"We are thankful, O God, for our college, for the rich heritage of truth, faith, love, hope."

--John A. Dykstra
“The name of our college may strike some as being rather odd,” John Dykstra once remarked in a speech about Hope. Dykstra knew as an alumnus of Hope College that “this hope is no wishful thinking.” This pastor from Grand Rapids, who served both as a minister to many Hope alums and as a member of Hope’s Board of Trustees, retained his connection with Hope College long after graduation. Through naming a building after him, Hope has a permanent reminder of the man who believed in the school’s cause his entire life. Dykstra’s character, his untiring energy and love for his congregation, as well as his desire to follow God’s calling in his life even when it was unexpected still reverberates across Hope’s campus.

Born in 1886 in Grand Rapids, John Dykstra remained there until he left home in order to attend Hope College. During his youth, Dykstra worked as a newspaper boy and probably played baseball in the neighborhood or at school, as it remained his favorite sport well into adulthood. Dykstra attended Central High School, the local public school in his area of Grand Rapids. As a child, Dykstra did not envision a future as a minister, but instead hoped to be a railroad conductor.

As a member of the Hope College class of 1909, Dykstra attended a college very different from the Hope of today. The school was much smaller, with a staff of only seventeen faculty members, including the president. Van Vleck Hall was the only dorm for men and Voorhees housed the women. The chapel and library were in Graves Hall and most classes were held in Van Raalte Hall, located just east of the present site of Dimnent Chapel.

Class choices were few and relatively structured, with little room for electives. Students could take either three or four courses each semester and their classes had to be approved by a member of the faculty. Rules were much more rigid: dinners took place in a formal dining room in Voorhees, men and women could spend time together only in the evenings and only on certain days of the week, and dancing was not allowed.

Even with restrictions that may seem excessive by today’s standards, Dykstra enjoyed his time at Hope. During his four years, “he distinguished himself as an orator, scholar, and leader.” Interested in writing and speaking, he became a part of the Fraternal Society, a literary group that has since evolved into the modern Fraternal Fraternity.
As a member of the society, Dykstra would have frequently practiced both oration and public speaking. When he was a senior, Dykstra met his future wife, Irene Staplekamp, a freshman native to Holland. Irene was also a talented speaker, winning the state championship in women’s oration.

After he graduated, Dykstra went away to seminary to pursue a career as a minister. He attended Princeton Seminary for a year before transferring to New Brunswick Theological Seminary in New Jersey, a college of the Reformed Church in America.

He finished with his master’s work in 1912, the same year Irene graduated from Hope, and the two were married the following summer, in July 1913. Dykstra later reflected that the “greatest event of his life was his marriage.”

The newlyweds moved to New York, where John took over a pastorate in Catskill. Irene’s profession was education, teaching high school French, German, and Drama. Remaining in Catskill from 1913 to 1917, John Dykstra endured a difficult time with his congregation.

With the beginning of World War I, men were lost in battle and more local people desired the comfort of a church. He focused on the work of his pastorate, increasing the membership from about 450 to 550 people. His congregation remembered him as a “strong preacher and a whole souled pastor.” Irene Dykstra aided in the work of the church as the head of the Women’s Society. The Dykstras were also occupied with raising their two young sons, William and John Dean.

In 1918, Dykstra accepted a position in Hamilton Grange, New York, at a small church of just two hundred members. Although they expected the move to be more permanent, the family remained in Hamilton Grange for only a year. During that time, thirty new members joined the church, a testament to Dykstra’s popularity as a preacher. However, Dykstra soon learned that a church in his childhood home needed a new pastor.

The Central Reformed Church in Grand Rapids was a new congregation resulting from the combination of two other churches, the First and Second Reformed Churches of Grand Rapids; this congregation of over five hundred needed a pastor. Although they were both Reformed Churches, the First and Second groups differed in belief and style. The new Central Church needed someone to synthesize the two groups and keep the peace while still working to bring in new members.

The congregations determined that John Dykstra was the man for the job. Although he was only thirty-three, the church members knew that Dykstra was a powerful preacher and a man of integrity. They believed that “God led them to John Dykstra” and the vote to appoint him was unanimous. However, Dykstra did not want to uproot his wife and two young sons in a cross-country move. He decided that staying in New York would be better for his family so he declined the position, twice. The Central Church congregation was insistent about the calling, however, and they refused to take ‘no’ for an answer.

