

two **EVENTS** that make all the difference

**An Ascension Day and Pentecost Virtual Roundtable**

**DIANE DYKGRAAF**

**A**scension Day and Pentecost are major events in the life of the Christian church. We confess the truth of Jesus' ascension and the coming of the Spirit every time we repeat the words of the Apostles' or Nicene Creed. But what difference do these days make in the life of the average worshiper today? And how do Christians and churches mark these important events?

Reformed Worship asked six church leaders from various locations and worship settings those two questions, and we were blessed by the answers found on the following pages. We hope you will be too.

**Participating in this conversation were:**



**Brian Engel**, pastor of Mohawk Reformed Church, Mohawk, New York.



**Claudette Reid**, Minister of Worship at Brookdale Reformed Church, Bloomfield, New Jersey.



**John Tenyenhuis**, pastor of Rehoboth Fellowship Christian Reformed Church, Toronto, Ontario.



**Eric Sarwar**, Minister of Worship and Music in Karachi, Pakistan, currently studying at Calvin Theological Seminary in Grand Rapids, Michigan.



**Karen Wilk**, pastor and leader of a new church plant called N.E.W. Community in Edmonton, Alberta.



**Reggie Smith**, pastor of Roosevelt Park Community Christian Reformed Church in Wyoming, Michigan.

**FROM YOUR PERSPECTIVE, WHAT DIFFERENCE DO THE ASCENSION OF CHRIST AND THE COMING OF THE HOLY SPIRIT ON PENTECOST MAKE IN THE CHRISTIAN LIFE?**

**Brian Engel:** If Jesus simply ascends to heaven and the Holy Spirit does not descend and remain present, the Trinity is broken, as is Christ’s promise not to leave his disciples (and us) as orphans. To me, Pentecost should be as big and as important as Christmas and Easter, and it should be celebrated accordingly. In a sermon about Pentecost and its importance to us, I coined the term “Pentechreaster,” connecting Pentecost with Easter. By reclaiming this special day in our lives as Christians and as a church, we make a statement to the world. Getting my congregation to appreciate and recognize this, though, has been difficult. I have had parishioners tell me that they never really knew much about Pentecost until they came to the church I currently serve.

**Mohawk Reformed Church**

Mohawk Reformed Church recently celebrated 175 years of ministry. This historic church serves a changing community in upstate New York.



Photo by Diane Dykstra



## Brookdale Reformed Church

Brookdale Reformed Church was established in 1802 by Dutch settlers. According to our records, the church was destroyed by fire twice, first in the 1850s and later in 1910 by an arsonist.

Today we are a small but vibrant multicultural congregation with a newly installed minister, Pastor Susan Dorward. Together we strive to understand and live the Word of God through prayer, nurturing, worship, fellowship, and mission.



Photo by Diane Dykgraaf

**Claudette Reid:** Growing up in the church, I didn't even notice that people paid attention to the ascension. We confessed it in the words of the Apostles' Creed, but it was only when I began ministry as part of the Reformed Church in America that this took on significance for me. For me it was a rediscovery of this important event tucked between Easter and Pentecost. I began to ask, Why are we leaving out this important day? The ascension stands for Christ's lordship, his divinity, his going back to the Father. At the same time it represents the place we take with him when he left. It points us to Pentecost. The ascension is a precursor to the Holy Spirit's coming and what that means for the church. We cannot have Ascension Day without Pentecost. And we cannot have Pentecost without Ascension Day. Even though Christ leaves us in person, he remains with us in the person of the Holy Spirit and gives us the power to carry out what he asked us to do: go and make disciples.

**John Tenyenhuis:** In some sense this is a nonsensical question. There is no Christian life without these two pivotal revelations. If the Christian life was simply to follow the moral imperatives of a Jewish teacher who came with some fresh perspectives two millennia ago, and if the followers of that Rabbi had the option of adding (or not) the meanings of these events to their Christian life, then the question might make some sense. As it is, the entire Scriptures have revealed that ascension and Pentecost have always been at the core of the soteriological (salvation) meanings and divine intents for the whole world and the people of God in it. They are the completion of all the Messiah was, is, and is to be. These two revelations are what carry the heart of God to us and us into the heart of God.

