I am a novice gardener. To learn more about what to plant, when to plant, and how to help plants grow, I have talked with experts and have acquired several books by master gardeners. When it comes to planting or transplanting bushes or small trees, the experts’ advice is consistent: take the time to rehydrate the roots by soaking them in water, cut off all damaged or broken roots, and make sure to disentangle and spread out the healthy roots before positioning the plant in the soil. The roots can then anchor the plant and provide nutrition as it grows, even in times of climate stress or drought. If the bush or tree comes in its own pot, the advice includes mixing some of the soil from the original container together with some of the soil from the hole in which the bush or tree will be planted, so that the plant will acclimatize more easily. Make sure to water the bush or plant regularly, and apply fertilizer to help it grow. Plants with an underdeveloped or damaged root system fail to thrive and are prone to collapse in stormy weather.

This gardening advice works well when we consider the roots of the Reformed tradition in the context of the contemporary global Reformed churches. Which of the roots of the Reformed tradition have become withered and can safely be cut off? Which ones can be successfully rehydrated? Which ones are still very much alive and can anchor and nourish Reformed churches worldwide? How do we disentangle those roots which are specific to the Reformed tradition, and how do we foster them so that they can help to strengthen the bond between Reformed churches worldwide? This essay will address these questions by highlighting a number of the common foundations of Reformed communities from the sixteenth century through today. I will argue that greater attention given
to these roots will both strengthen individual congregations and develop stronger connections between Reformed churches across the continents.

At the outset, we must be clear that a number of Reformed beliefs are held in common with the wider body of Christians around the world. Roots such as belief in the Trinity; in the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ; and in his nature as both fully human and fully divine are common to a wide array of Christian denominations and are not unique to the Reformed tradition. These beliefs and teachings are vital to Christian witness and are articulated in the ancient creeds of the church, including the Apostles’ Creed and the Nicene Creed. The Reformed church from the time of the Reformation onward has accepted the creeds as faithful articulations of the Christian faith, but the teachings presented in these statements of faith are not Reformed distinctives within broader Christianity, since these creeds are also accepted and taught in other Christian church circles, including the Lutheran and Roman Catholic ones.

For the roots specific to the Reformed tradition, we need to turn to sixteenth-century Europe, where the Reformation began. Although most summary accounts of the Reformed tradition focus on John Calvin (1509–1564), the reality, as is usually the case, is more complicated. Calvin’s predecessors and mentors in the Reformed faith included leading pastors and theologians in the Swiss cities of Zurich, Berne, and Basel, and in the German city of Strasbourg. Among the most important early Reformed leaders were Huldrych Zwingli (1484–1531), who led the Reformation in Zurich, and his successor Heinrich Bullinger (1504–1575), whose writings were widely translated and extremely influential, especially in England. Another important mentor for John Calvin was the Strasbourg Reformer Martin Bucer (1491–1551), who taught Calvin a great deal about worship and how to lead a church during the latter’s three-year period in Strasbourg, from 1538 to 1541. Thus Calvin did not articulate his theological insights in a vacuum, but rather in dialogue with other French, Dutch, Swiss, German, Scottish, and even Italian, Polish, and Hungarian Reformers, and in opposition to the views of other confessional groups at the time. Indeed, because the Reformation was a time of turmoil and division in the European Christian church, Calvin, Zwingli, Bullinger, and other Reformed theologians often used Reformed doctrine polemically, to underscore the distinctions between the Reformed positions and those held by Roman Catholics, Lutherans, or Anabaptists. By the seventeenth century, Reformed Christians even fought among themselves, disagreeing over predestination in particular. Although these debates did help to clarify what it was that Reformed Christians were meant to believe, I want to focus my contribution on other key facets of Reformed identity, ones that generally have received less attention than doctrinal aspects but have grown into equally important roots of the Reformed tradition. These facets deal primarily with how Reformed Christians worshiped and ran their churches.

