



## We Gathered Together

BY REV. DR. JIM LAWRENCE

For the fourth time since 2008, we convened our annual convention south of Boston at lovely Bridgewater State University, easily accessible by car and train and only a short drive from both our Bridgewater and Elmwood churches. Overall, our hybrid attendance saw numbers approaching our older times when we always had more than 200 people at convention. With a little over 100 people physically on campus and a little over 100 people attending various events virtually, our annual gathering has been growing again. To help us achieve this upward tilt, we were supported in our evolving hybrid capabilities through the skillful and vigorous presence of our new Digital Communications Manager, Rudy Caseres, who utilized robust teamwork with a support team that included Beki Greenwood, Emily Tergliafera, and Brittany Price. Our annual gatherings now forevermore will enable people to be present and active in vital ways from any part of the world.

Over the years our educational experiences at convention have become a genuine high point of our gatherings. I remember the times before Mini Courses! Introduced now a few decades ago to evolve our summer gatherings to be more spiritually oriented and not so endlessly dominated by business sessions, our spiritual



*Rev. Dr. Devin Zuber with the Laying on of Hands Blessers:  
Rev. Dr. Amanda Riley, Rev. Jane Siebert, Rev. Junchol Lee,  
and Rev. Dr. Jim Lawrence*

education program has become the most popular part of convention, and over the past few years we've maximized our virtual participation and in-person participation in careful ways. For each time slot one course is in-person physically only, one course is virtual only, and two are hybrid. I applaud the range of spiritual and educational experiences that were carefully curated by our Standing Committee on Education and Resources for Spiritual Community (SCER), chaired by Dr. Rebecca Esterson, and again this year we enjoyed wonderfully rich encounters with history, education, cultural diversity, and spiritual formation.

Additionally, the ordination of the now Rev. Dr. Devin Zuber enriched and blessed our gathering this year. A rising star professor at the Graduate Theological Union and the Center

for Swedenborgian Studies, Devin over the past decade has engaged a long and thoughtful process of spiritual leadership and ministry formation in the pastoral work at the San Francisco church under the purview of Rev. Junchol Lee. He has also long been under the guidance of our Committee on Admissions to the Ministry for his particular setting in education in addition to congregational presence. His stimulating ordination talk is included in this issue.

Our Council of Ministers meetings handled important ministry matters that included processing and accepting the Vision of Ministry statements from three new ordinands: Lynn Thompson, Eleanor Schnarr, and Roxanne Sperry. The Council had some fun with an exercise of creating taglines for our spirituality that produced such "bumper stickers" as "Inner Growth, Outer Change," "No Love, No Wisdom," "What's Next?," and also recovered one from our eighties conventions, "Life's a Miracle and then You Live Forever."

Finally, this was a year when our convention dates not only went across the Fourth of July but it also fell on our Outing Day. Given past experiences with Fourth of July traffic and congestion problems, we decided to stay local and enjoy the south of Boston

*Continues on page 87*

## Contents

We Gathered .....	85
Guest Editorial .....	86
Council of Ministers .....	87
Pre-Convention GC .....	88
Children's Program .....	88
Opening of Convention .....	89
Business Meeting Report .....	91
SCCM Report .....	92
CSS Meeting .....	93
Convention Preacher Sermon .....	94
Photo Pages .....	96
The Cloud of Witnesses .....	99
Planting the Future .....	102
Clear Blue Sky .....	106
SCYL Worship .....	107
July Fourth BBQ .....	108

## Guest Editorial



### What is the point of a convention?

The world changes pace in the summer. Boston has a host of free and interesting activities.

The streets fill with tourists and life that is drastically different than the bundled-up commuters of winter. For me, summer brings the convention of the Swedenborgian Church (General Convention of the Church of the New Jerusalem) and summer camps. One might ask, “what’s up with this convention and summer camp thing?”

What is the point of a convention? Some believe having a larger body to be accountable to is important, which it is. Others look at services denominations have to offer like ministerial credentialing and assistance with difficult issues. Both are ideas for when things go awry—a less than happy occasion. I want to talk about the value of a friend. Like-minded folks who care about the

same things you do. People who are struggling and working that share their experience. A place where different folks present what they love—that we might be transformed through their joy. These are the positive ideas behind why convention and camps are worthwhile.

At convention this year, a series of Mini Courses were inspiring and transformative for some. Topics such as the future of the New Church and optimism in Asian traditions expanded the mind. Reports from the Swedenborg Foundation and other churches showed myriad resources for both church and personal growth. Conventions are places where the dedicated people of the church from all over the country gather to talk about the church—surely a worthy endeavor.

Church camps are a nice break from the schedule and monotony of our work-a-day lives. But more than the possibility of splendid view and a chance to swim or boat, they are opportunities to examine our lives. At the Swedenborgian church camps, each day has talks and classes to help us examine ourselves. Through worship, classes, and conversations, we go to a spiritual mountain top in hopes that we can descend back to our world transformed and ready to fulfill the plans the Lord has laid out for us.

Buddha, the Lord in scripture, Swedenborg and so many more remind us that we should not live for what perishes, but for what is eternal. Our televisions and media companies try to distract us with the things that are not eternal, but conventions and camps remove us from those sensory desires to see charity and faith as the true eternal. A few folks headed off to convention and to camps, what is it that you do to step outside your life and re-focus? This does not require a trip — *staycations* have become popular — but each of us need a moment to reset and look at our lives.

## the Messenger

© The Swedenborgian Church of North America

Published monthly except two combined issues by the Standing Committee for Communication and Information of the Swedenborgian Church of North America (founded 1817, incorporated 1861 as the General Convention of the New Jerusalem in the United States of America), Rev. Dr. James Lawrence, president.

Convention Special 2023

Volume 247, No. 6 Whole Number 5484

Editor, design, and production: Rebekah Greenwood

Copy editing and proofing: Rudy Caseres, Robert Leith, Brittany Price, & Trevor

Standing Committee for Communication and Information: Rev. Kevin Baxter, Rev. Dr. David Brown, & Tara Conkling

Editorial Advisory Committee: Dr. Rebecca Esterson, Rev. Dr. Jim Lawrence, & Herb Ziegler

Printing: FenwayGroup, Boston, MA

Editorial Email: [messenger@swedenborg.org](mailto:messenger@swedenborg.org)

Editorial, Business, and Subscription Address: *The Messenger*, Central Office  
50 Quincy Street  
Cambridge, MA 02138

Tel: 617.969.4240

Central Office Email: [manager@swedenborg.org](mailto:manager@swedenborg.org)

Subscriptions: free online subscription at <https://swedenborg.org/subscribe/>. Printed and mailed to US address, \$25/year; to Canada address, \$30/year; to all other addresses, \$40/year; single copies, \$3.00, libraries & prisoners, free. Send check made out to “Swedenborgian Church” with “*Messenger*” on the memo line. Other requests, write or call Central Office.

Submissions are accepted at any time. Submissions must be received by the 15<sup>th</sup> of the month to be considered for the next issue.

The opinions and views expressed are those of the authors, not of *the Messenger*, the Standing Committee for Communication and Information, or the Swedenborgian Church.

Where will you be in five or ten years? What are you doing to begin to prepare for it? This is the question our church must ask—but each of us also should be asking it of ourselves and putting plans into motion.

Blessings,  
—Rev. Kevin Baxter





# Council of Ministers Report

BY REV. KEVIN BAXTER

On June 29 and 30, eighteen Ministers gathered in person and fifteen Ministers online (for a total thirty-two) as the Council of Ministers of the Swedenborgian Church. We welcomed seven Licensed Pastors and four people studying for various ministries. The two-day meeting allowed time for the needed business of the council, ministry sharing, and educational growth.

Our educational program centered around the mission and purpose of the church in interesting and unique ways. Through elevator speeches and the creation of *tag lines*. The various virtual attendees gathered in zoom rooms and the ministers broke out into small groups to focus in on what the essential qualities and attributes of the church are to them. Meaningful and spirited discussions occurred, peppered with humor and fun.

As is normal practice, our elections are held right before Convention. We would like to acknowledge the dedication of the Rev. Susannah Currie, who has served for the past four years due to the extended COVID year. She has brought new approaches to ministry support and has given her gifts faithfully and prayerfully. We thank you for your service.

The newly elected officers of the Council of Ministers are as follows: Rev. Richard L. Tafel, Chair; Rev. Kevin K. Baxter, Secretary; Rev. Dr. Donna Keane and Rev. Julie Conaron, members of the Executive Committee; Rev. Kit Billing, Nominating Committee, and Rev. Kevin Baxter was elected convention preacher in 2025.

Taking care of some administrative



*Above: Council of Ministers hybrid meeting with eighteen ministers present and fifteen more online, plus several invited guests.*

*Left: Small group discussing tag lines.*

business, the council also adopted a requirement for twenty hours of continuing education every two years for the clergy to remain in good standing. This professional requirement is standard practice in many other traditions. Also, we approved job descriptions for the Chair of the Council, Secretary of the Council, and the Chair of CAM. We also heard from the treasurer of convention about budget process and socially aware investing.

