

# KUYPER

College News

Celebrating 85 Years A Publication for Alumni & Friends



# 85 years of Kuyper College

**W**ere the people who founded the Reformed Bible Institute in 1939 to visit Kuyper College today, there is much they wouldn't recognize.

They'd notice that the campus location has changed, that many new technologies have emerged in the past 85 years and that students today dress a little differently than they did in the late 1930s.

But they also would quickly note that one essential thing has remained the same: Kuyper College equips women and men to serve God wherever they may be.

Jo Ann (Kuiper) Miersma (far left in the photo above) knows this well.

A 1956 graduate of what was then still known as Reformed Bible Institute, she says she was drawn to Grand Rapids

from her home in Maple Lake, Minn., because she wanted to be a missionary, and RBI came highly recommended.

"My cousin was a student, and he said it would be a good place for me to go," she recalled. "So did a pastor friend of mine."

After graduation, Miersma followed her dream to Hammond, Ind., as a lay missionary with the Christian Reformed Church in North America.

"I was a secretary in a church there, and I did local outreach," she said.

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# Christ: Our Firm Foundation

During the 15 years that our family was in the Philippines, we learned a lot about living in another culture and about ourselves.

For me, one of the most striking differences between my American culture and the Filipino culture is the value placed on being an individual versus being part of a community. A culture focused on the individual places value on self-reliance, autonomy, personal independence and achievement, whereas a culture focused on the community places value on cooperation, loyalty, harmony and interdependence. Both cultures have value.

I'm very thankful that by God's grace, my years in the Philippines taught me how to value community above self and more deeply appreciate the biblical metaphor of being "the body of Christ" that, "joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work" together (Eph. 4:16).

This year our theme is **Christ: Our Firm Foundation** based on Luke 6:46-49. As a Christian, I am called to build my

foundation on Jesus Christ, but even more, as a college community, as the body of Christ, we are called to do this together.

Community is an important concept and reality for us at Kuyper. In fact, that's why it's front-loaded in our mission statement — "As a community. . ." And, "caring community" is one of our six institutional core values.

As we focus on this year's theme, I've been thinking about the purpose of reinforcement bars (rebar) in the construction of a building as a metaphor for how a caring community can help us firm up our foundation on Jesus Christ.

Rebar is set into a concrete foundation and serves to strengthen, guard against cracks, and maintain stability and longevity of buildings. Likewise, a community founded on Jesus Christ joins together to support, encourage, hold accountable and mutually care for each other.



For 85 years Kuyper College has prepared students with a deep biblical foundation so they can live purposeful lives as they serve God and others. Celebrating this milestone in Kuyper's history and looking forward to the next 85 years, we are ready and eager to build a firm foundation for the next generation of faithful leaders.

Thank you for being part of the Kuyper community.

Grateful to serve,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Patricia".

**Dr. Patricia R. Harris**  
President



Celebrating **85** years

At Kuyper College, **we are building a firm foundation for lives of service wherever God calls**, and we invite you to partner with us as we empower the next generation of Christian leaders.

Please make a year-end gift today at [kuyper.edu/giving](https://kuyper.edu/giving) or by mailing a check to our Advancement Office. You can also contact us at [advancement@kuyper.edu](mailto:advancement@kuyper.edu) or (616) 988-3702.



## Changing Up Chapel

There's been an exciting change in the way chapel services now are conducted at Kuyper College, and for good reasons, said Curt Essenburg, Kuyper's Dean of Students and Work.

Whereas the Kuyper community previously gathered in the Vos Chapel three times per week — Tuesdays and Fridays for a traditional chapel service and Thursdays for the speaker series, Ora Et Labora — those meetings will now take place on Tuesdays and Fridays, Essenburg said.

"Fridays will keep the same format, with song, prayer and a devotion, while Ora Et Labora is becoming its own, pre recorded podcast," he noted.

A typical Tuesday, however, will change format every other week. One week will feature a speaker like Josh Shaarda, a 2000 Kuyper graduate, who has spent the last 23 years serving as a missionary alongside his wife, Mandy, first in Nigeria and then in Uganda.

In early October, he reminded the Kuyper community that we are often surprised by the people God chooses to work for His kingdom.

"God delights in using people the world has said are unqualified," said Shaarda.

