

## For the Church

Sarah Moss

Dordt University, [sarah.moss@dordt.edu](mailto:sarah.moss@dordt.edu)

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# For the CHURCH



Church attendance isn't what it used to be, write pastors Jim Davis and Michael Graham in their latest book *The Great Dechurching: Who's Leaving, Why Are They Going, and What Will It Take to Bring Them Back?* Around 40 million Americans (about 15 percent of the adult population) have dechurched: that is, stopped attending church as least once a month and switched to going less than once per year.

**It's the largest religious shift in the history of the United States.**

Rev. Todd Zuidema ('93) is not shocked by this statistic. A former pastor, Zuidema has witnessed denominational affiliation dwindle and church attendance lag for many reasons: a lack of trust in institutions, weariness around theological and cultural debates, and more.

As director of church relations at Dordt, Zuidema also isn't shocked to find that Dordt graduates are bucking that trend.

"What most impresses me about Dordt alumni is that they're deeply engaged in church life. Dordt graduates are in church on Sundays," he says. "In fact, 93 percent of alumni who responded to this year's alumni survey indicated that they attend church on a weekly basis."

Zuidema has come to know many Dordt graduates who have taken positions of leadership within the church, whether serving as a pastor or being part of a church council. Dordt graduates are key leaders and volunteers in church programming, including Bible studies, church education, worship, and soundboard. They get involved in their communities through service projects and outreach opportunities.

"There's a narrative in society that, if students go to college, they'll lose their faith," Zuidema says. "But what we're finding with the majority of Dordt graduates is quite the opposite. They're committed to growing in their faith during their four years here," recognizing how important it is to "work for Christ-centered renewal in all aspects of contemporary life" once they leave campus.

Here are the stories of six Dordt graduates who are loving their neighbors in unique ways, building up their fellow believers during times of struggle, and encouraging the church to consider new approaches.

### JUSTIN CARRUTHERS ('10)

Since 2019, Dr. Justin Carruthers has been the lead pastor at Gateway Community Christian Reformed Church in Abbotsford, British Columbia. The church of 700+ members is 73 years old and "to exist for that long," says

Carruthers, "there's a lot of things that you have to do right as a church."

This includes focusing on hospitality and generosity. "The Gateway congregation is gracious in how they love their neighbor, and they are committed to being biblically serious, community driven, and relentlessly missional."

“There’s a narrative in society that, if students go to college, they’ll lose their faith. But what we’re finding with the majority of Dordt graduates is quite the opposite.”

— Rev. Todd Zuidema, director of church relations

This was exemplified in Gateway's response to catastrophic flooding that swept through Fraser Valley and the Sumas Prairie in November 2021. The flood displaced more than 3,000 people, including 62 Gateway families. It caused approximately \$2 billion in property, home, and city infrastructure damage. An Abbotsford bank estimated the flood would cost the economy more than \$7.5 billion – the most expensive catastrophe in Canadian history.

Carruthers and the Gateway congregation decided to help the broader Abbotsford community by

setting up a donation center, providing lodging options for the displaced, leading a meal ministry that distributed frozen and fresh meals to those in need, and sending out emergency response teams to assist farms and homes in the flood's aftermath.

"This all came about because we asked ourselves, 'How can we meet the needs of our congregation and our community?'" says Carruthers.

Carruthers says that the emergency response teams had a significant impact on the local community. "The teams did whatever they needed to do, whether it was cleaning debris, bringing wet garbage to the dump, or moving farm animals to higher places so their lives would be spared," he recalls.

Right after the flood, the area spiraled into a state of chaos: thieves went into abandoned houses and stole valuables. The police eventually kept people from entering large areas of the community.

"However, when we told them we were from Gateway, the police force would let us through, because we had developed trust and goodwill by helping the community in whatever ways we could," he says. "For a while, even Samaritan's Purse wasn't allowed to go to Sumas Prairie because of the red tape, but we were."



