Thank you for this opportunity to offer a brief response. I was asked to respond to Dr. Stronks’ lecture with a focus on the following question:

If there were one habit, disposition, practice, or virtue that you would like Calvin College to cultivate in the next decade, in order to prepare its graduates better to offer their hearts and lives to God eagerly and earnestly, what would that be?

If I have to choose one, I would like the Calvin community to learn to cultivate what I call a missional disposition. Before I say more about what I mean by a missional disposition, let me follow Dr. Stronks’ good example. In developing a theology of citizenship, she rightly begins with who God is. But, to Dr. Stronks’ theological foundation and frameworks, I would suggest adding a critical missing piece about who God is: the missional nature of God, because God is the God who is on a mission. God’s will for justice, shalom, and care for the poor is never independent from God’s mission of reconciling all things in Christ Jesus.

Another way of putting this is to balance Dr. Stronk’s theology of citizenship with a theology of ambassadorship. We are not only to be good global citizens, but as Christians, we are first and foremost citizens of God’s kingdom, and hence, ambassadors of God’s reconciliation to the citizens of this world’s kingdoms. Working for the common good and for human flourishing is important, good, and biblical. But again, without that missio Dei perspective, the common good and human flourishing can become ends in themselves, and potentially become humanistic idols. These are not ultimate goals in life. Human flourishing and the common good are the results of the shalom of God’s kingdom being realized. Because God is king, and God’s ways are made real – whether acknowledged as so, or through common grace done by non-Christians – human flourishing and the common good are the results.

So, cultivating a missional disposition in our students means, first of all, to help all graduates recognize themselves as disciples of Jesus sent into the world as ambassadors of God’s love and peace, even as they are citizens of the world. This is an issue of cultivating a clear sense of identity.

I am taking my cues from the Scripture passage Luke 10. Here, Jesus sends out seventy-two of his disciples, a group of disciples similar to the more than 1,000 graduates Calvin sends out each year into the towns and villages of the pluralist, global world including gay and Muslim communities. And this is what he says, “Go! I am sending you out like lambs among wolves…When you enter a house, first say, “Peace (Shalom) to this house.” If someone who promotes peace is there, your peace will rest on them; if not, it will return to you.” The identity of every disciple of Jesus, according to this passage, is missional, in the sense of being sent as a messenger or an agent of shalom, one whose core calling is to announce, re-present, and embody the peace that Jesus brings. It is sort of like the role of an ambassador, someone who represents someone else, in this case, Jesus who is the Prince of peace.
Now, what does this mean concretely? Let me suggest one practice Calvin can cultivate in our graduates. One missional practice is simply entering into a community with the “other,” or, becoming and welcoming the “other” in the name of Christ.

Again, in Luke 10, after Jesus instructs his disciples to announce shalom, he does NOT say, “then, attract other Christians, form a building committee to buy a building, start a worship service, and then, form small groups to do a book study on building an authentic Christian community by singing ‘Jesus is my boyfriend’ songs until your hearts are warmed up...”. No, Jesus says (I want you to notice the actions verbs here. They are not churchy/Christianized activities, but simple human activities), “Stay in that house, eating and drinking whatever they give you, for the worker deserves his wages. Do not move around from house to house (in other words, settle in, dwell, “pitch your tent” there in the community you are sent). When you enter a town and are welcomed, eat what is set before you.” What are the action verbs? Enter, eat, drink, don’t move around, and speak. You don’t need a training in theology or evangelism to do any of that, right? Any ordinary person can do that. This is discipleship for ordinary people, like the seventy in Luke 10, like our Calvin students, like you and me. God’s people being the church in the public spaces of households, neighborhoods and towns, interacting and sitting at a table with the other.

This is a concrete social practice: concrete, as opposed to intellectual/ideal, and social, as opposed to “spiritual/inner/affective.” This is about entering and embracing the place, the physical local places—neighborhoods—we are sent as Jesus’ missionary people. And as we enter and come into contact with all kinds of neighbors and contacts, not just enter the space, but enter into a community with the people you find there, usually people with different values, beliefs, and social practices. This involves the re-socializing of Christians into certain kinds of practices and habits of Christian life.