This is something he knows from firsthand experience. He and Mandy work with Freedom in Christ Ministries, an organization that uses discipleship resources to spread the



Chapel Groups meet every other Tuesday and spend 20 minutes together in discussion and prayer.

way of Jesus, and they began sharing that message in prisons in Uganda eight years ago.

What began as one short talk in one prison has now grown to ministering in over 11 prisons, with even former inmates joining the movement.

"God wants to do great things through each of us," Shaarda told the audience. "The only question is, are you willing?"

On the alternate weeks will be Chapel Groups, which is also exciting to Essenburg.

"Chapel Groups are low-prep small groups, consisting of no more than 10 people, including facilitators. They meet in the dining hall every other Tuesday and spend 20 minutes tackling one question," he said. "Whether or not those are deeply theological, they will get participants thinking."

When Chapel Groups took place one sunny morning in late October, the Kuyper community considered a question that fits perfectly with the theme for the current academic year, "Christ, Our Firm Foundation."

"What have you been building your foundation on?" asked Dr. Richelle White, Professor of Youth Ministry and Director of Field Practicum and Internships, who facilitates one of the groups.

White went on to guide a discussion that contemplated the meaning of community, how we can support one another and why actually living out our Christian values can sometimes be so difficult. She closed the gathering with prayer, inviting God to help the participants build their lives with Him as their firm foundation.

This kind of discussion is exactly what Essenburg has been hoping to promote. Creating these groups, he said, was born out of Kuyper's deep commitment to prayer and community-based learning.

"It's meant to bring people together and start promoting more spiritual conversations," he said. "We've found that, sometimes, this can be a bit intimidating, especially for students, so we want to make it as accessible as possible."



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But when the church restructured and her position was eliminated, Miersma had to reevaluate what serving God looked like for her.

“I started working in the insurance industry in Chicago after that,” she said.

Miersma remembers being confused by God’s direction at first, though that gradually changed as she saw how using her financial resources could become its own kind of mission work.

“God opened my eyes throughout the years because I was able to use my salary to give toward His kingdom,” she recalled.

She and her husband, Harold, whom she was married to for 66 years before his death in June 2024, continued this pattern into their retirement years.

“God blessed us both spiritually and financially, so we were able to give to Kuyper and other worthy causes,” she said.

### Supporting Future Generations

Miersma hopes that her contributions help future generations of Kuyper students learn what she did, that a life of service can be lived anywhere.

“I think there’s always an opportunity to serve the Lord, no matter what you do or where you live,” she said.

Johannes Molenaar is one former student who has already figured this out.



“Life is not always easy. But, looking back, I can see how God has helped me.”

Johannes Molenaar

Before he came to Kuyper, then known as Reformed Bible College, in 2000, he had an entirely different life.

“It wasn’t until I was in my 30s that I felt called to the ministry. My wife, Lena, and I already had a family by then, and I worked part time as a butcher while I began studying,” he recalled.

He initially began learning classical languages at the University of Utrecht, near his home in the Netherlands, before

coming to RBC and, eventually, Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary.

Molenaar still has fond memories of this time.

“Actually, I was privileged to lead the first chapel after the name changed to Kuyper,” he said, smiling. “It was wonderful.”

Sadly, however, the good times did not last, and an issue with immigration paperwork forced the Molenaar family

## Kuyper News and Events

### Marriages

**Shelby (VanHouten) Hogan** (2014) married Benjamin Hogan on October 12, 2024.

**Kelsey (Palmquist) Kabemba** (2015) married Raphael Kabemba on July 6, 2024.

### Professional Development

**Michelle “Shelley” Eckenwiler** (2019) was officially licensed as a Wesleyan minister in April 2024.

### Service

**Naomi (Girwarnauth) Sponable** (2004) joined the Kuyper College Board of Trustees.

**Lisa (Poll) Rusticus** (2009) joined the team at MBK Corporate Promotions as an Inside Sales Account Manager (MBK works with Kuyper on the annual International Golf Scramble).

**Lisa (Ritzema) VanLonkhuyzen** (2011) accepted a call to be the pastor of Covenant Community Church in Muskegon, Michigan.

**Teresa (Leggett) Janzen** (2016) joined Fellowship of Christian Farmers International as Director of Marketing and Communications.

to return home in 2008. This was frustrating at first, he says, until God opened up new opportunities for him.