We were pleased to receive visions of ministry from Eleanor Schnarr, Roxanne Sperry, and Lynn S. Chittick Thompson. Also, we received a plan of Ministry from Dr. Devin Zuber, which we approved.

The council heard back from a committee examining the role of Licensed Pastors on the council. The committee recommended and the council adopted a policy that allows LPs to sit on some committees and participate fully in all clergy meetings and events.

We recognized and said farewell to our colleagues in ministry, the Reverends: Skuli Thorallson (thirty-four years), Judith Vandergrift (fourteen years), Jerry Poole (fifty-seven years), Richard H. Tafel, Jr. (sixty years), and also to Carl Yenetchi who is no longer on our roles. We also sadly accepted

Rev. Jennifer Tafel's request to be severed from our role of ministers.

Happily, the Council of Ministers recommended that Connie McOsker be given Licensed Pastor standing to serve at the Garden Church in San Pedro, California, the convention accepted the recommendation. We also recommended and welcomed Dr. Devin Zuber into the Ordained Ministry of the General Convention. ☸

## We Gathered

*Continued from cover*

semi-rural scenery. Most people in convention have never been to the "new" Elmwood church that was completely rebuilt several years ago, and we also had an invitation from Roger and Nina Grindle of the Elmwood church to enjoy their large and beautiful property spread for an old fashioned Fourth of July cookout. Our buses took us first to explore the delightful Elmwood church and then on to the cookout, where terrific conversations and community occurred with all age groups.

We are a family-size denomination, and as the saying goes, "Families are like branches on a tree: we may grow in some different directions, but our roots nurture all of us together." ☸

# Pre-Convention General Council Meeting Report

BY KAREN CONGER

The General Council (GC) met in a hybrid format on Saturday, July 1, for their pre-convention meeting at Bridgewater State University in Bridgewater, Massachusetts. All council members were able to attend the meeting, with four attending virtually. Various reports were received including those from the officers, the Operations Manager, and the Chair of the Council of Ministers, with both the outgoing and newly elected Chairs in attendance.

The sale of the New York New Church (NYNC) property to the Government of Serbia has been completed and the proceeds placed in a

special fund in the Common Fund. The NYNC Legacy Board has been formed to distribute the proceeds in a grant format; the exact details of that format will be determined at a meeting this fall. In addition, the Washington, D.C. Society, and the denomination have jointly agreed that the time has come to sell the National Church, its maintenance requirements having become too extreme to maintain. Dialogue is continuing between the denomination and the Society as to the best way to accomplish the needed changes, with a view to an ongoing Swedenborgian presence in the nation's capital.

Other discussion included the likely amendment(s) to the Constitution and Bylaws that will streamline the antiquated process by which qualified people may become Members-at-Large of the denomination; the agency funds dedicated to our theological school which are currently being held by the denomination being transferred to the full ownership and direction of the Center for Swedenborg Studies; and the importance of all of our ministries, the denomination itself, and the theological school having watertight dissolution clauses. 📺

## Children's Program

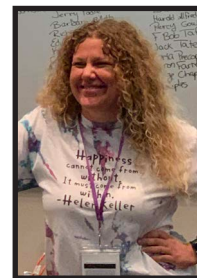
BY HEIDI BARNABY



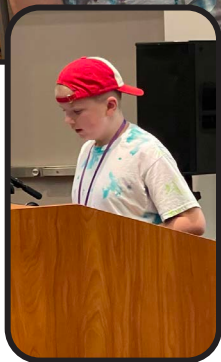
It was an honor spending my Convention working with the Children's Program (ages 6–12). We spent our time together focused on Optimism—what it looks like, feels like, how to find it and who we think represents it. We focused a lot of our time on

Helen Keller, top on

our list of someone portraying optimism, and learned about her obstacles and how she overcame them. We did a simulation to try and replicate what it would be like to be blind and deaf, practiced the ASL alphabet and learned a bit about braille. We discussed multiple ways to flip our thinking to that of an optimistic outlook including, but not limited to meditation, yoga, singing, breathing, writing, drawing and exercising. We all walked away from Convention 2023 in Bridgewater with more tricks in our bags to use when we are faced with trials and dark days. 📺



**Above:** Convention kids demonstrate the ASL alphabet.  
**Middle:** Zachary and Aiden waiting for their program to start.  
**Lower Right:** "Pocket Hugs" made by the children for all to take with them.  
**Lower Left:** Nate takes his turn in the presentation.





# Opening of Convention

## *"Practicing Optimism Toward Our Future"*

BY REV. DR. JIM LAWRENCE



Welcome to the 199<sup>th</sup> Convention of the Swedenborgian Church of North America. Of course, our legal name and the one which we commonly used until about twenty years ago is the General Convention of the New Jerusalem, and that legal incorporated name came the first words of the last chapter of the last book of the Bible, Revelation, which says,

*Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations (Revelation 22:1–2).*

In fact, not only our denomination but every Swedenborgian denomination in the world (and there are at least five) deploys the phrase “New Jerusalem” in their official incorporated language. In their legal incorporated name, every Swedenborgian denomination features the closing and final biblical image: a Holy City New

Jerusalem descending from heaven to earth.

A hundred and ninety-nine seems an odd number for this convention considering that we held our official bicentennial way back in 2017 in the Philadelphia area, where it all began for the New Church in America. Due to various years of wars and pandemics, however, led to decisions not to gather for the annual convention, and thus we will not celebrate our actual physical bicentennial of legal denominational gatherings until next year.

### A New Church Arises

Today, however, we might go back even further to true American Swedenborgian history to the summer of 1784 when James Glen, a British plantation owner in Guyana, brought copies of Swedenborg’s theological writings into the harbor of Philadelphia and gave a series of public talks there and in multiple locations across four other young states of the new republic. From circulating boxes of Swedenborg’s books from London, reading groups organized, and soon some of those circles evolved into churches with religious services and eventually with consecrated leadership.

Though early on the church in Baltimore had the most members in a single church, Philadelphia remained ground zero for the first quarter-century with the largest number of groups. The Quaker strength in Pennsylvania proved useful as both movements shared similarities in discussing the inner light, and both movements have been framed by some religion historians as “the spiritualist option” in Reformation currents. And not surprisingly, Quakers in the earliest phase

provided the most significant channel of conversions into the new fledgling Swedenborgian societies.

The first church building commissioned by Swedenborgians was in Philadelphia and opened on New Year’s Day 1817. It was modeled after the Nunc Licet temple described in *True Christianity* (2006:508):

*One day a magnificent church building appeared to me; it was square in plan with a roof like a crown, with arches above and a raised parapet running around . . . Later, when I got closer, I saw there was a Latin inscription over the door, NOW IT IS PERMITTED which is shorthand for the full sentence, “Now it is permitted to enter with the understanding into the mysteries of faith.”*

In that same year, since so many societies had cropped up around the eastern seaboard, the idea was sprung to have a “general convention” of representatives from these groups, which was put into action by meeting on May 15, 1817 (the Day of Ascension in the Christian calendar) in the new Nunc Licet temple. Their closing piece of business was to set up the second meeting the following year, also for the Day of Ascension, to be held in the Baltimore church. And the fledgling New Church denomination in American has continued ever since to hold an annual convention.

### Convention Splintering

A foremost challenge the new movement faced in its first half-century involved the push-and-pull of whether to adopt a more centralized government or whether to maintain complete autonomy for the local “societies.” Convention was functioning as a loose

*Continues on page 90*

## Opening of Convention

*Continued from page 89*

federation under the congregational form of polity (local groups owning and operating their own ministry), but a broad desire for more coordination was rising among the growing movement. Part of such coordination also meant shared standards, partly to increase identity and presence in the public square, but at the same time such a vision of more unity bred fears of coercion by the stronger regions running roughshod over smaller ones.

This tension around obligations and freedom led to our early history of splitting into multiple Conventions. We weren't always just one Convention due these very significant disagreements about how to be a larger church. In 1838 Thomas Worcester of the Boston church tried to impose an episcopal form of church government upon the widely dispersed gaggle of Swedenborgian congregations in what infamously became known as "the squeezing rule." At the twenty-second annual convention, Worcester engineered an edict requiring all societies to become organized according to a new Rule of Order by the following year—or be dropped from the rolls of Convention.