One of the biggest changes at the Reformation was in the role of the clergy. Although a number of Catholic clergy did gain access to higher education, university-level training for parish priests was the exception rather than the rule in the pre-Reformation Catholic church. Among the Reformed, however, one of the hallmarks of a truly Reformed church was to have a pastor who had benefitted from at least some degree of advanced study, especially in the ancient biblical languages and in scriptural exegesis. Thus the first major root of the Reformed tradition is the focus on education and training, especially for the clergy. Candidates for ministry were examined not only on their preaching abilities and their morals, but also on their academic record. By the seventeenth century, the Reformed expectation was that all pastors, with very few exceptions, would have spent at least a few years at a university or academy and would provide proof of their academic qualifications for ministry. Today, churches and denominational leaders in many countries are taking another look at seminary training for pastors, and some question whether future pastors really need such expensive and time-consuming education. Isn’t it enough to be led by the Spirit? The sixteenth-century Reformers would disagree: to them such an attitude risked exposing congregations to the danger of ill-prepared, unorthodox, and possibly delusional clergy. However, they did offer some very flexible and innovative ways to provide access to higher education for pastors, especially for those already at work in parishes. It is worth knowing that the sixteenth-century Reformers beginning with Zwingli in Zurich placed such an emphasis on advanced education for pastors that they pioneered continuing education sessions for pastors, focusing on scriptural exegesis under the leadership of experienced and trained clergy. In Zurich, these sessions took place daily and featured careful analysis of the Hebrew and Greek text, followed by a sermon in the language of the people, given by each of the pastors in turn. The Genevan congégaions and the later Puritan conventicles fulfilled many of the same objectives.

This emphasis on continuing education for pastors is a root that has steadied and nourished the Reformed church over centuries. The international attention given to education in a Christian context was reflected in the panel "Higher Education: International Cooperation" at the "Reformed Mission in an Age of World Christianity" conference. Presenters emphasized the importance of a close connection between the church and insti-
The focus on education for clergy can be of great value to today’s Reformed churches, as this type of training can be offered in a number of ways, from short residential courses to online offerings. The important point is to ensure that the education provided is both high quality and useful.

During the Reformation era, the aim of this training, whether undertaken prior to or during a pastor’s career, was to prepare pastors to interpret the Bible faithfully to congregations in their sermons. Thus the second key root of the Reformed tradition to highlight is this emphasis on the centrality of Scripture and its exposition through sermons. In fact, the focus on preaching was so strong that French-speaking Reformed Christians called going to church “going to sermon,” just as Catholics would say “going to Mass.” One part of the worship service had given its name to the whole. Once again, the Reformers of Zurich pioneered the early Reformed practice of preaching through a given book of the Bible from start to finish in a sequence of consecutive sermons, rather than jumping around from text to text or even (a very non-Reformed practice!) introducing texts from extra-Biblical sources such as the lives of the saints. The evidence from surviving sermons suggests that books of the Old Testament were as likely to be selected as those from the New Testament. It is fair to say that the practice of preaching straight through a given book gave the pastors little flexibility in matching texts to circumstances and audience. One pastor in the Genevan countryside in the 1560s, however, did recommend to his successor that he avoid difficult or complicated texts, especially the letters of Paul, because such sermons only confused congregational members. The Reformed focus on orienting sermons around the biblical text rather than the other way around is a helpful reminder to the contemporary church about the centrality of the Bible in preaching. This root is also one worth disentangling and fertilizing to strengthen the witness of the Reformed church worldwide.