“Within three months, we were back in the Netherlands, and I took a job as a Bible teacher at a nearby Christian college. Now, I also preach and teach catechism classes at various churches in the Netherlands and Belgium,” he said.

Part of his current role involves leading students on international mission trips, and he enjoys helping them see how God is at work all over the world.

“They get to see how other people in the world live, often in much worse situations than theirs. It’s quite an enormous experience, and they take it with them,” he said.

### Called, Equipped Alumni

Reflecting on his sometimes-tumultuous journey, Molenaar highlighted God’s presence along the way, calling and equipping him wherever he was.

“Life is not always easy,” he emphasized. “But, looking back, I can see how God has helped me.”

The same is true for Rachael (Smith) Austin. When she thinks about being called and equipped on her journey to chaplaincy, she can’t help but mention the part Kuyper played.

Austin, who graduated in 2014 and now works as a chaplain in a healthcare



**Rachael (Smith) Austin**

setting, recalled an overnight campus visit as a high school student.

“I stayed with two really lovely girls, and there was this moment when the whole dorm floor joined in prayer and worship,” she said. “I didn’t have a solid group of Christian friends in high school, so that really stood out. I knew right then that Kuyper was the place for me.”

Austin added that the relationships she formed with her professors also had a lasting impact on her. One recognized her writing abilities, while the other encouraged her to attend graduate school in the future.

“There’s something powerful about someone like that looking you in the eye and telling you you’re good at something,” she added, smiling. “It was really the first time I experienced that.”

Years later, as she processed the death of her twin brother, her professors’ encouragement came back to her in a big way.

“I wanted to be able to walk alongside other people in their hardships the way my therapist walked alongside me. I remembered those professors, and I decided to enroll in seminary and become a chaplain,” she said.

She was ordained as a minister in the Reformed Church in America and took what she describes as her dream job in 2023, which she says would likely not have been possible without her time at Kuyper.

“I don’t think I would’ve had as much confidence in my calling, had I not heard the things I did from those professors,” she said.

Thousands of students like Austin, Molenaar and Miersma have passed through Kuyper’s doors over the past 85 years. No matter where they go after they leave, they do so filled with knowledge of God and His Word, ready to serve Him anywhere and everywhere.

And, God willing, Kuyper will continue to make this possible for the next 85 years and beyond.



**Jon Versluis** (2017) joined Kuyper College as a Financial Aid Specialist.

**Alyssa (Baar) Patton** (2018) was promoted to Student Development Specialist with the Kuyper College Student Development Office.

**Daniel Przybylski** (2019) joined Kuyper College as an adjunct professor teaching Introduction to Chaplaincy.

**Lindsey (DeShetler) de Boo** (2021) shared her story of attending Kuyper College, of serving gun violence victims in Chicago and of bringing her social work skills to Washington D.C., as a Capital City Fellow.

### In Memory Of

**Elisabeth “Bizzy” Feekes** (2019) passed away unexpectedly on July 10, 2024. She graduated with a major in Intercultural Studies and a minor in



Scan code for full obituary

Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL). In 2024, she graduated from Seattle Pacific Seminary with a Master’s of Theology in Reconciliation and Intercultural Studies. She was a writer and an artist and was proud to be a member of the Winnebago Tribe of Nebraska. She considered herself a restorative justice advocate and an educator. Our condolences to all who knew and loved her, including her husband of six years, Geoff Hulsether.

# Advancing Kuyper

As a kid I always had a close relationship with my Grandpa Olthof. He lived in another state where he was a farmer and a trucker, the latter mainly so he could get his produce to market.



Jim Steenberg  
Chief Advancement Officer

He had suffered the normal pains life throws at most of us but also had lost one of his arms from a severe gunshot wound after being mugged! Grandpa Olthof was a man of stories, and if you spent any amount of time with him, as I loved to do as a young boy, he would tell those stories. Grandpa Olthof was so wise in so many ways and believed strongly that people could choose sides.

He would say, “Jim, you are either on the right side of the fence or the wrong side of the fence. And you have to choose which side you will be on in this life.”

For him, the right side of the fence was a life in Jesus Christ, always building a firmer foundation steeped in prayer, work and service to God. I think about this side of the fence when I think about the value of Kuyper College.