Furor erupted. Resistance took two forms: in the Midwest a rebellion against any kind of centralization developed; and in a mid-Coast region anchored by Philadelphia, resistance rose up against Worcester personally. These doings created new breakaway Conventions called the Western Convention and the Central Convention, while most referred to the old General Convention as "the Eastern Convention." It took decades for it all to settle

down, but finally the Western Convention came back into the fold with older General Convention and accepted some aspects of denominational governance, such as standards and procedures for the path to ordination, and in turn the General Convention agreed to a decentralized congregational polity over a centralized episcopal one. Though some of the congregations in

any thoughtful study of Swedenborg, at the same time Swedenborg stands at the top of theologians for being engaged by such a long list of celebrated artists, novelists, painters, poets, and sculptors. In point of fact, Swedenborg's cultural reception in such veins far outreaches the Martin Luthers, John Calvins, and John Wesleys. Religion historians have often noted that the Swedenborgian Church perhaps holds the most lopsided ratio of cultural recognition in relation to size of membership with a considerably high cultural studies recognition despite a quite negligible membership.

One of those famous names among the cultural titans who have engaged Swedenborg in notable and positive ways is Helen Keller, whom we selected to feature for this convention to raise up the new effort at a Helen Keller Center at our Cambridge church. The Practice of Optimism, which is our theme, comes from one of

her earliest books completed while still in her twenties, which she had begun writing while still a college student at Radcliffe. I'm personally forever grateful to Helen because it is she who convinced my mother that I did not go off and join a cult. If Helen Keller loved Swedenborg, it was the real deal, and over time mom collected quite a few Swedenborgian books and of course followed the work of our church with interest.

Ever since I've been in this church, now for four decades, we've always wrestled with why aren't we bigger? How could something so rich and powerful on the inside manifest itself in such seeming small ways on the outside? Why don't more people see the New Church vision that we see?



*The Convention choir, led by Greg Huang-Dale, graced us with beautiful music during the opening worship service and throughout Convention.*

the Central Convention also returned to the General Convention, many dug in and became the sprouting root to a splinter movement that finally formed a new denomination, which we know today as the General Church.

## The Little Church with the Big Reach

While many stories of great effort to be the New Church in the right way shape our history, there is one core value we all share: a love for the treasure of Swedenborg's writings that have given birth to millions of pages of discourse and countless numbers of enriched lives. It is now commonly touted that though Swedenborg has been largely ignored by organized Christianity with very few prominent theologians and writers of other traditions producing

*Continues on page 91*

# Business Meeting Report

BY KAREN CONGER

The first business session of the 2023 convention hybrid meetings convened by President Rev. Dr. Jim Lawrence at approximately 9:30 AM ET on Sunday, July 2. Included amongst the business transacted were the acceptance of the report from the Council of Ministers which authorized the ordination of Dr. Devin Zuber, as well as the recommendation that Connie McOsker be given licensed standing as a Licensed Pastor in the denomination.

Various reports were given and accepted including from the editor of *the Messenger*, *Our Daily Bread*, the National Church, Wayfarers Chapel, The Swedenborg Foundation, Swedenborgians in Action Against Racism, and others.

Elections were held for the several offices as printed in the March issue of *the Messenger* and the list on the right were duly elected to office.

Several people were recognized for their years of service on various committees, as well as on the General Council and many folks were recognized for all their work in organizing this year's convention, including the good people at the Bridgewater Church (thank you, Merrilee Phinney!), the Elmwood Church, all the local volunteers, with special thanks to Operations Manager Brittany Price, Digital Communications Manager Rudy Caseres, and *Messenger* editor Beki Greenwood, all of whom were irreplaceable at this year's convention! The location of next year's convention has not yet been set, but stay tuned for details to follow as they are printed in *The Messenger*. The last business session closed at 11:40 AM ET on Tuesday, July 4, and there was a tour of the beautiful Elmwood New Church and a wonderful barbecue at the farm of

## Election Results

**Vice President:** Kurt Fekete

**Recording Secretary:** Karen Conger

**General Council Lay Person:** Tom Murphy (1<sup>st</sup> term)

**General Council Lay Person:** Kelly Kennedy (1<sup>st</sup> term)

**General Council Minister:** Rev. Renee Machiniak (1<sup>st</sup> term)

**Committee on Admission to the Ministry:** Rev. Gabriella Cahaley

**Standing Comm. Communication & Info.:** Rev. Dr. David Brown

**Standing Committee for Financial Accountability:** Bill Coffman

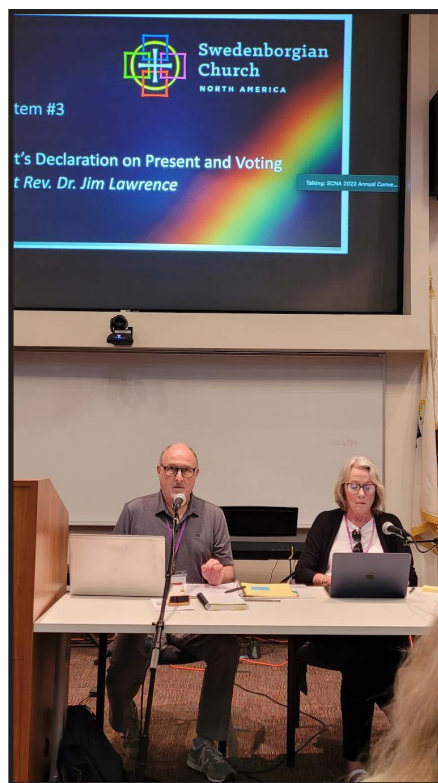
**Standing Committee for Financial Accountability:** Stan Conger

**Standing Committee for Nominations:** Pastor Robbin Ferriman

**Standing Committee for Nominations:** Nancy Little (unexpired term)

**Center for Swedenborgian Studies Board of Trustees,**

**Representative Class:** Robert Carr



President, Rev. Dr. Jim Lawrence and Recording Secretary, Karen Conger lead the meetings.

## Opening of Convention

*Continued from page 90*

But these are dynamic times. Religion and spirituality today very little resemble religion and spirituality in America a half-century ago. Every organized religion in America today laments the trends dragging their numbers down, while at the same time new modes of spirituality that often have small pop-up manifestations and new livelihoods in virtual spaces do not resemble old fashion brick and mortar churches. New approaches to spiritual life keep appearing and touching peoples' hearts and minds and lives.

I encourage us to believe in our future, to believe in our ability to meet the challenges of engaging the questions mattering most to people today, to believe in our calling to contribute effectively to the reality of the Holy City New Jerusalem both in our personal lives as well as in a world who in all its sprawling manifestations remains as ever and always our neighbor and our charge.

Roger and Nina Grindle, which the memorable rain, thunder, and lightning, did nothing to dampen.



# SCCM Meeting Report

BY REV. KIT BILLINGS

The Swedenborgian Church Children's Ministry (SCCM) held its Annual Meeting on July 2 during the 2023 Annual Convention of the Swedenborgian Church held at Bridgewater State University. Our officers led this meeting, which was productive and engaging for all involved. Highlights were the following:

The body of the SCCM agreed to continue working on our web-page within our denomination's website and will strive to have it functional by late Autumn 2023. President Kit Billings reviewed many resources to be attached or web links shown for parents and religious education teachers needing a Swedenborgian foundation to offer children. Examples are the Dole Bible Study Notes, the Sower Notes, the publication Five Smooth Stones and other resources.

The SCCM agreed to move forward with the production of more kid-friendly educational videos using the PowToons platform online. Kit demonstrated one such video he made to give everyone an idea of the capability of the program. Overall, the video platform was seen as a positive way to reach children. Many commented on the content such as collaborating with SCYL and getting feedback from the kids and teens as well as doing a voice over for children who are not able to read.

The Treasurer, Bev Titus, gave her report sharing that the SCCM ending balance as of the meeting date is \$9,647.55.

Bev talked about the mindfulness training that she and Rev. Kit participated in recently. They appreciated the training and found it helpful in



learning about the process that children go through when meditating and how their minds work in general. This training is something that could help children all over the world. Kit asked that anyone interested in taking this training to please let him know. Rev. Betsy Coffman and others were immediately interested and volunteered to take the training.

Election of Officers was held. The following slate of officers were nominated and voted in unanimously by members present.

President: Rev. Kit Billings  
 Vice President: Pastor Kelly Milne  
 Secretary: Nancy Little  
 Treasurer: Bev Titus

Kit added that now is a great time to get involved in the work of the Swedenborgian Church Children's Ministry and those interested may contact him via email at [RevKit123@gmail.com](mailto:RevKit123@gmail.com).

The meeting was adjourned at 11:30 AM ET. 📺

## The 2024 Convention of the Swedenborgian Church will be in Michigan! June 28 – July 2

We hope you can join us for the 200<sup>th</sup> Swedenborgian Church Annual Convention in Michigan this year!

- Convention will be June 28 – July 2 (this includes travel dates)
- Located at the Kellogg Hotel and Conference Center and Michigan State University, East Lansing, Michigan
- Event will utilize a mix of Hotel and University facilities
- Stay tuned for more details coming this winter!

More information will be shared on [swedenborg.org](https://swedenborg.org)!