## Rehoboth Fellowship CRC

Rehoboth Fellowship CRC is busy creating hope for our future. We are taking big steps to become a church that looks more like Toronto with all its diverse people. It is our intent to keep growing in our serving and worshipping in our part of the city.



Photo by John Tenyenhuis



### First Presbyterian Church in Karachi

I started First Presbyterian Church in Karachi in 1999 as a house fellowship at the outskirts of Karachi city. This fellowship started for missional purposes as a witness to our neighbors: three different Muslim people groups (Afghan Refugee Camp, Sindhi, and Pashtun).



Photo by Eric Sarwar

**Eric Sarwar:** In Pakistan, the ascension is not as popular as Pentecost. Because of the influence of the Charismatic/Pentecostal movement, Ascension Day is pushed back by the churches and people are not very aware about the theological significance of this important day. But we need to celebrate both Ascension Day and Pentecost. These important events remind us how we become the body of Christ and how we can go to heaven. We would not have the Holy Spirit with us without the ascension of Christ. Fuller observance of the cycle of the Christian year would serve positively in the faith formation of our congregation. I believe our attentiveness and perseverance in intercessory prayer would be encouraged by greater focus on Christ's high priestly role and on the powerful presence of the Spirit with, in, and among the people of God.

**Karen Wilk:** These two events, the ascension and Pentecost, make *all* the difference in the life of the Christian. Without the Spirit we cannot be who we are made and called to be as God's sent people, the Body of Christ, blessed to be a blessing. We participate in God's mission by the power of the Spirit!

### NEW Community

NEW Community is a missional church plant of the Christian Reformed Church in Alberta, Canada. Our purpose and intention is to seed and multiply missional communities/churches that seek to live incarnationally in their local neighborhoods by doing life in, amongst, with, for (and sometimes in contrast to) their neighbors and community.



Photo by Karen Wilk

**Reggie Smith:** The ascension of Christ pulls us into the Lordship of Christ, and has the capacity to broaden and deepen our worship and expand our view of God in all areas of life. In my community, which has a 75% Hispanic population, the ascension of Christ has familiarity as it has traditionally been celebrated in the Roman Catholic Church. I think Protestants such as myself can learn to receive the ascension as part of a balanced diet for worship. Pentecost, the coming of the Spirit, simply makes the Christian life more alive and brings awareness to keep the flame of worship going in our own lives. While Pentecost has sometimes been taken over by charismatics and other Pentecostal circles as the center of worship and life, as Reformed believers I think we can learn a thing or two from our brothers and sisters.

Pentecost is, however, more than raised hands and voices. Pentecost introduces us to “the shy person of the Trinity,” according to exegete F. Dale Bruner. The Spirit doesn’t scream for the spotlight or bully for his own mic. The Spirit seeks to remind us of the words and actions of the Father and Son. Pentecost can be more robust when our Christian lives, via the Spirit, are about practicing the shy fruit of patience, kindness, love, and self control, because “against these things there is no law.”

## HOW DOES YOUR CHURCH CELEBRATE OR MARK THESE TWO PARTS OF THE CHRISTIAN STORY?

**Brian Engel:** Pentecost is a critical day in the story of God. We have celebrated Pentecost in a variety of ways. A few times we’ve had a spoken “chorus” of the Lord’s Prayer in several languages, emphasizing oneness with believers around the world. It’s a very participative worship service with lots of congregational involvement.

We always decorate the sanctuary in a special way. We’ve created red banners with flames and hung red, orange, and yellow ribbons from the rafters to symbolize flames. We’ve darkened the sanctuary and used special red candles to create a kind of traditional Christmas Eve-like candlelight service. (I’ve thought about writing a new stanza for “Silent Night” for Pentecost: “Spirit of God . . . Spirit of God. . .”) We have also celebrated by

### Roosevelt Park Community Church

On an average Sunday the worshipers at Roosevelt Park Community Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan, are mostly Anglo, but include about 25 percent Hispanic and African American. We provide Spanish interpretation for the sermon. We are located in a former Dutch enclave that’s now 75 percent Hispanic.