I believe that this community is building a strong foundation in the lives of the students we serve day in and day out. Your gifts, large and small, are being put to good use.

They are providing Bibles for our students. They are providing athletic opportunities where our student-athletes learn teamwork and cooperation. They are providing a strong Christian curriculum and professors who are building a firm foundation in our students’ lives. They are providing numerous vocational opportunities through KuyperWorks.

Your gifts are transformational in the lives of our students. More than half of all funding for our College comes through the generosity of our financial supporters. Your dollars daily are moving this community forward and keeping us strong.

Now, as we near the end of 2024 and you are considering your year-end giving, please prayerfully consider a generous gift to the ministry of Kuyper College.

# In My Words

## INVESTING IN STUDENTS’ LIVES

For over 25 years, I’ve had the joy of teaching in Christian educational settings, and every time I walk into a classroom at Kuyper College, I’m reminded of why this work is so meaningful to me.

In my high school teaching at Phil-Mont Christian Academy and my work as a professor at Covenant Seminary, The King’s College and now Kuyper, I have always valued investing in my students’ lives, both inside and outside the classroom.



Anthony Bradley  
Research Professor  
of Interdisciplinary  
and Theological Studies

This investment is what makes Kuyper College such a special place.

Before my teaching career began, I earned my degree at Clemson University, where I developed a deep appreciation for rigorous learning and the importance of community. I later studied at Westminster Theological Seminary, which further shaped my understanding of how faith and education should be integrated.

My work in youth ministry also gave me a unique perspective on the challenges young people face, which has informed how I engage with students in the classroom today. Throughout my own teaching journey, I have always enjoyed walking alongside students as they navigate their personal and academic journeys.

At Kuyper College, I continue this journey, helping students engage with the world while remaining deeply rooted in their Christian faith. The College’s mission to form lifelong learners for purposeful lives of work and service to God and neighbor perfectly reflects what I see in the story of Daniel.

In Daniel 1, young men are selected for their wisdom and character, yet they remain faithful to God while immersed in a foreign culture. Similarly, Kuyper students are encouraged to excel academically and spiritually while staying faithful to God’s call on their lives.

One of the most rewarding aspects of teaching at Kuyper is the chance to engage with students outside the classroom. At each one of my educational stops, including Kuyper, the relationships I’ve built with students have been central to my calling as an educator. Whether it’s mentoring, sharing meals, or discussing their future aspirations, these connections are where the real growth happens. This personal engagement is what sets Kuyper College apart and what makes my role so fulfilling.

Kuyper College fosters a community where students are not only equipped for academic success but also prepared to serve the church and the world with wisdom, integrity and purpose. Like Daniel, these students are being formed to use their gifts for the greater good, and I am honored to walk alongside them in that journey. It’s a privilege to serve in this transformative work. What an honor!

*“In My Words” is a feature of the Kuyper College News highlighting first-person stories by Kuyper College faculty and staff.*

# Kuyper New Home of *Divine Servant* Statue

Kuyper College is now home to the *Divine Servant* statue, something Jim Steenbergen is excited about.

“Kuyper College has always strongly emphasized fostering a sense of community and Christian hospitality,” said Steenbergen, Kuyper’s Chief Advancement Officer. “The newest member of our community, the *Divine Servant*, is a testament to this sense of hospitality.”

The *Divine Servant* is the first iteration of the work by artist Max Greiner, who used early Christian artwork to create a life-size bronze cast depicting Jesus washing His disciple Peter’s feet, based on the story found in John 13.

It was gifted to the College by the Zondervan Publishing Company, an imprint of HarperCollins Christian Publishing, in 2023, after being housed in the Zondervan offices for many years.

The Kuyper community officially welcomed the statue to campus in late September with a dedication service attended by representatives from Zondervan and HarperCollins, Kuyper alumni, students and staff, as well as other friends of the College.

## On Bended Knee

In her opening remarks at the event, President Patricia Harris said that the *Divine Servant* symbolizes the goal of education at Kuyper.

“The message of the statue really reflects our mission as a college, which is to live purposeful lives of work and service to God and neighbor,” she said.