**Did you miss some of  
convention or want to  
watch it again?**

**Several events are on our  
YouTube page! Click the  
logo above to check it  
out as well as many past  
events.**



# CSS Annual Meeting Report

BY TOM NEUENFELDT

The annual meeting of the Center for Swedenborgian Studies (CSS) was held on July 2, 2023, at Bridgewater State University. Chair, Tom Neuenfeldt called the meeting to order at 2:45 PM ET.

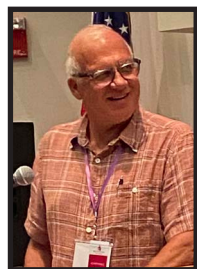
Rev. Dr. Gard Perry gave the Invocation and Clerk, Karen Conger, read the bylaws with respect to joining the Corporation. The minutes of the 2022 Annual Meeting, held in Long Beach, California, were approved.

Tom Neuenfeldt (pictured below) introduced the current Board of Trustees, the faculty, and the staff. Special recognition was given to Dean, Dr. Rebecca Esterson. She has just completed her first year as dean of the school. Her accomplishments over the past year include the creation of the Nunc Licet Fellowship and the selection of students who will be recipients of the grant, overseeing online classes for over one hundred learners, and developing educational paths for licensed pastor and ordination tract students.

Dr. Esterson has written a book on Biblical Allegory, is working on a college level text on Death, Dying, and the Afterlife, and co-authoring a book on Helen Keller's Swedenborgian faith.

In her dean's report, Rebecca thanked the Board, the faculty, and staff for the productive year that we have all experienced.

Rebecca advised that a great deal of historical archive material was received this year from storage at Iron Mountain; these items are being sorted through. She announced an archival scanner purchase, which was accomplished through the generosity of the



**Left:** Dr. Rebecca Esterson and Dr. Devin Zuber present Eleanor Schnarr with a Certificate of Swedenborgian Ministry Studies. **Right:** Connie McOsker was presented with a certificate of Licensed Pastor.



Boston Society of the New Jerusalem.

Rebecca announced the *Nunc Licet* Fellowship awards for 2023: Michael Goss, who is a student at the Pacific School of Religion, and Tirah Keal who is engaged in study toward an M.Div. at United Lutheran Seminary in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Treasurer, Jennifer Lindsay (pictured left) gave a short financial report, which presents a deficit budget due to the funding of the Nunc Licet Fellowship. This will be an opportunity to look forward and to empower students to achieve their academic goals and enter the ministry of the Church. CSS's assets at this time being \$14.7M, the cost of the Fellowship represents less than ½ of one percent of our present corpus.

Karen Conger presented the Nominating Committee report. Tom Neuenfeldt was nominated for a

four-year term of the At-Large class of the Board of Trustees. No additional nominations were presented from the floor. The motion to elect Tom Neuenfeldt was passed.

Dr. Esterson and Dr. Devin Zuber presented a Certificate of Swedenborgian Ministry Studies to Eleanor Schnarr.

Dr. Esterson and Dr. Zuber also presented a Certificate of Licensed Pastor to Consolin McOsker.

The Rev. Kathy Speas gave the graduation address via Zoom. She talked about the changing landscape of Ministry and the challenge of preparing ministers to adapt to our evolving world, particularly in light of the three Cs: Covid, Climate, and Culture. Thank you, Kathy, for your insight and passion.

Rev. Dr. Gard Perry (pictured right) gave the closing prayer, and the meeting was adjourned. ☪



# What in the World Comes Next: Why I Remain Optimistic

## Convention Preacher Sermon

BY REV. RICH TAFEL

In all my years of preaching, there's one thing I have said that really gets push back. It's not the topic I expected. Mind you I've preached on the most controversial topics you can imagine.

In fact, I preached a whole sermon series called "Sermons Ministers Won't Preach On" and challenged members to send in their requests. I preached on abortion, guns, trans, gays, and race. You name it I've preached on it. If you are interested, you can check them out on our website. And some of those topics got push back, but there's still one phrase that whenever I say it, I'm sure to get push back.

Can you guess what is so radical? What really makes people angry? Are you ready? The answer: Optimism—the theme of this year's convention.

Nothing makes people more angry than when I say, "Things are getting better. People get furious when I say, "I'm optimistic about the future. I'm optimistic about the future of our church." I finally had to preach a sermon called "Things are Getting Better," where I painstakingly went through data from poverty to death rates. You name it and things are getting better in all the most major aspects of our lives.

*Things are getting better, and they will continue to get better.* Yet we don't believe it. I know this not just at a data level, but a soul level.

When did God tell us? Revelations.

This concept of spiritual evolution is one the most incredible gifts of the Swedenborgian tradition. We get a peek at what happens next in the world. It tells us that God is always working through humanity to make things better. This is a reassuring teaching.



Swedenborg taught us interpretation that led to some dramatic predictions in the late 1700s that the world was evolving into a new, better age.

This might sound like heresy at a Swedenborgian Convention, but I encourage you not to believe something just because Swedenborg said it. Run it by your own experience and intuition. What do you see, hear, and feel that's true? Revelations as source of prediction has always been confusing if read literally, but this has not stopped every generation of Christian scholars from interpreting it. And most got it wrong.

In our own time, there's been a book and movie series that millions of Americans watched and believed called the "Left Behind" series where the anti-Christ seeks to destroy the earth. Many of the conspiracy theories today are impacted by this view of Revelations. Much trauma. Swedenborg says these predictions are all missing the message and that the second coming foretold in Revelations is something that will happen within us, not a physical return of Jesus.

The religious leaders of Jesus's day asked him when the kingdom of God would come, "The kingdom of God does not come with observation; nor will they say, 'See here!' or 'See there!' For indeed, the kingdom of God is within you."

Yet most Christians look for a physical event, missing the spiritual event Jesus spoke about.

What are the predictions? Before we look to the future, let's look back to see just how Swedenborg's interpretations and predictions worked out. Let's look at just four major predictions made based on Revelations. What does he say is happening in that new epoch?

### The Old Church Must Die

First, there's a mention of seven plagues in Revelations 15.

**15** I saw in heaven another great and marvelous sign: seven angels with the seven last plagues—last, because with them God's wrath is completed.

I'm glad we don't read this literally. This symbolized the sad state of affairs and evil in our current world that needs to be transcended. The Christian Church lost its way. Instead of preaching love, truth, inclusion, and justice, the Christian Church focused on judging and condemning, and lost the message of love of Jesus.

Swedenborg predicted that the old church would lead to a time of chaos when long hidden evils would be revealed to be dealt with bringing forth a new spiritual age and a new church. In a story I read this week, it was reported that over a half million Catholics in Germany have left the church last year

*Continues on page 95*



## Convention Sermon

*Continued from 94*

over the issue of child abuse scandals.

Swedenborg's prediction of the death of Christianity is a prophecy being fulfilled before our very eyes. This death of old church would lead to a period of chaos and exhaustion. Chaos is necessary to lead to exhaustion when, after doing things the way we always did them, we are ready to align to God's providence.

His first prediction feels very real to me. The old church is dying, and we can feel the chaos and we are impacted by that to the extent we imitated old church.

Let's look to prophecy number 2.

### Inclusive of all Faith Paths

In Revelations 21, we read that the Holy City has twelve gates.

**12** It had a great, high wall with twelve gates, and with twelve angels at the gates.

What an odd detail read at the literal level. But at the spiritual level the Holy City has twelve gates symbolizes a new period of religious pluralism where people of different religions can all find a gate or way into this Holy City. People get to God differently and that's great. Here again, we see this prophecy being played out before our eyes.

In Swedenborg's time you could be killed for having the wrong Christian belief. Christian didn't just kill other religions they killed other Christians. A century after his death we have the rise of an ecumenical movement. The game changing event was the World Parliament of Religions that took place at the 1893 World's Fair. This introduced eastern religions to the United States. We should be proud and not surprised that the event was the brainchild of Charles Bonney a

Swedenborgian.

Ecumenism is now very normal today. I'm in my eighth year representing our denomination at the NCC, who itself is a group respecting different faith paths, and within that there are six interfaith dialogues taking place. Most of the mainstream denominations now have ecumenical officers who attend inter-faith meetings.

But even there, among my very progressive, mainline denomination colleagues, I ask, "I know you are a leader in inter-faith dialogue, but at the end of the day, do you believe they are saved?" To a person, they have told me, "No, you must accept Christ to be saved." There's still work to be done. Our ability to see that there all faith paths are good, resonates with the rising generation who intuitively know this is true.

So far Swedenborg's prophesy is two for two. What's the third prophecy?

### Increase in Equality

In the next verses of Revelations, the Holy City in another strangely specific verse, he describes as a square that is equal on all sides. Why all of these measurements mentioning equal sides?