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"First, we were hit with the Covid-19 pandemic. Then, we had the flood," says Justin Carruthers. "But we had the opportunity to be Jesus to people, which is so cool."

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Knowing that flood damage would impact their community for months and years to come, Gateway eventually partnered with six other local CRC churches to form the Abbotsford Disaster Response Coalition. They wanted to provide help and hope in the name of Jesus by identifying and meeting the unique needs in the community in ways that other agencies and organizations were not.

The coalition raised more than \$2 million, which helped members of the community replace household furniture and appliances, outdoor equipment like lawn mowers, and lumber. The churches partnered with local and national stores and companies to make this happen.

"To have seven churches come together with that kingdom mindset to help their community – it's amazing," says Carruthers.

When he thinks back to the four years he spent at Dordt, Carruthers remembers the strong emphasis on how "our work is worship, and how God is calling us to use our gifts to make a contribution in the world that he loves." That was a new idea to him at the time, having grown up in mainline evangelical churches. But in the years since he graduated from Dordt – and eventually earned an M.Div. degree at Calvin Theology Seminary as well as a Doctor of Ministry degree from Fuller Theological Seminary – it's become integral to how he approaches life and his perspective about the church.

"I see the church as a light in the darkness," he says. "That's what we're called to be: a beacon of hope in an otherwise hopeless world. Even in a difficult, tumultuous time, we wanted to provide support to others."

The church is God's power unto salvation, adds Carruthers. As Jesus tells Peter in Matthew 15:18, "And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it."

### JEANINE KOPASKA-BROEK ('99) AND CRAIG BROEK ('00)

Last spring, Jeanine Kopaska-Broek noticed a vacant plot of land behind a police station in urban Denver. Having recently received funding to build vegetable gardens in the area, which has limited access to nutritious food, Kopaska-Broek knew the 5,000 square



The flooding in November 2021 was catastrophic and continues to impact communities in British Columbia.

foot swath would be a great spot to plant. It took her a month to get up the courage to call the police station, but once she did, they gave her an enthusiastic yes.

"The district commander was eager to have vegetables planted and growing this season, but we're focused on building soil for the future, to grow better food later."

The plot is one of dozens that Kopaska-Broek and a team of gardeners have developed within Denver's Platt Park and University Hills neighborhoods, seeking to develop new ways of distributing food, supporting the local community, and embodying grace in the city. They

call it The Table Urban Farm, and 100 percent of the organic food they grow is donated back to the community as a ministry.

Kopaska-Broek first became interested in growing food in unusual places when she was a Dordt student. She attended a conference in Florida during her senior year, where missionaries spoke about doing agriculture in creative ways. The idea stuck with her. She and her husband, Rev. Craig Broek, eventually moved out to Ridgewood, New Jersey, so he could work as a pastor, and Kopaska-Broek enrolled in the City University of New York Hunter College's Master of Public Health program in Community Health Education. Her thesis explored farming in corporate campuses as a worksite wellness initiative.

"My dream was to farm on a corporate campus, believing that proximity to food would be beneficial mentally, physically, and nutritionally," she explains.

Kopaska-Broek also led a community-supported agriculture venture on a tiny New Jersey farm, and she started a community garden beside some railroad tracks.

Meanwhile, Broek learned key lessons as a lead pastor, including how to engage during conflict and how "challenging it is

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The interns, workers, and volunteers at The Table Urban Farm enable it "to be a tangible presence of grace and beauty in the community."



The veggie bike, which has been in operation for eight growing seasons, helps The Table transport fresh, local produce to neighborhood hangouts.

to walk through situations where people were deeply divided on issues.”

He also became enthusiastic about working alongside non-Christians. “I met great people through playing basketball at the YMCA, and they continue to be some of my closest friends.”

The couple began to dream of establishing a CRC church plant out West. They made connections before engaging in interviews, assessments, and conversations. Eventually they were invited to spend a few days in Denver.

“We went hiking and talked about what the church plant might look like there. Jeanine suggested that we should plant a church out of a farm.”

