Breanna Tubergen
- 7 - Matt Simone
- 11 - Skip Hawkins
- 13 - Brian Townley
- 13 - Koa Rossiter
- 13 - Kivi Rossiter
- 19 - Erin Meendering
- 20 - Tim Dorn
- 22 - Vera Baar
- 23 - Sarah Parler
- 23 - Luke Bills
- 25 - Tiffany Gonzales
- 27 - Daniel Berthiaume
- 29 - Barb Blystone
- 30 - Sue Berrios
- 31 - James Brinks

### April

- 3 - Sandy Moll
- 7 - Erin Berrevoets
- 9 - Mike Brinks
- 11 - Alex Smith
- 12 - Michael Gleason
- 13 - JoAnn Parks
- 13 - Melissa Schalk
- 14 - Beau McDowell
- 15 - Chad Kooyer
- 16 - Paul Baragar
- 17 - Nate Meendering
- 18 - Emily O'Brook
- 21 - Zachary Coeling
- 25 - Lisa Boehm
- 28 - Mike Bolt
- 30 - Jan Abbott



## TEAM21

What makes the Bible special? How do we know we can trust the things that it says? How do we know it's the "actual" Word of God - and what does it mean that Jesus is the Word made flesh? These, and many other conversations have been happening these past few months in Team21 meetings. We have been working through some curriculum that has been guiding us through these types of conversations. We will soon be heading into a new section of study. Pray that God would be near to each of our students' hearts and minds. Pray also that students would feel comfortable in asking hard questions, taking dives into the Word of God, and making their relationship with Him personal and real. We are looking forward to how God is going to work in the lives of your students, and how He will continue to move them through this crazy world we live in.

- Alisha Riepma



Christianity came to Japan after the arrival of Roman Catholic missionaries around 1550. At first they were welcomed, but later were persecuted. Six European and 20 Japanese Christians were crucified at Nagasaki on February 5, 1597 and are known today as the Twenty-Six Martyrs of Japan. It was written that by 1650 as many as 300,000 believers had been killed. Japan instituted a policy of *Sakoku* or national isolation. No one could leave or enter the country. Besides the Chinese, The Dutch maintained a trading post on the island of Dejima in Nagasaki harbor. For over 200 years, this was Japan's only window to the outside world.

After American mariners forced to land in Japan were mistreated, the United States intervened. On July 8, 1853, Commodore Matthew C. Perry arrived with four warships and a letter from President Millard Fillmore. While the visit was friendly, it protested the abuse of Americans. This show of force convinced Japan to open its doors to the rest of the world in 1858.

Even though Christianity would for some time remain a forbidden religion to the Japanese people, the Reformed Church joined other denominations to bring a Christian testimony to Japan beginning in 1859. The work of the pioneer Reformed missionaries Samuel Brown and James Ballagh will be covered in this article. The work of Guido Ver Beck, who not only influenced Christian missions, but also the modern Japanese nation will be described in the next.

Almost from his birth, Samuel Brown was consecrated for missionary service. In China for nine years, he thoroughly learned the language. He returned to the United States where he founded Elmira College in 1855, the first permanent, accredited American college for women. After the opening of Japan, Brown went there. At first, he was met with deep suspicion. To support himself, he worked as a government interpreter.

Soon after the opening of Japan, government leaders embraced western ideas. By 1866, students were encouraged to study overseas. Brown sent young people to his alma mater of Monson Academy, as well as RCA colleges. Around 1870, there were about 30 Japanese students at New Brunswick Seminary. The kindness and Christian testimony shown to these visitors positively impacted future U.S.-Japanese relations and helped end persecution.

The first established church in Japan was largely the work of James Ballagh. Unlike Brown and VerBeck who trained future church and government leaders, Ballagh was above all, a faithful under shepherd. In his own words, he was called *to be an evangelist-to be Jesus Christ's man-to the heathen, that is all*. He began to hold Seekers Meetings and taught a class of about 30 beggar boys.

On March 10, 1872 the first native Japanese congregation was started at Yokohama consisting of nine young men baptized by Ballagh and two older men. A contribution of \$1,000.00 for a brick church building was donated by native believers from the Sandwich Islands (Hawaii). For several years, Ballagh was the pastor. This became known as the Kaigan Church, having about 1,000 members by 1906.