**21** 16 The city was laid out like a square, as long as it was wide.

This symbolism represents that in this new epoch, there will be a new equality we've never experienced before with greater justice. Did this prophecy pan out? Here again we see dramatic shifts taking place shortly after Swedenborg wrote that this would come about. Only six years after Swedenborg's death democracy sprung up in the United States leading to a new democracy movement around the world, where today democracy is more the norm than the exception.

Within a century, slavery, which was ubiquitous, would be abolished around the world. The earliest followers of Swedenborg were the

first abolitionists. The story of Carl Wadström is an amazing one.

A founder of the Swedenborgian church in Sweden, Wadström, was a central figure in the British abolition movement. He published an anti-slavery tract. But his big impact came from his engravings. If you've seen that image of the slave ships with people stacked next to one another. This early social justice campaign was a game changer and the leaders of the abolitionist movement ordered 500 copies of one of these engravings to be distributed among influential people. This story represents a living example of how this prediction of greater equality and justice would roll out.

The transformation of acceptance of LGBT people in my lifetime is breathtaking. I know older friends who, in the 1960s, were given electroshock therapy to become straight. Where was this done? Some backward fundamentalist camp? Nope, it took place when they were undergraduates at Harvard.

In the mid-1990s, I embarked in a series of college debates with the Christian Action Network on the topic of gay marriage. The one thing my opposition had against me in every debate was that only twenty-four percent of Americans support same-sex marriage. It appeared to be an issue that would never change.

Just thirty years later, same-sex marriage is the law of the land and seventy percent of Americans now support it. Equality is in the move. There remains chaos, but things are getting better.

Swedenborg's understanding of Revelations is three for three. What else was predicted in this chapter in Revelations?

### No Temple

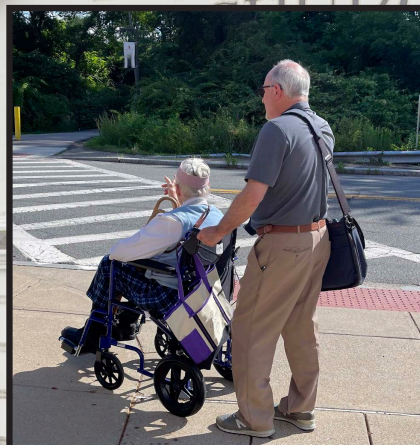
The fourth prediction that we read in Revelations that there is no temple in the Holy City.

*Continues on page 98*











## Convention Sermon

*Continued from 95*

21<sup>22</sup> I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple.

This symbolizes that no one religion will dominate, but instead all will be welcomed. Christians, he says, had done a generally poor job of carrying through the true message of Jesus, and other faiths will present insights as well. He suggests that humanity will begin to see ourselves more as a global community where we care for the world.

This new connection to God will come to all people who act in compassion and truth in service to humanity. The rise of young people saying they are spiritual not religious is an example of this shift. Not one of the new members of my community was raised in the Swedenborgian faith. They each want to do good in the world and live a life of purpose. They are overwhelmingly spiritual but not religious.

Here again, Swedenborg's insights on the predictions told in Revelations is unfolding before our eyes. Things are getting better.

### Recognition

But hold on. If Swedenborg's teaching of the second coming is so true, why has no other voice in Christianity see this? Why are we so small?

The answer is that they have. We have a leadership catalyst role to play. We are not the new church. The new church is happening everywhere.

The well-read Catholic Priest, author, Father Richard Rohr shares a view that the second coming wasn't Jesus coming down but new evolution in the spiritual potential in each of us. Does it sound familiar?

In his book *The Cosmic Christ* he writes,

The mystery of Christ is revealed, and the Christ "comes again," whenever you are able to see the spiritual and the material coexisting, in any moment, in any event, and in any person. God's hope for history seems to be that humanity will one day be able to recognize its dignity as the divine dwelling place, which it shares with the rest of creation. I don't know when it will happen or what it will look like to reach the tipping point, for the Christ Mystery to come to fullness.

...I suspect "the Second Coming of Christ" happens whenever and wherever we allow this to be utterly true for us. We're still living in the in-between right now, slowly edging forward, with much resistance. ... "It is just a matter of time until all false power falls apart," and that "this is the gradual 'second coming of Christ'" (198–9).

This new age is being experienced everywhere. What an amazing future is predicted. I'm optimistic.

We'll see a period when all faith paths will be respected. We'll see a greater movement toward equality and justice. We'll see time when all of humanity will have access to Christ's consciousness. This framework of understanding what's happening in the world is the greatest gift we have received through the teachings of our church.

Yet, Swedenborg gives us the caveat that even the angels can't predict the exact future. Why is that?

Because God is in a co-creative relationship with humanity, and this is ruled by our freedom to do good or not. The degree that we are engaged



*Convention guests join the choir in song during the Convention Worship Service.*

in good is the degree we are bringing heaven to earth. In other words, what we decide to do daily has an impact on what's next.

When each of us here decide to attend Convention, serve on a committee, accept a call, call a pastor, serve the poor, counsel the lonely, write a check, or sleep on an uncomfortable plastic mattress on a college campus—you are bringing in the new church in a time of chaos.

Whenever any of us decide to choose inclusion over exclusion you are bringing in the new church. Whenever any of us decide to become stop judging other based on difference or different, we are bringing in the new church. Whenever we say "Yes" to whatever God is calling you to do now we bring in the new church.

We cannot avoid this period of chaos, but we can be the guides and leaders for others grappling in it. Being optimistic is not being naive about evil, but we still remain optimistic and involved.

Helen Keller described this best in her book on optimism when she said,

My optimism, then, does not rest on the absence of evil, but on a glad belief in the preponderance of good and a willing effort always to co-operate with the good, that it may prevail.

*Continues on page 105*



# The Cloud of Witnesses

## *Message from the Ordination Speaker*

BY REV. JANE SIEBERT

**I**ntroduction to the reading from Ezekiel 47:1–12. The Hebrew prophet Ezekiel had several visions while in captivity in Babylon. He foresaw the destruction of Solomon's temple, and the reading tonight is taken from his last vision during the twenty-fifth year of his exile. An angel took Ezekiel back to the Holy Land and he was given a tour of the New Temple, complete with a river running through it. This vision offered optimism for the people in captivity.

<sup>47</sup> The angel brought me back to the entrance to the temple, and I saw water coming out from under the threshold of the temple toward the east (for the temple faced east). The water was coming down from under the south side of the temple, south of the altar. <sup>2</sup> The angel then brought me out through the north gate and led me around the outside to the outer gate facing east, and the water was trickling from the south side.

<sup>3</sup> As the angel went eastward with a measuring line in his hand, he measured off a thousand cubits and then led me through water that was ankle-deep. <sup>4</sup> He measured off another thousand cubits and led me through water that was knee-deep. He measured off another thousand and led me through water that was up to the waist. <sup>5</sup> He measured off another thousand, but now it was a river that I could not cross, because the water had risen and was deep enough to swim in—a river that no one could cross. <sup>6</sup> The angel asked me, "Son of man, do you see this?" Then the angel led me back to the bank of the river. <sup>7</sup> When I arrived there, I saw a great number of trees on each side of the river. <sup>8</sup> He said to me, "This water flows toward the eastern region and goes down into



the Arabah, where it enters the Dead Sea. When it empties into the sea, the salty water there becomes fresh.

<sup>9</sup> Swarms of living creatures will live wherever the river flows. There will be large numbers of fish, because this water flows there and makes the salt water fresh; so where the river flows everything will live. <sup>10</sup> Fishermen will stand along the shore; from En Gedi to En Eglaim there will be places for spreading nets. The fish will be of many kinds—like the fish of the Mediterranean Sea. <sup>11</sup> But the swamps and marshes will not become fresh; they will be left for salt. <sup>12</sup> Fruit trees of all kinds will grow on both banks of the river. Their leaves will not wither, nor will their fruit fail. Every month they will bear fruit, because the water from the sanctuary flows to them. Their fruit will serve for food and their leaves for healing.

And from the New Testament in Revelation 22: 1–5, we have another familiar river from Revelation, right through the middle of the Holy City New Jerusalem coming down out of heaven.

<sup>22</sup> Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear

as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb <sup>2</sup> down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. <sup>3</sup> No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. <sup>4</sup> They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. <sup>5</sup> There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever.

Offering this ordination message is a combination of joy at being chosen by Devin to share a few words on this most holy occasion and questions about what to say to him and all of you. What does it mean that he will now and forever be Rev. Dr. Devin Zuber? What does it mean to add this *Rev.* title? What does it mean to be an Ordained Minister?

For me, this night lights up as the Practice of Optimism, our Convention theme. Devin's decision to become an ordained Swedenborgian minister is the epitome of optimism.