“It felt like God gave me the words while we were walking and talking,” adds Kopaska-Broek. “I said, ‘What if we call it The Table?’ In our Christian faith, the table is central: our food and drink exist sacramentally.”

It took them two months and 17 fundraising stops between New Jersey and Colorado to raise enough funds to move and start their ministry.

Broek thinks of The Table as a three-legged stool. The Table Urban Farm is about outreach and is how “we get into the fabric of the community.” The Table Public House, their latest venture, offers

an artfully curated food menu in addition to coffee, tea, wine, beer, and more.

“It’s been truly remarkable to see the different people come in and stay,” says Broek. “Visitors talk about how there’s a cool vibe about The Table Public House. I think they’re sensing the Holy Spirit, but they don’t have the language for that.”

“Giving away free vegetables became a way of extending tangible grace. We want to create a sense of awe in our community, and giving away free food is one way we’ve done that.”

— Jeanine Kopaska-Broek ('99)

The Table Community Church, the third leg, is the smallest by design, with about 30 people attending every week. “Because our focus is the table, our time is centered around a meal,” explains Broek. “We have a weekly potluck gathering, along with celebrating the Lord’s supper. We include Scripture reading and response. There’s always a theological reflection, and we have an activity. It feels more like a Bible study to some.”

The Table Urban Farm is unique as well, given that they use a “veggie bike” to

transport free vegetables to different neighborhood hangout spots. To date, they have grown and donated over 20,000 pounds of fresh produce to food banks, schools, families, and people in need.

“Giving away free vegetables became a way of extending tangible grace,” says Kopaska-Broek. “We want to create a sense of awe in our community, and giving away free food is one way we’ve done that. It always generates confusion and questions about why we’re doing this. It doesn’t matter who you are, where you came from, or how much you earn – these vegetables are for you, and it’s our way of sharing the truth of the Gospel.”

Because of Broek’s clergy status, he is often invited into people’s most joyful and difficult moments. “We’ve had people tell us, ‘You’re the spiritual people on the block: the pastors of our neighborhood,’” says Kopaska-Broek. “Our neighbor’s partner died, and they wanted Craig to do the funeral. He’s been asked to officiate weddings and do baptisms. So, we’ve built these relationships to the point where we are constantly inviting someone over for dinner every night.”

Non-traditional ministry like The Table Urban Farm can help build community in a world that’s wary of trust, she says. “In the backyards where we grow vegetables, and in the homes where we spend time in our neighborhood, it’s taken years to build up trust and entry into people’s lives.”

It’s valuable to recognize that the container of non-traditional ministry can look different, even though the contents may be the same, says Broek. “The church and the Gospel can be found anywhere. We’re hopefully expanding people’s vision in a way that they can see how this small expression represents God’s kingdom.”

“And goodness can grow in unexpected places,” adds Kopaska-Broek. “Like an empty field next to a police station: spaces can be redeemed and reclaimed.”

### JEREMY ENGBERS ('14)

Rev. Jeremy Engbers first felt called to ministry after his freshman year at Dordt, when he worked at a camp in Pennsylvania. “I loved working with young kids and spending time with other

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college students-turned-counselors who took their faith seriously," he says. "I came away with a sense that I wanted to work with young people."

He switched his major to theology with a minor in worship arts. A few years after graduating, Engbers enrolled in Fuller Theological Seminary's M.Div. online degree program. He also landed a job as Director of Youth Ministries at a church in Pella, Iowa, where he led a youth group of more than 60 high school students.

Every week, the youth group did a fun activity and listened to Engbers' message. "I spent a lot of time preparing a message, and when I shared it, I'd just get blank stares," he says. "I got frustrated because I felt like my effort wasn't matching my effectiveness. I started wondering, 'Is any of this really sinking in for them?'"