Like in China, the missionary community was both indigenous and interdenominational. A Classis (*Chu-Kwai*) was formed and as the number of churches grew a Synod (*Dai-Kwai*) was established. The RCA, together with five other Presbyterian bodies joined ranks in 1889 to form the *Nihon Kirisuto Kokai* (Japan Church of Christ). By 1901, there 61 churches and 8,690 members.

The long process of translating the Bible into Japanese was a combined effort of the three principal missionaries and Japanese church leaders whose contribution was immeasurably vital. A house fire destroyed many of Brown's early manuscripts. Working with the Presbyterian missionary James Hepburn he set to work on Mark and then John. Ballagh undertook translating Matthew. In spite of growing illness, Brown worked on until he returned to the U.S. for the last time. He died on June 19, 1880 a month after learning that the Japanese New Testament had been completed. Meanwhile, work began on the Old Testament in 1876 by Ver Beck and others. The end result was an excellent translation, considered the authorized version by Japanese Biblical scholars until 1955. The entire Japanese Bible was published by the end of 1887.

- Eric O'Rock

Next - Japanese Missions, Part 2

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on class began with *NO Easy Answers: Making Good Decisions in an Anything Goes World*, a course on how to make moral choices according to Christian ethical principles. We explored the ten commandments in depth, then examined how they apply to real-life situations.

We've followed that with Thea Nyhoff Leunk's *What's Up With The Church Down The Street*, which explores other denominations. We found it to be helpful a couple of ways: studying the history of the Christian church really shows how God has been faithful to human beings through the centuries. Becoming knowledgeable about others' beliefs enables us to relate with them more easily. Contrasting their theologies with ours reminds us of what we know to be true, and finding things in common links us together with the church at large. So it's all good.

My hope is that my students will leave equipped to more accurately evaluate the religious beliefs of their friends and neighbors, and to proclaim Christ with the confidence of people - empowered by the Holy Spirit - who know what they believe and why.

I gotta admit that I was apprehensive about teaching just guys, but they've been attentive and engaged, full of questions I can't answer. They're really terrific young men. And they will devour a plate of puff pastries like bears at a picnic table. I am not kidding you. Seriously, watch your fingers.

- Steve Wammack

### Preaching Schedule

March 20 & 27 - Pastor Eric  
 April 3 & 17 - Branson  
 April 10 & 24 - Pastor Eric

Parsonage work day!



## GEMS



This year has been full of all sorts of singing, giggles, crafts, learning, and playing. Teaching the GEMS girls to choose truth in all situations. Maybe how they think about themselves, God, or how they think about others. In our American culture it can be so hard to think of anyone outside of our families or even ourselves individually. Our girls had an opportunity to learn more about the world and surrounding cultures this year. Many of you already know that we did a fundraiser for the persecuted church. We thank you all for your support to the mission of alleviating the struggles that so many of our brothers and sisters have on a daily basis! What some of you may not know is that we also learned a lot about the persecuted church and the serious burdens that other Christians carry. The girls heard stories told about different situations across the globe and young women who are abused or outcast because of their faith in Jesus Christ.

GEMS is unfortunately coming to a close for this year though not before a little more fun with the girls! March 14<sup>th</sup> will be a night of outdoor fun and cake decorating. We would love to have any Special Friends join us if they are able! We're also looking forward to GEMS Sunday which will be April 17<sup>th</sup>. I'm very excited for Fourth to hear firsthand from a few of the girls who have been coming to GEMS this year about how it has impacted them in different ways. April 18<sup>th</sup> will be the last regularly scheduled GEMS and will be loads of fun that your girls do not want to miss!

It has been so rewarding to watch the girls grow in Christ and learn to see themselves through Christ's eyes. On behalf of all of the leaders of GEMS, thank you to parents who share your girls with us and have encouraged your girls to bring friends. We also want to thank everyone who has given of their time and money to help by bringing snacks, donating supplies, and so many other ways! You all make it possible for us to continue this ministry of spreading the gospel from year to year. Thank you very much!!

- Kristi Dennis

A few of the lovely ladies who helped stomp out germs!