I remember when Devin first came to the Committee for Admission to the Ministry in 2016. I was a member as president of our denomination. He asked to be admitted on the path of ministry preparation and ordination. He was already a professor in the Center for Swedenborgian Studies at our seminary. We asked why he wanted to be a minister, too. I checked with the committee, and this is what we all remembered, Devin. You wanted

*Continues on page 100*

## Cloud of Witnesses

*Continued from 99*

to know what your ministry students were experiencing to be a better professor for them and to understand the full spectrum of ministry; you also mentioned that this was important for your own personal, spiritual growth to walk with people facing serious life issues, illness, and death. This was seven years ago. What a long journey, Devin. You always have so much going on in your world and life, and yet, you also made room to keep this dream alive, honoring your grandmothers that were so important in your formative years, and searching for the right path you and the Divine were walking. We've watched you deepen this call as you fulfilled the steps required and moved closer to the Divine in your personal life.

At our annual Kansas Association meeting last May, members fondly reflected back on your visit to Camp Mennoscah, five years ago, at our annual fall retreat along the Ninnoscah River. They laughed as they remembered when you had the tractor driver stop the hayrack ride so you could hop off and run into a field of cotton to investigate something new to you – a cotton ball, which you picked to take home and show your daughters, Sophia and Catherine.

Devin, you have so many gifts and amongst them is your love of life, and nature, and your ability to share your knowledge and yourself with everyone in a memorable way,

So here we are, finally, your day of ordination and I'm wondering what this day may mean in your journey, your academic journey, your spiritual journey, and your life journey? You are a scholar in a demanding academic world. Graduate Theological Union students and Swedenborgian students

clamor to take your classes. You are a writer with a book and many articles featuring your byline. You are sought after to speak at national and international conferences and scholarly meetings. Many would be satisfied with all this, but not you. Now we will see what difference does this Rev. make? Only you and the future can answer this, but I have a couple ideas.



Let us turn to the Word and Swedenborg's opening of the internal sense. As I thought deeply and prayed about this message, I was drawn to the last vision of the prophet Ezekiel, and the river of life... and Genesis with the river of life in the Garden of Eden, and, of course, Revelation 22 with the similar vision from John of this beautiful, crystal-clear river flowing down the middle of the descending holy city New Jerusalem. I thought of Devin and his love of water and surfing and his love of searching for truth. The image of water/truth brought them all together.

What caught my interest in Ezekiel's vision was the deepening of the water of the river as he was led by the angel, first wading in the water ankle deep, then knee deep, then waist deep, and then where one had to swim and even then, it was a river, that could not be crossed.

My father was a farmer along a river. As a child I would wade along the bank, then when older I could venture into knee deep currents. This was a meandering small Kansas river. My mom would warn me about not getting too deep until I learned to swim. When I was older, I waded in the river waist deep and then, when I finally learned to swim, I was ready to explore the deep river water. I experienced this new freedom, that came with added responsibility to be careful of the sometimes swift current and drop-offs in the river as it was always changing with new rain. This relates so clearly to truth as we are always encountering new truth, small "r", and we must be careful and wise in our discernment.

This vision of Ezekiel as led by an Angel is such a beautiful lesson of how the Lord teaches us: from our first ventures into an innocent understanding of truth, a simple acceptance of

what we are taught, then the questioning begins as we go deeper and deeper into the waters of truth. And something wakes in us as we learn to swim and study and think deeply about what we believe and the truth we swim in. Some are OK with ankle- or knee-deep truth. But in my experience, most Swedenborgians seek out the deeper waters.

I wonder about you, Devin? Your mother and I had some informative conversations about you as a child when I asked her help to put together my ideas what to say today. You've probably heard this, but you were a difficult baby, hard to satisfy and entertain. She spoke about finally getting you a baby walker so you could get around and explore your home, and this helped a lot. One day, you made your way into a closet that had a pull string to turn on the light. You were

*Continues on page 101*



## Cloud of Witnesses

Continued from 100

fascinated and spent some time just turning on and off the light. We could go further with this analogy and what it means, but those here that know you, understand.

Your mother, Janna, also said you were always a deep questioner. I doubt you spent much time just wading. She added that you were somewhat impatient in school. She spoke of three special teachers that helped to answer your questions and encouraged their students to *think*: Carol Waelchli, Brian Henderson, and later, Jane Williams-Hogan. All helped to expand your love of history, art, and religion, teaching you to swim in the truth and realizing no one can ever completely cross this river of truth, the river of life. There is always more to learn and to be, and so you are taking on this new challenge of being an ordained minister to support your deep dive in a new way.

As we study and learn more and more, only the idea that we have it all figured out, or we are clinging to old, incomplete truth, will create the swamps and salt marshes in Ezekiel's vision. Those are the bogs in our life where the freshwater of truth cannot enter and bring new life. These parts of us remain in a negative, pessimistic, useless state of saltiness.

This vision is enlightening for all of us. It is so full of correspondences. A little salt is good, an element which unites truth to goodness and the desire to live as the truth teaches, we say "being of use." But too much salt can kill us. Salt is used as a preservative and can also represent a lack of willingness to change and cling to old truth, preserve old ways or old understanding. However, the Lord's ultimate truth is not static. It flows like a river we can never completely cross; it is infinite. If it gets stationary, it loses its energy and power. We can get caught in an eddy,

just going around and around with the truth we already have and not getting anywhere. Truth is always expanding our finite minds with infinite wisdom of the Lord to link with God's infinite love. It is only when love and truth are combined that the water is fresh and useful. And this is how we put it to use in our lives to be of service and regenerate our spirit. We receive from the Divine only as much truth as we are willing to use.

Devin, I remember talking with you about your grandmothers and the difference they made in your life. Your mother, Janna, and I talked about your relationship with Grandma Ruth and Grandma Janet or Nini and what they might say to you this evening if they could be here in the natural body. They are certainly here in spirit, as is your brother Justin, Jane Williams-Hogan, and many others in your cloud of witnesses, both in the spirit world and with you tonight.

**You have touched many people in your life, Devin. You are a connector of people and a keeper of friends. As your mother said, "You have an incredible ability to bring light and understanding to life," just like pulling that closet light string over and over.**

You have touched many people in your life, Devin. You are a connector of people and a keeper of friends. As your mother said, "You have an incredible ability to bring light and understanding to life," just like pulling that closet light string over and over.

And now with the Holy City descending as we read in Revelations 22, the river of the water of life is flowing in the middle of the city and it is watering the trees on either side to enable them to bring forth fruit (good works)

and leaves for the healing of the nations. The river of truth (our understanding of truth) deepens as we progress in regeneration, and enables one to do more and more good, and part of your path that is enhanced with being an ordained minister. You are a bridge builder to help heal our nation.

So, Devin, now we will watch, as adding minister to your roll of service to others, expands your call and adding the title reverend multiplies your reach. Just keep trusting the Divine will guide and provide and let love lead through your cloud of witnesses, all the angels around you.

When I asked your mother what your grandmothers would say to you this evening if they could be here in body, she was quick to answer. She said both grandmas would be and are overjoyed and delighted with your ordination just as she and your father are. Your grandmothers would be sure that this ordination will offer you more opportunities to serve others, which they both exemplified in their lives; and Grandma Ruth would remind you to always ask "What would the angels do?" I think she would laugh with her good humor and agree that it's meaningful that the title Reverend officially comes before Doctor. Reverend Doctor Devin Zuber.


Devin, my prayer for you:

As you live into your new title,  
May you search for truth through  
a widened lens?

May you write about truth with a  
renewed vision?

May you teach about truth with  
deepened wisdom?

Always remember, the title doesn't  
change the bearer, but the living  
of it does.

From *Secrets of Heaven* §3207. "In us (and in angels) truth is never, ever pure, or in other words, free of illusion.... Yet the Lord still accepts its true if there is good in it. Only the Lord is pure truth." Amen. 

# Planting for the Future

## *Message from the Ordinand*

BY REV. DR. DEVIN ZUBER

**T**he text for my sermon today comes from the gospel of Mark 4: 26–32:

He also said, “This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. All by itself the soil produces grain—first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come.” Again he said, “What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest of all seeds on earth. Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds can perch in its shade.”

On my long flight from San Francisco to Boston, I had a window seat. Back In the San Francisco Bay, I was leaving behind one of the coldest, wettest, and grayest June gloom summers we’ve ever had – it’s been San Francisco’s consistently coldest summer on record since 1911. Strange weather for us Californians, to lurch into one of the coldest wettest seasons, after decades of a parching mega-drought. As my plane approached the Midwest, I began to take note of a pale, sickly haze, a film that obscured the white clouds further below, and then I realized, of course, that I was looking down on the giant plume of smoke from the Canadian wildfires: arboreal forests, the largest single intact forest ecosystem in the world, was being incinerated somewhere down there, millions of acres of trees transmuted into ash in the sky.

I’m sure many of you went through some level of this on your journeys to get here. What a way to look at the earth, this ashy lens of tree death that reminds us it is, indeed, a small world after all.