Reformed worshipers in sixteenth-century congregations thus heard a great deal of the Bible read and expounded in sermons. Yet worship services also provided another way for the faithful to internalize biblical texts, through song. Beginning during his years in Strasbourg, Calvin started having congregations sing the psalms in metrical (rhymed) settings. Psalm singing became the hallmark of Reformed worship in many European countries, including France, the Netherlands, and Hungary, and the practice also became rooted around the world as Reformed Christians traveled to other continents. For instance, in his presentation at this conference, Yudha Thianto discussed the impact of the Genevan Psalter on the island of Java beginning in the seventeenth century. He showed participants how the Genevan melodies were adapted for use in Malay, the local language. The composers of the Genevan psalm settings, Louis Bourgeois and others, prepared fairly simple melodies within a manageable range of notes, to facilitate unison congregational singing. Some of the melodies have survived the test of time, including the Old Hundredth (most commonly sung in English as “All People That on Earth Do Dwell” or “Praise God from Whom All Blessings Flow”). Setting the words of the Psalms and other biblical texts to music made them easier to learn and remember. Today, Reformed churches around the world have a range of texts and music to choose from, including music by local composers. Some may well wonder whether the root of psalm singing in the Genevan tradition is worth preserving, given that the music is increasingly old-fashioned to modern ears and that its Western origins do not fit well in other global contexts. Yet rather than debating the merits or flaws of specific melodies and musical styles, Reformed churches might well want to retain the best of the Reformed tradition in this regard, namely, setting biblical texts to melodies that can easily be sung and retained by congregations, to allow for memorization and meditation on key passages of God’s Word. Blending indigenous music traditions with the principle of setting biblical texts to music is a very effective way to ensure that this root of the Reformed tradition will not only survive but flourish for many years to come.

Congregational psalm singing made laypeople worship leaders in their own right, not simply in response to the chanting of the clergy. Their active participation points to another important root of the Reformed tradition, namely, the crucial role of laypeople in the worship and polity of the church. Indeed, the role given to lay leaders in the early modern Reformed church was a key distinctive compared to Roman Catholic and Lutheran practice at the time. One of Calvin’s key decisions was to restore pastors, teachers, elders, and deacons. Elders and deacons in particular quickly began to play a prominent role in church leadership. In times of persecution, as in France in the 1550s and 1560s, Reformed Christians could come together to create a church, even without a pastor. Services led by lay members could include prayers, psalm singing, and the reading of sermons. The only part such congregations could not do was administer the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper. Calvin made a distinction between these “planted churches” and “established churches,” that is, to say, ones that had an ordained pastor, but both gatherings counted as churches. By vesting authority and leadership in laymen (women were not eligible to serve as elders or deacons), Calvin and his colleagues made it possible to establish networks of worshiping communities even...
before sufficient numbers of ordained pastors could be found to lead them. These “planted churches” were also less susceptible to collapse in times of persecution, since they did not depend solely on a single leading figure whose arrest could otherwise throw the community into disarray.

Lay leadership was also very much in evidence in the day-to-day running of church affairs. Apart from Geneva, where all the city clergy met together as a group (known as the Company of Pastors), the more common model was for individual congregations to be overseen by a council made up of one or sometimes two pastors and many elders (and sometimes the deacons as well). In these councils, the plurality of votes was in the hands of the elders, though the pastor’s prestige and influence could still carry a lot of weight. Together, the members of the church council oversaw worship as well as the morals and beliefs of the congregation. The deacons were responsible for the collection of offerings and assistance to the poor, the ill, and the aged. In some Reformed areas, deacons and elders held their offices for a given length of time, whereas elsewhere (particularly in Scotland) the office of elder was considered permanent.

This system of shared leadership continued at each level of the church: both pastors and elders were delegates to regional assemblies and to national synods. In theory, therefore, the voices of both clergy and laity were represented at each level. In practice, however, pastors were more likely to be able to travel to these larger meetings than elders, who could not readily absent themselves from their employment. Although the representative system did not work perfectly, it did take a different approach to church governance than the Lutheran and Catholic models, which tended to vest authority in a chain of hierarchical clergy.

The question of authority in the church continues to be a pressing one today. Working through committees and representative bodies, whether at the local, regional, or national level, can be a painstaking and frustrating process, at times making the idea of a single person in charge (perhaps with a few advisors) an attractive alternative. Yet the rich heritage of shared church governance in the Reformed tradition is a root that is well worth preserving, though perhaps with careful pruning to avoid excessive bureaucracy and stagnation. By having a wider body of people directly involved in decision making, the church gains more committed members. Furthermore, setting up representative bodies of clergy and laypeople at each level limits excessive congregationalism and allows for mutual oversight.