After two refusals, the church decided that a more direct course of action was necessary and sent a committee to New York in order to persuade Dykstra. “You are the person on whom we all agree,” the committee said. “We have come so far in this wonderful union, we wish to keep it so, hence there is nothing to do but wait for you.” The church members who spoke to Dykstra, along with the rest of the congregation, knew that in order to make the synthesis of the two churches work, they needed Dykstra’s help. Through their words, Dykstra felt that God was calling him to go to Grand Rapids. “This was too much,” Dykstra later recalled of the committee’s plea. If they needed him and were waiting for him, there was no way he could refuse to go.
And so, in 1919, the Dykstra family packed their belongings and moved to Grand Rapids. A six-bedroom parsonage was awaiting them and the family quickly made themselves at home in the church and greater community. Unfortunately, they were greeted by one of the worst flu epidemics in U.S. history and both John Sr. and John Dean were critically afflicted. Both survived, however, and the Dykstras managed to make it through the first year in Western Michigan.

John Dykstra began making progress in the church almost immediately. World War I was over and the 1920s brought a new spirit of hope to the people. They were thankful to God for peace and wanted to celebrate life. The young and handsome Dykstra brought his own energy to match that of his congregation. He started organizing groups and events to give churchgoers an opportunity to enjoy each others’ company. Young men returning from war were offered a special Bible Study and the parsonage featured an open house every week for John and Irene to build relationships with their parishioners.

Dykstra loved spending time with the members of his church, who remembered that “he never spoke ill of anyone.” People appreciated both his friendly nature and his skills as a public speaker. Worshippers appreciated his sermons and came to hear him preach every week. Services took place on Sunday mornings and evenings and an additional Wednesday service soon became necessary. Dykstra even started a radio broadcast of the services, since parishioners who were elderly or ill also wanted to hear the sermons.

The congregation grew rapidly, enough that the church needed to be extensively remodeled only two years after Dykstra had become the pastor. With $75,000 worth of renovations—featuring a larger auditorium, a balcony, a choir loft, and an organ—there was space enough to seat one thousand worshippers. Central Church now had the resources to become a powerful presence in the community and move its ministries city-wide.

New clubs and organizations started to form, including a Bowling Club and Dramatics Club, as well as numerous Bible Studies and a thriving Sunday School program. John preached to a growing congregation and Irene supervised the Women’s Society and became involved in other local ministries. She served as director of the YWCA and participated actively in the Salvation Army. Both of the Dykstras enjoyed writing and Irene wrote for local and church newspapers, whereas John published a book called *Heavenly Days*, a devotional for holidays and other special occasions.

Along with the success of the congregation came hard times. The Great Depression struck nine years after Dykstra moved to Grand Rapids, and his church members faced unemployment and financial hardship. In Grand Rapids, a quarter of the families relied on some form of public aid, due to the high rate of employment.
Although tithing and economic support of the church became more difficult for congregants, people still attended weekly services. Dykstra was able to help his congregation through this difficult period with his talent for speaking, both publicly and to individuals. One of the men from his church remembered that Dykstra’s “words carried strength and courage where it was most needed.”

This strength and courage would be even more critical with the coming years. During the second World War, Central Reformed Church lost men and women in the military, and families mourned their personal tragedies while the entire congregation followed the struggles of people all over the world. All of the church members needed Central Church to be a sustaining force for them and Dykstra did what he could to support his congregation.

He offered prayers and counsel to people, but also looked beyond Grand Rapids to aid others all over the world. Upon hearing that most people in the Netherlands did not even have a full set of clothes, Dykstra set about conducting a collection in order to help these European neighbors.

After the conclusion of the war, Central Church faced another tragedy when their historic building burned to the ground in 1953. The damage was so extensive that the site was no longer usable and the congregation was forced to meet in the local Central High School, where Dykstra had attended class as a boy. The church was able to pull through the disaster and construct a new building to accommodate their large membership. When the new church was dedicated in 1954, it came complete with a Dykstra Chapel, named after the pastor who had kept the people together when the church did not have a home.

Dykstra remained the pastor of the church until 1954, when he retired after thirty-five years of service. He had been Central’s only pastor, so he was given the honorary title of Minister Emeritus, and he continued to be involved in the life of the church. Along with this local recognition, Dykstra was also awarded worldwide recognition when he was knighted on behalf of the Queen of the Netherlands for his service to Dutch citizens during World War II. Inducted into the Order of Orange-Nassau, Dykstra joined an elite class of those afforded the highest honor the Queen can bestow.

Thanks to his work with the growing Central Church, Dykstra became a public figure in Grand Rapids. Even outside Central’s congregation, people wanted to learn about this prominent pastor. As a part of the Rotary Club, Red Cross, YMCA, and Chamber of Commerce, Dykstra had a wide arena of influence and made many acquaintances and friends. He was a subject of several Grand Rapids human interest articles, one of which
outlined details of his day-to-day life. Apparently, he liked to play dominoes, enjoyed custard as his favorite dessert, and loved to recite poetry, but wished that he could be as humorous as some of his friends.