As the Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg has put it, we are living through “Code Red” from the planet—our earth systems are out of alignment, destabilizing like a spinning top that gyrates and spirals out of control in increasingly dramatic extremes of weather. The uncertainty we find on the earth seems to mirror the fragility of our fraying democratic systems—unsettling cracks in governance, failures of equity and accountability, a general unbalancing and polarization. Left here, Right over there, and pundits speak ominously about the undertow of a so-called “slow civil war.” At a similar prior moment of turbulent history in the early twentieth century, the great Irish poet William Butler Yeats—who himself was a deep reader of Swedenborg—described this sense of unraveling, of centrifugal forces pulling cultural cohesion apart, in the following well-known lines from his poem, the “Second Coming,” which was written in the turmoil and aftermath of both the first World War, and Ireland’s own bloody struggle for independence:

Turning and turning in the widening  
gyre  
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;  
Things fall apart; the centre cannot  
hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the  
world,  
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and  
everywhere



The ceremony of innocence is  
drowned;  
The best lack all conviction, while the  
worst  
Are full of passionate intensity.

As our climate turns and turns in widening gyres, extremes of temperature and weather, how are we to find hope? How do we as Christians, as Swedenborgians who believe in the coming of a better world, engage with the Practice of Optimism—the theme for this year’s Convention—when our natural and political orders seem to be in such depressing disarray and deep disfunction? The best lack all conviction, the worst are full of passionate intensity.

It is the deepest honor and privilege to stand here tonight in Bridgewater, not as an academic or a scholar of Swedenborg, but as someone who joins the ranks with my brothers and sisters in the service of ministry and usefulness to this church. A cloud of

*Continues on page 103*



## Planting for the Future

*Continued from 102*

witnesses stands behind me that has brought me to this point—parents, grandparents—and I wonder about the line that goes further back for everyone like me who has felt a call to the ministry, a lineage that begins in the oldest of the Gospels, Mark, at the very end, after Jesus has returned from the dead and miraculously appeared—firstly, to the women!—and then to the eleven male disciples. The Great Commission is then given, and any minister within all the varieties of Christianity over the centuries has had to grapple accordingly with what it means to heed this final commandment from the Lord: We are to go into all of the world, and preach the Good News to the whole of Creation.

Perhaps this is the original instance of a Christian practice of optimism, as a spiritual discipline—to give Good News to the whole of Creation, not in spite of the world’s brokenness, but because of it. The Good News is a message of freeing transformation, that things do not have to be the way they are, that we do not have to be in a state of despair, mired in what Swedenborg would call the delusions of hell.

And isn’t it interesting that this command for the gospel, this good news of salvation, is not just a message to be preached to our fellow humans, but to all of creation? The Greek word for all of creation in the biblical text here is *ktisis* (κτίσις) – it means a creation that has been made by a Creator, a capacious term that is importantly, critically, not limited to humans, and can be read as entailing all of the creation and its various creatures. When I hear or read this Great Commission—to preach the good news to the whole

of Creation-- I often think of the that wonderful medieval saint, Francis of Assisi, who in the thirteenth century preached this message to the birds in the trees. St. Francis said:

“My sweet little sisters, birds of the sky, you are bound to heaven, to God, your Creator. In every beat of your wings and every note of your songs, praise him! He has given you the greatest of gifts, the freedom of the air. You neither sow, nor reap, yet God provides for you the most delicious food, rivers, and lakes to quench your thirst, mountains, and valleys for your home, tall trees to build your nests in, and the most beautiful clothing: a change of feathers with every season. please beware, my little sisters of the sky, of the sin of ingratitude, and always sing your praise to God.”

**The Good News is a message of freeing transformation, that things do not have to be the way they are, that we do not have to be in a state of despair, mired in what Swedenborg would call the delusions of hell.**

A practice of optimism from the Gospel of Mark onwards is grounded in turning to the Creation. Can *you* also, like St. Francis’s birds, voice praises of gratitude to God for food, rivers, and lakes, as effortlessly as the bird song which has filled our evening sky of this fine New England summer evening? Perhaps bird song is a kind of hope; in Swedenborg’s system of correspondences, birds represent “matters pertaining to the intellect,” which while at first hearing sounds quite dry and clinical, actually beautifully connects the flights and perches of our various trains of thought with these glorious winged creatures of the air. That great nineteenth century poet and female theologian from Massachusetts,



*Rev. Dr. Devin Zuber with his proud parents.*

Emily Dickinson, meditates deeply on the relation between birds and the practice of optimism in her poem, no. 254:

Hope is the thing with feathers  
That perches in the soul,  
And sings the tune without the words,  
And never stops at all,  
And sweetest in the gale is heard;  
And sore must be the storm  
That could abash the little bird  
That kept so many warm.  
I’ve heard it in the chilliest land,  
And on the strangest sea;  
Yet, never, in extremity,  
It asked a crumb of me.

The gospels are filled with an earthy turn towards creatures and creatureliness, grounded in the abundance and goodness of the planet. The kingdom of heaven, again and again, is described by Jesus as seeds and seedtime, the little mustard that becomes the largest of all garden plants, with shade for the singing birds; seeds that flourish and grow independent of human control: “Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. All by itself the soil produces grain.”

*Continues on page 104*

## Planting for the Future

*Continued from 103*

This well-worn parable, but one that never gets old, acquired new meaning for me this past spring when I traveled to Palestine with the Center for Swedenborgian Studies, accompanying students, and various members of our board and community. We traveled together up to the Sea of Galilee, and stayed in a Franciscan convent on the Mount of Beatitudes, reputedly the site where Jesus taught on the hillside, and delivered the teachings that came to be known as the Sermon on the Mount. The mountains and valleys around the shining lake where Jesus had lived and walked and preached were incandescent with wildflowers, and fragrant with blooming trees. As well as shrieking green parrots. We traveled northwards into the Golan Heights where the water from Mt. Hermon—the dews of Mt. Hermon—flowed furiously down towards the Sea of Galilee, a bucolic, almost impossibly beautiful landscape, until one looked closer, and began to realize that behind the fields of yellow and red flower -- poppies, anemones, and cyclamen—there were tangles of barbed wire, fencing with razors of concertina. My desire to run off and explore these flowered expanses was immediately tempered by the rusty yellow signs we began noticing, everywhere, which warned us of active land mines. In our bus, we passed bombed-out and abandoned buildings between the green, the shell of a burnt out car on the side of the road—remnants of a still active conflict between different groups and nations in a lethal territorial dispute. And still, there, spring after spring, these flowers in the Golan Heights return and bloom, impossibly, in a landscape scarred by trauma and violence.

Part of our time in the Holy Land was spent staying in the homes of

Palestinian families, who generously fed and housed us for a night. I stayed with one family of woodworkers outside of Bethlehem, along with my now fellow minister Dan Burchett. The family was very proud to tell us how in a way they were truly the oldest Christians in the world, descended from



while they may not have a cheap sense of hope—a false belief that somehow the current apartheid system in Israel, so rigged against them and denying them of basic rights, could ever deliver them any

the same stock of people who had first heard the good news of Christ's birth when the angels appeared in a blaze of glory to the shepherds outside of Bethlehem, keeping watch over their flocks by night. But, thirty years ago, in that house where Dan and I slept, where the family had been consecutively living for generations, the Israeli authorities came in and completely destroyed the family home with bulldozers, razing it to the ground. They lost everything, and had to rebuild the entire structure, story by story. Over dinner Dan and I asked the family how, then, in spite of all of this tragedy, did they still manage to have hope?

The family immediately, all of them, burst out into laughter at this question. They found it hilarious, once it had been translated, these two naïve white American guys, asking about hope – the older parents clarified to us – “Hope? We do not have hope. How can we? The situation is so absurd.” Though their laughter first surprised and chastened me, I later realized that

measure of justice—this family nevertheless had a fiercely beautiful, daily practice of optimism. In their backyard, they proudly showed us the only thing the Israeli bulldozers had not destroyed: an ancient gnarled olive tree, at least four hundred years old, which still produced olives, which they continue to make olive oil out of every year. Who knows how many of their grandfathers and great grandmothers and beyond had touched and pruned, water and harvested the fruit of this very tree, which we tasted in the olive oil used in the food that they prepared for us that evening. The tree was still there, with its leaves—leaves for the healing of the nations, and with ample branches for the singing birds.