This wasn't unique to the youth group where he worked, adds Engbers; "it seemed like a general pattern for youth ministry." He began looking for better ways to engage high school students. He tried student-led discussion groups where students asked each other questions based on a video or short talk. And he started studying up on faith formation as part of his seminary work, including taking a class called Adolescent Faith Longevity.

"That course shifted my perspective from just teaching young people to also bringing them into a sense of ownership of their faith and leadership in the church," he says.

Engbers now works at Olympia Christian Reformed Church in Washington as a pastor of worship, youth, and family, where he regularly leads worship, does pastoral care, and preaches. He's also in charge of a high school ministry of about 15 students who gather weekly to engage in discussion-based learning. He tries to pick key moments that help guide the discussion, but otherwise, he wants the students to find that sense of ownership of their faith and their place in the church.

"I want students to wrestle through tough questions of faith," he adds. "I don't shy away from tough issues. I want

them to have a resilient faith as they prepare for life beyond high school."

He's encouraged intergenerational Christian formation in Sunday school as well. Recently, Olympia CRC decided to have all churchgoers engage in Sunday school together, rather than breaking into classes based on age.

"It's a neat sense of community and growth to be able to ask questions that

“Churches have made a lot of effort to be more attractive to young people, but smoke machines aren't going to help you when you encounter difficult times.”

— Rev. Jeremy Engbers ('14)

everyone, regardless of age, can answer," says Engbers. "Young people can learn from older folks, and vice versa. To have a long-lasting faith, young people need to have a solid understanding of doctrine and theology. But it's also important to build relationships with other people in the church."

This past April, Engbers was included in a *Christianity Today* article titled "Youth Pastors Ditch Gross-Out Games and Help Student Ministry Grow Up." He talked about "trying to be the youth pastor he

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Jeremy Engbers was officially ordained in the Christian Reformed Church this fall.

needed back [when he was younger] and how "the relational capital that our students are building is what holds them in the future, not necessarily the charisma of the youth pastor."

"Youth ministry can be more about spectacle and entertainment, with a tack-on of spiritual," he says. "But if a faith built on fun runs into life situations that aren't fun anymore, or you've never felt like you've been part of a bigger community of believers, then it becomes easier to walk away from your faith entirely."

Engbers encourages parents and churches to have conversations with their high school students about faith, as this can have a huge impact on the child's faith life in the long run.

"Churches have made a lot of effort to



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"Sometimes, the church tries to compete with broader culture for relevance," says Engbers. "But what students are looking for is something deeper."

be more attractive to young people, but smoke machines aren't going to help you when you encounter difficult times," he says. "What's going to help is a deeper connectedness to God and to those in your church community. We need to be able to ask the hard questions of faith in front of our young people, so that they aren't thinking, 'I'm the only person that's ever had this experience.'"

The local church, says Engbers, should be a place where Christians can encourage each other and depend on one another. "It is the way we can be the hands and feet of Jesus – for the kingdom of God to come on earth. It's an important part of our identity as Christians."

### TIM HUIZENGA ('99)

Rev. Tim Huizenga has been a lifelong member of First Christian Reformed Church of Highland, Indiana. Even when he enrolled at Dordt to study business, he stayed connected with his home church. After he graduated, married, and moved back to the Chicagoland area, he and his wife, Teresa, explored other churches in the area but eventually felt called to attend First CRC again.

"There was no one at First CRC in their early to mid-20's at the time," he says. "We felt like God was calling us to come and fill in the gap."

Huizenga volunteered to be deacon and later served as elder for two terms. He and Teresa also started a young adult ministry called Insight.

"It was just two couples at first. The first night we met, we set out an empty chair and started praying that God would fill it," he says.

Three days later, a woman called the church and said, "I'm 20 years old and I'm looking to connect with others around my age. Any chance you have a group?"

Over time Huizenga and the leadership also recognized that they weren't as involved in the local community as they should be. "As we looked across the street, we confessed we did not know who lived in the brown house, the tan house, or the blue house. God put the church right in the middle of a neighborhood, but we didn't really know our neighbors."