Author and missiologist Alan Roxburgh offers a helpful commentary on the historical-social background of Luke 10:

When the seventy in Luke 10 were told to practice speaking shalom in the households and towns they entered, it was the practical announcement of an alternative story that stood in contra-distinction to the PAX of that other empire that promised economic, political and social peace to all who lived under the requirements (practices) of that PAX. The speaking of shalom was the announcement of practices cutting across the claims of PAX. Sitting at a table, joining the social and economic life of the household with the open hands of the stranger were practices radically counter to the regnant Pax of that empire. (Roxburgh, “Practices of Christian Life,” accessed on 10/14/12, http://themissionalnetwork.com/index.php/practices-of-christian-life-forming-and-performing-a-culture)

This kind of radical social practices of first Christians created a parallel culture, an alternative culture of a different world. Entering a community with the other meant they had to welcome strangers into the Christian community, which is a hallmark of a genuine Christian hospitality. Without personal self-sacrifice, dying to self, genuine hospitality is not possible.

Today many Christian communities I know struggle with this practice of hospitality to those who are very “different” than us in their religious beliefs and social practices. Most of us know how to welcome a friend or a family member—people who are like us, or people we like to hang out with. But, what Jesus is asking his disciples in Luke 10 goes a step further.
His disciples are to enter into the community of the “other” to be welcomed by them as strangers in their midst. It’s going even farther than making ourselves available to the other. It also involves making ourselves vulnerable. This is where we become the “other.” For that, we need a lot of courage.

Jesus’ seventy disciples, in Luke 10, are told to eat and drink what is set before them by their host, because they were told earlier in verse 3 not to “take a purse or bag or sandals.” In other words, they were not to depend on their own resources, but to depend on their hosts. This is a call to choose to become like strangers and receive hospitality from the other. It is similar to what Miroslav Volf experienced in Serbia as the only Christian student in a school where everyone else was an atheist or hostile to religious belief. He asked, “As Christians, who do we need to be to live in harmony with others?” Or it’s similar for any one of us to enter into a Muslim community and be known as a Christian, and willingly to enter into relationships—getting to know them and be known to them as a Christian.

If we succeed in cultivating a deep, strong missional disposition in our graduates, they will learn to have a willingness and courage to enter into communities different than ours like that of gay and Muslim people as our neighbors, not first of all to win them over to our side. But to actually listen to people without making them objects of our ends. It’s going to mean a readiness to enter into dialogue with the other, seeking to listen to their stories and conversations (that’s what you do around a meal table) in a genuinely human engagement. That way, our missional practice is not another imperialistic, triumphalist coercion, but a genuine desire to get to know and love them as agents of God’s shalom, and leaving the Holy Spirit to transform their hearts. This is one of the practical ways we can help our graduates live out their Christian faith as a way of life everywhere they live, and not treat it as a private matter and confined to church life.

So, cultivating a missional practice involves cultivating Christian social practices of hospitality, availability, and vulnerability. One quick example: The first Christians of the early church were a prime example of people who lived out this kind of missional identity and practice. They embraced “the other” into their community by practicing radical hospitality, availability and vulnerability. They cared for the Roman widows and orphans, the marginalized that even the Roman society abandoned. They did that because that’s what they experienced in the person of Jesus Christ. And so, those first Christians were socialized into an alternative way of life that formed a parallel, alternative culture, a world, in the name of the One revealed in Jesus Christ.

Calvin College’s long standing mission of cultivating a Christian thinking mind is second to none. In the next decade, if Calvin College can find all kinds of creative, innovative, concrete ways to educate and prepare our graduates by cultivating a missional disposition, this will help them to navigate our complex, global, pluralist worlds with the particularity and distinctiveness of Christian convictions and actions without falling into relativism or vague spirituality. Calvin College, by embracing these missional dispositions and practices, will enable its graduates to become both citizens and ambassadors who represent God’s love and peace by becoming and welcoming the other through radical hospitality, availability and vulnerability.

Thank you.