This emphasis on mutual oversight leads to the last of the roots of the Reformed tradition that I will address—namely, the Reformed focus on church discipline. The Reformed churches in the sixteenth century were not in agreement about the appropriate body to oversee the beliefs and behaviors of congregational members. By and large the Swiss churches followed the Zurich model, where such oversight was carried out by the government, not by the church. In Geneva, however, after a significant period of struggle, Calvin and his fellow pastors established that the church, through a consistory of pastors and elders, should be the one to handle this oversight. In Geneva, the consistory met weekly, and dealt with cases ranging from nonattendance at worship to neighbor and family quarrels, and from broken engagements to family violence. The aim of the consistory was not to be a “Big Brother” agency but rather to ensure that the Genevans’ allegiance to their Reformed faith was not merely a matter of words, but of deeds as well. In other words, the Genevan authorities wanted to see congregation members’ behavior match their faith commitments. The consistory’s main tool in working to amend Genevans’ behavior was to administer a verbal reprimand. If this strategy did not succeed, the consistory could bar people from receiving the Lord’s Supper until they made amends. This step was not intended to be punitive but rather an inducement to have people mend their ways. Indeed, this approach to church discipline was tied to the importance of the sacraments. The Lord’s Supper was an expression of the bonds between God and the covenant community. Those who were not in a right relationship with God or with their neighbor damaged those bonds and hence were not meant to partake in the Lord’s Supper until the fractured relationships had been restored. In the same way, those suspended from the Lord’s Supper pending their reconciliation were also forbidden from presenting children for baptism, whether as parents or as godparents, until the matter had been resolved. This strong emphasis on the importance of communal worship and covenantal relationships was also highlighted by Richard Mouw in his plenary address at the conference. Mouw highlighted the importance of worshipping together as Reformed Christians, for, as he noted, “we need a renewed emphasis in the Reformed community on the importance of the worshipping life of the church as the central arena in which Christ makes the reality of his ‘holding together’ ministry known to us.” It is because of the importance given to the worshipping community that the Reformed church leaders looked to church discipline as a healthy way to ensure accountability among members.

Because the Reformed church in Geneva was in essence a state church, the consistory could also send serious cases on to the city government for more forceful action, including fines, imprisonment, or banishment. The system of consistorial discipline spread from Geneva to other Reformed areas, including Scotland, France, and the Netherlands. In Catholic France,
where Reformed Christians were in the minority, consistories often could not turn to government authorities for enforcement assistance. In such instances, the discipline of the consistory had to rely more on communal pressure to get people to amend their behavior. Thus the root of consistorial discipline was grounded in a range of soils, depending on the socio-political context of the various Reformed communities across Europe at the time. Yet a commitment to the exercise of church discipline remained a hallmark of Reformed churches up until the twentieth century.

Today, such an approach to church discipline strikes many as heavy-handed, intrusive, and oppressive. In areas in which a wide range of denominations are available, enforcing such a system would be challenging, since a person under censure could simply move to another denomination. Generally speaking, especially in the Western Hemisphere, people value individual autonomy and privacy and may well feel that church discipline as set up by Calvin and his colleagues is one root that is well worth cutting off. Clearly, abuses of church discipline could and did occur; when consistories were quicker to adopt the narrow perspective of the Pharisees rather than genuine Christian compassion and understanding. Yet there is a sense in which some aspects of church discipline are worth retaining, perhaps in a new form, such as accountability groups or in mentoring relationships. Jettisoning any kind of accountability for church members can simply aggravate the disconnect in some believers’ minds between what they profess in church on Sundays and their behavior the rest of the week.

Thus the main roots of the Reformed tradition presented in this contribution include an emphasis on education, especially for pastors; a focus on the Bible in preaching and in worship, especially in congregational singing; a strong role for lay people in church governance; and a focus on congregational accountability in living lives worthy of one’s calling. Many accounts of the Reformed tradition leave these roots aside in favor of a focus on theological distinctives. Yet if rehydrated by renewed attention, and planted in soils that blend the best of the historic Reformed tradition with locally supported practices, these practical roots can help anchor and feed the Reformed churches in today’s world. It is my hope that further reflection on these roots and on ways to enhance the best elements of the Reformed tradition will strengthen the worldwide church and enable it to flourish.