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**"Now as I reflect back on my life, I see that God was preparing me to be a leader," says Tim Huizenga.**

He and others at First CRC began praying for their neighbors, just as Huizenga had been doing with Insight. They reached out to those in the neighborhood and started building relationships. Now, years later, Huizenga says that when the leadership group sits in a meeting and looks out the window, they can say, "That's Rod's house, and that's Dave's house, and that Pam's house."



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**"It's hard to put into words how amazing God has been," says Tim Huizenga about the growth at Faith Church Highland. "It's just a tremendous blessing."**

"We want to care for our neighbors because we feel like God put us in our location for a reason," he says.

In 2013, First CRC chose to partner with another church, change their name to Faith Church, and bring on another pastor, who asked Huizenga a question that he'd been asked many times: have you ever considered working full-time in ministry?

Although Huizenga had spent 15 years working for a Vermeer Manufacturing dealer in Chicagoland, he had given most of his free time back to the church. So, he signed up for an eight-month leadership training residency before enrolling in Western Theological Seminary's M.Div. distance program. Eventually he became a full-time staff member at Faith Church, serving as an associate pastor of community and connections.

Moving from the business world into ministry was a smooth transition for Huizenga. "I love to connect with and meet new people – to help people with finding solutions," he says. "That happens both in business and in church ministry. At Vermeer, I enjoyed identifying equipment that would help people solve a specific problem. In ministry, I get to know people and hear their stories. Often, they don't know what they need, but we know it's God's peace and transformation in their life."

The church expanded to include five locations in the metropolitan Chicago area. When the lead pastor at Faith

Church in Highland, Indiana, decided to become executive pastor over all five locations, the elders asked Huizenga if he would consider being lead pastor at the Highland location. He said yes.

Each Faith Church location acts as a local church within a multisite, explains Huizenga. Every Wednesday, the pastors at all five locations meet. "We have the same passage, the same bottom line. But at the end of the day, each location preaches, teaches, and lives out the verse as the Spirit leads."

Twenty years ago, First CRC in Highland was what Huizenga describes as a "pretty homogenous group." Step into a new members class today at Faith Church Highland, and you'll find attendees of all ages, all abilities, and all backgrounds. "To have such a wide generational group wanting to join the local church is amazing," he says.

Last Easter, more than 1,300 people attended Faith Church Highland's three services. Church attendance isn't a measure of everything, but Huizenga sees it as the Holy Spirit working through those who want to be part of something bigger than themselves.

"I truly believe that the local church is the hope of the world, and Jesus calls us to love our neighbor. Sometimes we forget about our literal neighbor, the people who live closest to us. I think something special happens when you are in proximity to people and are present with them. They see how you live out what you believe and that your actions match your beliefs."

Huizenga loves the challenge of getting to know his neighbors. He and Teresa even moved into a home four blocks from the church in part so that they could invite their neighbors to the church.

"It was a joy that one neighbor across the street was recently baptized and made her profession of faith," he says. "To me, it's beautiful to be in the local neighborhood community and to see God connect people to the church to receive the eternity-changing salvation of Christ."

### SAM GUTIERREZ ('00)

Growing up in Southern California, Rev. Sam Gutierrez loved to draw; he copied comic book characters and created cartoons with colored pencils. It may not come as a surprise, then, that when he decided to attend Dordt, he majored in art. Ministry wasn't on his mind until he became the lead coordinator for GIFT, a

students participate, back when Dordt was a campus of only 1,200 students. Being involved in significant leadership opportunities as a young person was life-shaping for me."

It was scary to realize that what he'd studied for four years wasn't what he wanted to do for the rest of his life, he says. He eventually landed a role as

youth pastor for a Northern California church before sending an email to Dordt's then-campus pastor Rev. Don Draayer and asking, "Is there any way I can come back to Dordt and try campus ministry?"

Gutierrez became Dordt's resident director and associate director of campus ministries. "It was so fun," he recalls. "I kept asking myself, 'Is this my calling? Is this what I want to do with my life?' And after four years, I knew that, to do this type of work well, I needed to go to seminary."

