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## Poem on the Occasion of Pastor Herm Van Niejenhuis's Retirement

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# Poem on the Occasion of Pastor Herm Van Niejenhuis's Retirement

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*David Schelhaas*

We will miss the way he repeated the word *congregation*  
throughout the service, calling us by our name, saying it like a lover,  
like the word was honey in his mouth.  
And also the *salud*—the lifted water glass thrust  
ever so delicately toward the congregation  
that said, “Health,” “Cheers,” “Blessings,” but also  
“I’ve got the ice water and you don’t but don’t you wish you did.”  
We will miss, especially, this mischievous little-boy quality, the puns  
that popped up in prayers and greetings like, “God’s arms are  
Weid,-en-aar long enough to welcome visitors all the way from Georgia”  
and the “joke” which, before he says it, we see him debating with himself  
whether he *should* say it and then, resisting his inner censor,  
giving in and saying it. We will miss seeing our Pastor’s  
**Hermeneutical** struggles with **Dee**-ism.  
We will miss that best of compliments, the long “ah-h-h”  
following an especially well-played or well-sung song,  
the “ah” sounding as if he has been holding  
his breath during the entire song so as not to  
allow the static of his breathing to mar the music.  
We will miss greetings and benedictions  
introduced with words and pauses timed to the millisecond:  
“The Lord greets you . . . With these words.”  
We will miss sermons that end in paradox,  
with conflicting answers that are “yes” and “yes,”  
and sermons so fresh and surprising they take our breath away.  
We will miss his carefully crafted language that gave us sentences like  
“God set about to heal us and the world,  
beginning with his heel coming down on the serpent.”  
And we will miss moments when circumstance and text collide  
in such a way that as he begins to read Paul’s great  
“More than Conquerors” hymn at the end of Romans 8,  
he is struck dumb when he gets to “nothing can separate us. . . .”  
And so are we.