The new Central Reformed Church

During his time as the pastor of Central Church, Dykstra also reinstated his involvement with Hope College, joining the Board of Trustees. The Board was a governing council of the college and included many local and regional pastors. When Dykstra became a member of the board in 1925, the school had not changed too drastically from when he last saw it in 1909. However, by the time Dykstra resigned his position in 1961, after having been president of the Board for twenty years, the school had completely changed.

On the board of trustees, Dykstra served on the standing committee on the Report to the General Synod of the Reformed Church of America. This committee was responsible for communicating to the RCA on Hope’s activities. Dykstra was also on the committees on teaching and campus improvements.

When he became the board president in 1940, he oversaw the work of the entire Board of Trustees, a very powerful position at the college. Dykstra was very successful as the president of the Board, enough that he was even considered for the job of the president of the college itself, though the position ultimately went to Irwin Lubbers.

During Dykstra’s tenure on the council, he approved and witnessed the construction of Dimnent Chapel and the Nykerk Hall of Music. He also watched the student living conditions change dramatically with the new Durfee and Phelps Halls for women, as well as Kollen Hall for men, which eventually became the first co-ed dorm. By the time he retired, men and women were living together in residence halls, dancing had become permitted on campus, and he had seen the college through the Great Depression and World War II. Hope College was a changing place and Dykstra was a part of the transformation along with the students.

In recognition for all of his work with the school, Dykstra received the ultimate honor—a building named for him. Dykstra Hall was constructed in 1967, six years after Dykstra had retired from the Board of Trustees. When the council of Hope College decided that more residences were needed for female students, they determined the need for a donor to make the project possible.

The new hall would be one of the few dorms in the area with the cluster system, a new concept in the 1960s, intended to bring living and learning together by giving the women a place to meet and talk about classes and complete their homework, as well as a space to socialize and build quality friendships.

When Central Reformed Church in Grand Rapids heard about Hope’s project, they wanted to be a part of it and to help Hope College and women’s education. They decided to make a significant contribution to the hall and subsequently had a stake in the naming process.
Although Dykstra had been retired for more than a decade, he still remained a vital part of the congregation. Central Church could not forget the pastor who had helped them to become a people of influence in their community. They now had the financial ability to help a cause like the construction of a dormitory at Hope and they remembered Dykstra for his contribution.

John Dykstra was able to attend the dedication of the building that still bears his name, and he watched as speakers paid tribute to his life and memorialized him forever. “For his inspiring commitment to Christ, for his warm devotion to Hope College, for his deep and abiding interest in young men and women, and for his faithful and dedicated service to the cause of Christ,” a member of Dykstra’s church, who had helped to raise money for this tribute, remarked, “the congregation of Central Reformed Church proudly names this women’s residence hall in honor of the Reverend Dr. John A. Dykstra.”

John Dykstra is justly remembered years after his death in 1968 for his reputation as a man of God. Following his calling to a place he had not expected, Dykstra found a life of service for God. His entire life was shaped by his understanding of God’s calling: “Jesus Christ fashioned his character, governed his thoughts, determined his career, anchored his intellect, was the source of his power, the center of his preaching, and the eternal hope of his heart.”

Hope College found a true friend in someone without obligation to remain connected to the school. But Dykstra’s time as a student encouraged him to have an ongoing relationship with Hope, and he used his abilities to have a positive impact on the college. The council, which Dykstra had served for years, recognized that he had been involved “both in the physical growth of the college, and in its steadfast Christian purpose.”

Even more than his material influence, Dykstra believed in Hope College, both as an alumus and friend of the institution. His devotion to Hope’s calling as an educational and Christian institution still serves an example today. “What is education at Hope College?” he asked, “It is a drawing out of the students’ possibilities; it is a training to give him dominion over his environment; it is also education to enable them to draw upon the boundless energies and life of God.” For, Dykstra believed that “In our pursuit of knowledge we are always moving in the direction of the unknown and the ultimate unknown is God Himself.”
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Photographs courtesy of the Joint Archives of Holland, Hope College.
This project grew out of my own recognition that the Hope community could be enriched by an examination of the lives of notable persons in Hope’s history. Words like “Phelps,” “Dykstra,” and “Kollen” are in constant use around campus but often with little understanding of the people behind the names. A knowledge of the people whose names we use in everyday conversation can serve to reconnect us with our heritage, as well as acquainting us with past and present visions for Hope College. At the suggestion and encouragement of several members of the Hope community, my idea evolved into a study of the eleven residence hall “ancestors.”

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If you would like to learn more about all the individuals for whom the other ten residence halls have been named, visit www.hope.edu/student/residential/halls and click on each building. For more information about the history of Hope College, visit the Joint Archives of Holland at 9 East 10th St.

Laura Shears, August 2008