Photo by Reggie Smith

having an after-worship luncheon with a birthday cake for the church. When Pentecost fell on Mother’s Day, I reminded the congregation that in a unique sense the Holy Spirit is the mother of the Church, for without God’s Spirit giving us life and equipping us for service, we wouldn’t be here.

**Claudette Reid:** Pentecost marks a special day for our church. Paraments are changed, banners are raised to go with the Pentecost theme. It is important to realize that the Holy Spirit is not only for our personal lives, but that the church is born—it’s a day for all of us! This is “Happy Birthday, Church” Sunday! We see this day as a celebration of diversity and unity joined together in one mission, and look for ways for all to participate. Balloons and cake have marked the celebration, and we invite everyone, the young and old, member and guest, to participate. Multiple languages spoken by members of the church are used in the readings, prayers, call to worship, and even hymns. There is a freedom and opportunity to let those with different gifts and talents who may be otherwise challenged bless the congregation. This has become a special day for a young woman who offers her gift of dance to her favorite hymn, “There’s a Sweet, Sweet, Spirit In This Place.” I call this her “Holy Spirit dance,” and as she dances to the music and words we are all blessed.



## THE EXAMEN

This is a method of prayer outlined by Ignatius Loyola in his *Spiritual Exercises* (1548). Christians to this day find this devotional method very helpful and adaptable for various age groups and contexts. If you do an online search for Examen Prayer you will find a plethora of online resources, both print and audio, as well as links to online stores where additional material can be purchased.

### The Examen Prayer suggests these steps:

1. Become aware of God's presence.
2. Review the day with gratitude.
3. Pay attention to your emotions.
4. Choose one feature of the day and pray from it.
5. Look toward tomorrow.

**John Tenyenhuis:** We, like all Christian Reformed churches, used to celebrate Ascension on the appropriate Thursday, but have succumbed to the more convenient Sunday just before Pentecost. But celebrate we do, tough as it is to indulge in the meanings of the days. Ascension gets more than a mention. We find litanies, songs, children's messages, and projections of art associated with the topic and other expressions of the rich layers of our Lord's Ascension. The same goes for Pentecost, with the addition of making that an occasion for profession of faith. These two events, though, are never limited to just those two Sundays. They are always the windows, however opaque and mysterious they remain, through which we see the greatness of the Lord and the hope for the world and the church in it.

**Eric Sarwar:** There are many ways to celebrate this part of the story of God. The celebrations of both Ascension Day and Pentecost strengthen our faith. The church as a whole celebrates with joy and spiritual hunger. In Pakistan, it is only in traditional/liturgical churches that Ascension Day is celebrated. Pentecost is celebrated with great celebration. The Karachi diocese of the Anglican Church has arranged for a three-day convention and invited their parishes to come and attend this event at the Bishop's house. A special emphasis is given to prayer. Pentecostal churches have created a network of prayer before Pentecost Day, sometimes involving 40 days of prayer after Easter and 10 days following Ascension Day. Several churches organize special seminars and evening prayer and praise meetings in their local churches.

**Karen Wilk:** We make Ascension and Pentecost the themes of our focus during our gathering times. During the ten days following Ascension Day we participate in daily shared devotions which include action steps. An example of one of those actions steps the community has participated in was a commitment to repeating the "Jesus Creed" in the morning (*The Jesus Creed: Loving God, Loving Others* by Scot McKnight), and doing the "prayer of examen" in the evening (sidebar). This is done by each member of the community as an act of giving and serving daily.

**Reggie Smith:** We, at Roosevelt Park Church, have had ascension- and Pentecost-centered worship services over the years that lifted up the power of the Spirit in the everydayness of life, and in the ascension of Christ, lifting him up as the Lord of life. We are not successful all the time in remembering, but we attempt to be aware of both events' significance in the church calendar.



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