In the 10 years after graduating with an M.Div. degree from Western Theological Seminary, he worked as a CRC campus minister at the University of British Columbia-Okanagan; as pastor of

“Sometimes we forget about our literal neighbor—the people who live closest to us. I think something special happens when you are in proximity to people and are present with them. They see how you live out what you believe and that your actions match your beliefs.”

— Rev. Tim Huizenga ('99)

student-led worship ministry experience held on Sunday nights.

"I helped create meaningful student-led worship services on campus, and a lot of students showed up; we'd have 800



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"I had very positive interactions with my Dordt professors," says Sam Gutierrez. "It was wonderful to have caring adults that I respected who wanted to pour into me."



spiritual formation at Granite Springs Church in Lincoln, California; and as pastor of community and discipleship at Alger Park Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

Gutierrez says that decade's worth of ministry experiences taught him a lot about people, the church, God, and himself. "There's a lot of angst right now in the church as well as anxiety about the decline of the church and church attendance. It's an understandable concern, because it's real. But I also learned that God is faithful, and we can trust God to keep doing his good work in the world. Sometimes our institutions will fall away, decrease, or shrink. But we should keep our eyes on God."

Gutierrez saw how factors outside of our control, like changing culture dynamics and decreasing birth rates, affect the church. He saw how easy it is to get caught up in worrying about the future.

"But we're a death and resurrection people. There's always a dying, and there's always a rising; God is with us in both the dying and rising. God can bring new life out of death," he says.

Then, the Covid-19 pandemic and other culture-shifting events struck. "Those were tough times to work as a pastor," he says. He saw a posting for an associate director position at the Eugene Peterson Center for Christian Imagination. It fit him well: his artistic gifts, temperament, experiences. "It almost felt written for me," he says. "I knew I had to throw my name in the hat, walk through the process, and see what happened."

Now, Gutierrez's daily work as associate director combines his love for the arts and ministry. He organizes conferences and events that feature artists and authors. He engages in relational work by connecting with pastors. He uses his art skills to update the website, create flyers and posters, and more.

The Peterson Center, located at Western Theological Seminary, stewards the pastoral vision and spiritual theology of minister and theologian Eugene Peterson, whose work "hummed with one basic, unwavering theme: God," writes the center.

"We want to help not just pastors but the whole church reclaim this Christian imagination that sees God at the center of all things," explains Gutierrez. "Our



"The Table" Sam Gutierrez

**"Being a creative person is part of who God created me to be. It became an issue of stewardship," says Gutierrez. "I've been given artistic gifts, and I should use them."**

churches and pastors have gotten away from that: church becomes about strategies and vision, membership and growth, influence and dynamic ministries. The church can be about a thousand other things, and we lose the center, which is God."

The Eugene Peterson Center ponders questions like, "What does it mean to be a faithful pastor when prevailing conditions resist a joyful, simple, and holy vocation?" After all, pastoring these days can be anything but simple.

"When God is not at the center of everything pastors are doing, thinking, and saying, our vision gets clouded, and we can't see reality properly," he says. "We seek control, which can lead us into disintegration and destruction. Pastors become depressed; we burn out. Some of us get divorced, and others get deposed."

Pastors don't have to make it all happen, adds Gutierrez. "We don't have to try to save the church or our denominations. We can just be human beings who point to God and point other people to God."

Dordt is where Gutierrez first discovered his interest in ministry, and it's where he developed an articulated worldview around the creation, fall, redemption,

and consummation framework.

"At Dordt, I learned I have a part to play in God's redemptive work in the world, but I'm not the main actor. I don't always know how what I do matters, so in that way there's a mystery to the significance of my own life and work. But I know God is using my small part to ultimately restore the world through the big story of redemption."

SARAH MOSS ('10)



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**Gutierrez's book *The Jesus Questions* is "a small group study that explores the questions of Jesus in the Gospels."**