Dr. Dan Kroeze, Professor of Biblical Studies at Kuyper, echoed this sentiment



(L-R): Mark Schoenwald, President and CEO, HarperCollins Christian Publishing; Dr. Patricia Harris, President, Kuyper College; Doug Lockhart, Senior Vice President Marketing and New Initiatives, HarperCollins Christian Publishing; Bernard (Bud) D. Zondervan III, retired Corporate Director of Operations/Transportation, HarperCollins

**“The message of the statue really reflects our mission as a college, which is to live purposeful lives of work and service to God and neighbor.”**

in a meditation on John 13. This story, reflected in the statue, reminds all of us that the way of Jesus transforms not through power, but through service, he emphasized.

“Jesus is bending a knee and humbling Himself,” he said. “And we here at Kuyper College have been doing just that for 85 years.”

Harris noted that being chosen by Zondervan as the *Divine Servant*’s new home represents a relationship that goes back many decades.

“Our partnership goes back 85 years to when Mr. Pat Zondervan, co-founder of Zondervan, was a founding board member of this institution,” Harris said. “And he went on to provide many contributions to us — from special anniversary Bibles to funding for the construction of our Zondervan Library and even a repository of one copy of everything that Zondervan has ever published.”

## A Space for Rest, Contemplation

Nestled into a shady corner of the courtyard outside the Vos Chapel, the statue is flanked by two concrete benches and surrounded with flowers, providing a space for rest and contemplation.

In choosing a place for the *Divine Servant* to reside, Steenbergen said the hope was to create a space that reflects the statue’s message by serving all those who visit it.

“Giving students spaces to feel welcome, supported and part of a larger Christian family is crucial to their spiritual and academic development,” he said.

And he hopes that this oasis will continue to nurture those who visit it for many years to come.

“With its serene beauty, the *Divine Servant* alcove provides a spot for people to gather and feel a part of the community, inspiring them in their journey,” Steenbergen said.



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## STUDENTS TO WATCH

### Jordyn Carlson

After high school I went to Grand Rapids Community College, graduated from there in 2023 and then transferred to Kuyper. I had a few friends who had attended Kuyper, and they spoke very highly of it. I also saw the opportunities that Kuyper would be able to provide, the quality education that I could receive, and the community I could grow with.

God played a big role in solidifying the decision to come to Kuyper. I spent a copious amount of time in prayer, asking God to reveal Himself, what my calling was, and what I was supposed to do with my life. God definitely brought me to Kuyper through many different people affirming this decision, finances working out, and so many significant signs pointing toward Kuyper.

Growing up in a single-parent household, I think you learn to mature a lot earlier than your peers, and as the oldest, I naturally took on a parental role to assist my strong and amazing social worker mother. My family has always incorporated serving others into our lives, and growing up, I was blessed to have many opportunities all because of how God has worked through my life. My family is extremely supportive of one another, and we celebrate one another's wins.

I also see this at Kuyper. I didn't expect to love learning as much as I do right now, and a big part of that is due to my professors. Each one of them has been extremely passionate about what they're teaching, which in turn inspires me to be passionate as well. I appreciate their willingness to work with students and to make classes educational and enjoyable. I also appreciate how they have encouraged my call to ministry and empowered me

to pursue my passion. I have had the blessing and privilege of doing my practicums and an independent study alongside Dr. Richelle White. Learning from her has been such a great opportunity. Her ability to cultivate meaningful relationships centered around Christ is inspiring and encouraging to me to see. I always look forward to my meetings and classes with her.

The friendships that I have formed at Kuyper have also exceeded my expectations. And, most importantly, I expected that Kuyper would help me grow in my faith, and it has done more than that. My relationship with Christ is stronger than ever. I think part of the reason for that is these last two years, I have had the blessing and opportunity to be on the Spiritual Life (SPiL) team at Kuyper as my KuyperWorks job. I have loved being part of this team. We are continuously trying to add new opportunities for spiritual growth at Kuyper, including our new style of chapel — our Chapel Groups.

I love Kuyper's size and how it is such a close-knit community that enjoys supporting each other and celebrating one another. The small class sizes make Kuyper a perfect place to study because the professors are able to dedicate so much of their time to helping students one-on-one. Kuyper is personal, and the people are intentional.



CLASS **2025**  
HOME **Grand Rapids**  
MAJOR **Ministry Leadership**