Perhaps it is no coincidence that our little church tradition takes its cues from the theological writings of someone who was not just a scientist and a mystic, but a grubby gardener who got his hands dirty in the soil, and loved tending to his vegetables and flowers,

*Continues on page 105*



## Planting for the Future

Continued from 104

lemon and mulberry trees, and kept a large cage of singing birds in his garden. As a church, in general, we do not make enough of this fact. As any of you here who are gardeners know, to garden is inherently a practice of optimism – a hope and faith in a future flowering, a patience tempered by frustrations and failures, and always anticipating the unexpected and unpredictable. It also requires a letting go. Recall the gospel again: “Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. All by itself the soil produces grain.” In Swedenborg’s book, *Divine Love and Wisdom*—one of his theological works that is engraved with the image of an angel watering a bed of flowers, under a banner that reads *CURA ET LABORE*, “with loving care and effort”—Swedenborg euphorically describes the interconnectedness of all the things in the natural and spiritual worlds. He describes the forms and species of nature, propelling upwards into one another. Minerals aspire to be plants, and in all of plant life, Swedenborg says, “there is an energy towards movement” that approximates animal, and then human, life. “There is a ladder in all created things,” the text goes, an interconnectedness which



Rev. Junchol Lee helps Devin get prepared.

should “stun” our minds with amazement and wonder.

The practice of optimism in our moment of planetary emergency perhaps requires less rational plans for the future—less abstractions of facts and statistics about carbon emissions—and more cultivation of how we can attune ourselves to feeling the wonder and awe of the creation with our five senses, in this gift of our perceiving bodies: eyes and ears, touch, taste, and smell. When is the last time that you have been stunned by this interconnectedness, the ladder in all created things? When have you tasted and seen that the Lord is good?

Post COVID, still in our brave new world so heavily mediated by Zooms and constant screen-time, and the incessant distractions of so-called smart phones, we would be wise to heed the words of the Psalmist from 2,500 years ago. This is from Psalm 8:

O LORD, our  
Lord,  
How excellent is  
Your name in all  
the earth,  
Who have set Your  
glory above the  
heavens!  
When I consider  
Your heavens,  
the work of Your  
fingers,  
The moon and the  
stars, which You

## Convention Sermon

Continued from 98

I try to increase the power God has given me to see the best in everything and everyone and make that “Best” a part of my life. The world is sown with good; but unless I turn my glad thoughts into practical living and till my own field, I cannot reap a kernel of the good.

We have our role to play. Revelations promises us a beautiful future beyond our imagination saying:

“Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. ‘He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death’ or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”

I’m optimistic for this church. Let me end with a prediction of my own. Out of this little community will come powerful shifts in the unfolding of the new church community in ways that we cannot yet comprehend. We just need to keep following God’s guidance and do our part. Amen. ☸

have ordained,  
What is man that You are mindful of  
him,  
And the son of man that You visit  
him?

In closing, It is my hope and sincerest prayer for you in the summer months remaining, that we can all find adequate time to be still; to be quiet in the ways which open us to getting stunned with wonder, and to practice the corresponding gratitude and optimism which flows from these moments when we are able to find heaven in wildflowers, and in the singing of the birds. ☸



## Swedenborgian Church Youth League

# clear blue sky

1981  
october

## SCYL Teens at Convention

BY NORA BARNABY, *SCYL Clear Blue Sky editor*

Our 2023 Convention was held in Bridgewater, Massachusetts. We stayed at the beautiful Bridgewater State University campus and the staff were very helpful and accommodating. Rev. Sage Cole delivered a heartfelt, inspiring message about Helen Keller for our opening keynote. After each service there were delicious snacks and drinks set out for everyone to enjoy along with numerous display and sales tables. The SCYL sold much more than we expected at our table including Swedenborg candles made by Trent and Lilly Carson, *The Strange One* comic books, and even a Swedenborgian School of Religion shirt that was signed by many ministers and sold in a silent auction.

time laughing and having fun with our old friends while also meeting new ones which is one of the best parts of convention. Many of us teens helped escort those in wheelchairs to meals and worship, and during that, we learned that Gretchen Frauenberger is great at identifying birds by their calls. We also got to enjoy the scenery along



We went to the Bridgewater Church where Rev. Dr. Devin Zuber was ordained. It was a beautiful service and after, we ate cake and other snacks with our friends while we got to talk with him a little more. We spent a lot of

the way. Once we got to the meals, all of us teens crammed in one booth together to chat and eat. The adults spent a lot of their time in business meetings while both the Children's Program and us, in the SCYL, spent our time planning for our worship services. After a lot of hard work, the worship services were done very well. We liked the children's songs and the "pocket hug" rocks they painted for us. Later we went to the Elmwood Church where they told us the story about their church being

taken down and built again. From there, we left to go to a Fourth of July barbeque. Unfortunately, it was raining but we still enjoyed lots of really great food, played games, made friendship bracelets, and more. The last night of Convention was the best as we started it off by going to the top of the car park to watch the Fourth of July fireworks. Afterward, we were surprised with lots of ice cream bars from CVS. We ate them all up while playing games and joking around together so much that we didn't want to leave the next day. Overall, during Convention we learned a lot from our experiences, raised money for even more trips, and most of all, had lots of fun with friends. ☺

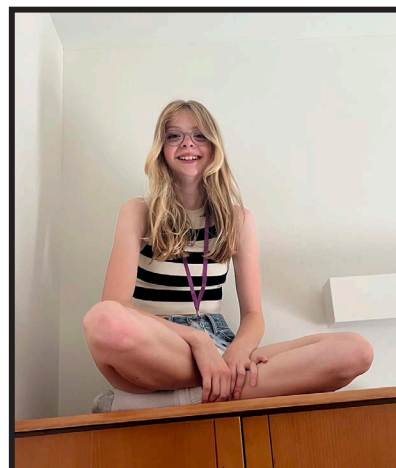
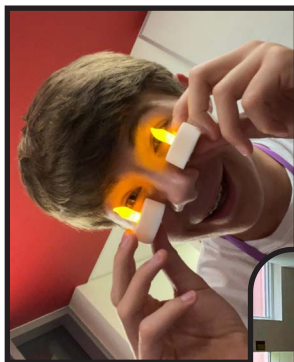


# SCYL Worship Service

BY ZSA ZSA DOLLEY, *SCYL president*

Us teens worked hard the whole Convention to make our worship service special, so much so, that we even built a flying angel for it! We schemed on what we could do and the options seemed endless but eventually we decided on a plan to incorporate the one thing we were feeling throughout the entire convention: a loving community. Whether it was limbo competitions breaking out while practicing worship or working together on scavenger hunts to win some candy, we all felt brightened by the community we formed through the SCYL. Our service started with the songs “Under Pressure” by Queen ft. David Bowie, and “Pressure” by Billy Joel as people walked in, symbolizing how much pressure we feel when we are isolated. Then the whole auditorium went dark, and Ephraim Baxter talked about a devastating train wreck in Quebec, followed by a song sung by Ellie Barnaby. The rest of us went up and stated our fears in the darkness. We drifted to the side as Julien Billings read a scripture about the light we find in community; then one by one we flicked on candles to light up our faces and continued the service in the light. Towards the end we gave out pens and paper for the congregation to write down their own concerns to be put in a rainbow box. We ended by singing the hymn, “If Your Heart Keeps Right” and during it surprised everyone. Our community of teens lifted an angel holding their rainbow box of concerns

into the sky while we all sang. We marched it up and away to show how our group raises anxieties and loneliness with light and angelic love. Not only did our worship service help to communicate our feelings to the adults, but we improved ourselves by facing our fears and lifting each other up. ☸



**Top:** Zsa Zsa hangs out on the closet top. **Above left:** Trent displays his candle eyes. **Above:** SCYL teens at their merch table with their angel. **Left:** Nora shares her fears. **Below:** The angel carries the box of anxieties.



## July Fourth Outing

BY PASTOR KELLY MILNE



Following the close of the final Business Session and Mini Courses, a contingent of curious convention goers were taken by two shuttles to the Elmwood New Church in East Bridgewater for a tour of the new church building. As you enter through the church doors, the sanctuary is directly in front of you with a beautiful altar built from the old church building trusses, alongside the pulpit stand, also made with wood from the old church. The church was admired by all who entered. Rev. Dr. Donna Keane had a captive audience as she spoke about the building, its history, and answered questions from all in attendance.

The shuttle returned to bring attendees to the Fourth of July Backyard Barbecue at the home of Elmwood members Roger and Nina Grindle. Driving up a long driveway with green grass, fruit trees, and gardens on both sides, the shuttle let the guests off near a tented

some just enjoyed each other's company. The adults spent time together talking with old friends and making new friends. Laughter could be heard under the tent the entire afternoon.

Once the barbecue was ready, Rev. Kevin Baxter led us all in singing the Hallelu grace, and coordinated the table order of the food line. As guests began eating, there was a peaceful quiet that came over the tent. Filled with good food, good conversation, and good friends, the outing was a success.

Many thanks to the Grindle family for the use of their home and backyard for our Fourth of July Backyard Barbeque. 🇺🇸



structure filled with tables and chairs, just waiting to become a place of community and social enjoyment. As guests continued to arrive, the smell of home cooked barbecue chicken and steak tips filled the air. The children brought their excitement and love of games with them. They played badminton, corn hole, ring toss, and