

NEWS

No New Children's Curriculum in Development

If you lead a Coffee Break women's ministry or a small group Bible study in your church and you're looking for new adult Bible study materials, there's new material on the way. But if you're on your church's education or faith formation committee, don't hold your breath waiting for new children's curriculum to be published by the Christian Reformed Church. With nothing

Some of those functions have been picked up. For example, new adult Bible study materials are being produced by Christian Reformed Home Missions. The popular *Discover Your Bible* series will have studies on Isaiah and Nehemiah available by Fall 2015 in both traditional and downloadable formats. Studies on Genesis, Luke, Ephesians, Christmas, Easter, and Fruit of the Spirit have been revised and made available in a printable format.

The newly formed Worship Ministries recently produced a

Karen De Boer is a curriculum editor who moved from Faith Alive to Faith Formation Ministries. "Curriculum editorial staff who were still working at the time were deeply concerned about how it would be possible to continue to produce curriculum resources for churches in the future," she said. "We watched [Synod 2013] online from the edge of our seats—hoping, praying, waiting for someone to stand up and say, 'But what about the children? How will we provide resources that help congregations partner with families to nurture the faith of our children?' But no one did."

As De Boer said, "Theology matters, whether you're 3 or 103. How God's story is told with children matters."

The CRC has historically placed a very high value on good Reformed materials for church education that teach God's story from a redemptive-historical perspective as opposed to a moralistic approach. As far back as 1890, provision of appropriate materials for church education was a regular topic of synod discussion. In the 1800s and early 1900s, Sunday school lessons were published in *The Banner* or earlier in the Dutch-language *De Wachter* magazine. By 1936, church leaders were so committed to having children instructed from theologically sound materials that synod appointed a denominational committee "to draw up a uniform lesson system and edit a Sunday school paper of our own." And by 1937, those materials were received by the churches "with a great deal of appreciation and enthusiasm,"

large-print edition of the hymnal *Lift Up Your Hearts*. And Faith Formation Ministries, another ministry formed in the wake of Faith Alive's demise, is updating and reissuing the *God Loves Me* preschool storybooks.

However, Synod 2013 did not make any specific plans for what is arguably the core function of Faith Alive: producing materials from a Reformed perspective for the church education of children.

in the pipeline and the infrastructure to create curriculum dismantled, it could be a long wait.

Synod 2013 (the CRC's annual general assembly) dissolved Faith Alive Christian Resources (the CRC's publishing ministry) as an administrative entity. After five years of financial losses, the ministry was no longer financially sustainable. Synod 2013 noted that core functions of Faith Alive would be housed in different ministries of the Christian Reformed Church. Faith Alive products continue to be sold.



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according to the *Acts of Synod* of those years.

That committee was the genesis of a publishing ministry that functioned under different names over the years (Board of Publications, CRC Publications, and finally Faith Alive Christian Resources), producing much-loved children's curricula including *Bible Way*, *LiFE*, *Walk With Me*, and most recently *Dwell*. While *Bible Way* served the church well for more than 20 years, the shelf life of subsequent curricula has become progressively shorter.

Syd Hielema is team leader for Faith Formation Ministries (FFM). "When FFM was formed, we were not given any instructions about curricula, and neither were we told to propose a process for developing guidelines or protocols," Hielema said. "As the mandate for FFM was being finalized this past April, this footnote was added at the eleventh hour: 'At this time we do not yet know to what extent FFM will be called to continue the creating and marketing of curricular and study resources that was carried out by Faith Alive Christian Resources.'" »



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Colin Watson, Sr., appointed as the CRC's director of ministries and administration in July, acknowledged that this is a very important issue and initiated a conversation with staff. "This requires continuing conversation among ministries and congregations," he said.

However, he said, "Development of new materials has to be driven by congregational demand. We have to make sure what we are doing is needed by churches. We no longer have the luxury of saying, 'We are putting out product X or book Y.' We have to work in partnership with congregations to be sure that what is produced meets their current and anticipated requirements for ministry."

The first rumblings of that congregational demand are already being heard. Libby Huizenga, an intern with FFM, spent her summer contacting church leaders as part of FFM's mandate



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to build relationships with churches, learning about their needs. She said she is hearing from churches that they really like *Dwell* and are content to use it, but they want resources to continue to be updated, to stay relevant. "They don't need to be updated now or a year from now, but there are questions about five years or 10 years from now."

One of the ways being tried to finance updating current materials or developing new resources is crowdfunding, whereby the preliminary funding of a project is done by raising contributions from a large number of people.

Churches and individuals essentially pre-buy a product. That's what worked with the large-print edition of *Lift Up Your Hearts*. For *God Loves Me*, crowdfunding raised \$34,000, about half of the development costs for the product.

In a story for the CRC's website, web manager Tim Postuma said, "Crowdfunding lets churches speak into these publishing decisions. In a very real way they can dictate what gets published." As Postuma wrote on the *Network*, it reduces the guesswork about what churches want or need.

It's one thing to crowdfund something that doesn't have to be produced from scratch, like storybooks and hymnals with existing content, which can be published in a few months. It is quite another to get churches to commit to something that won't be ready for four to five years. According to Ruth VanderHart, recently retired after 44 years as a Faith Alive curriculum editor, that's the amount of time it typically takes to create a new curriculum, even with an existing editorial and development infrastructure.

That raises the question of whether a church finance committee would approve a substantial amount of money to crowdfund something that cannot be reviewed and won't be available for a few years.

And by the time churches identify the need for new curriculum, a years-long wait may drive them to look elsewhere. Huizenga said some of the people she talked to would be satisfied if they could be referred to resources from other publishers that align with Reformed theology and have good pedagogy. The problem is that there are few high-quality

Reformed curriculum publishers around. In fact, many Reformed Church in America and Presbyterian congregations look to the CRC for their curriculum. Other congregations may turn to curricula that have non-Reformed theological content.

Huizenga said FFM has also been surprised by the number of churches that would also like new catechism resources. "Since these resources are more specific to our context, it's harder to find resources from other publishers," she said. As VanderHart commented, "In getting rid of a development group like our editorial staff, the church lost something. No question about it."

De Boer said that it will be extremely difficult to produce the same volume of curriculum that was produced in the past. However, she said, FFM is hard at work seeking new models of providing resources. FFM recently produced *Welcoming Children to the Lord's Supper Toolkit*, which debuted this spring and which will be followed by the *Profession of Faith Toolkit* and an *Intergenerational Toolkit*, available Spring 2016.

"It's our dream to be able to one day provide the same high-quality, theologically sound curriculum for which Faith Alive continues to be highly respected in the CRCNA and beyond," De Boer said. "I continue to pray that we'll also be able to find funding and staff to [produce] stellar resources."

"I think we'll get there again one day, although the format may be very different," she said. "And that's exciting too."

—Gayla R. Postma

