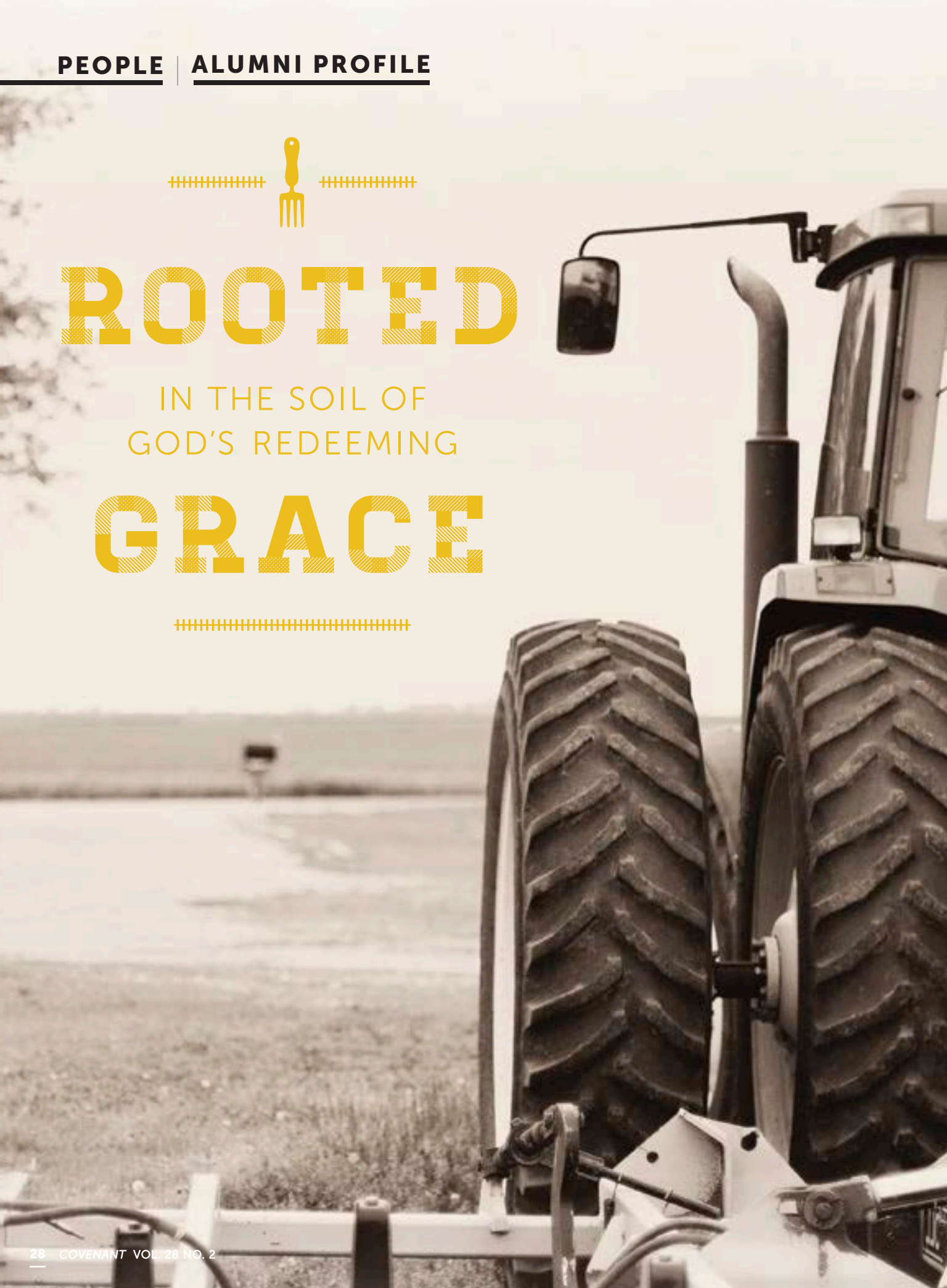


ROOTED

IN THE SOIL OF
GOD'S REDEEMING

GRACE





What does it mean to live as part of a beautiful but broken creation?

What is our relationship to the earth and to each other? Do the cycles and seasons of the natural world have any significance for us in this fast-paced, urbanized, technological age? What implications—if any—does the gospel have for all this? These are just a few of the many questions that Covenant Seminary alumni Duane Otto (MDiv/MAC '98) and Phillip Jensen (MATS '08) are seeking to answer—and help others to answer—through two similar yet wholly distinct farm-based ministries. Born and bred in the Midwest—Otto grew up in Illinois and Jensen in several states, including Minnesota, Indiana, and Iowa—both men feel a strong connection to the land, and though they each came by this connection in different ways, it exerts a similarly powerful influence on their lives, thinking, and ministries. Its roots run deep.

Faithfully Sowing the Seeds of Hope

*Trust in the Lord, and do good;
dwell in the land and befriend
faithfulness.*

*Delight yourself in the Lord, and
he will give you the desires of
your heart.*

— Psalm 37:3–4

Duane Otto grew up on the family farm in Gridley, Illinois, where, in addition to a strong Christian faith nurtured by his parents, his pastor, and the Lutheran catechism, he also developed an appreciation for the natural world around him. “In private moments on the farm,” he says, “the outdoors became a grand cathedral creating awe and wonder in my impressionable soul. I would spend hours sitting in a cottonwood or pine tree taking in the grandeur and glory that were shimmering and beckoning all around me.”

Otto’s faith and his love of the land fueled creative interests in landscape art and helped him survive some difficult years in high school. Later, he earned a degree in agricultural economics from the University of Illinois and spent a few years working as a manager for an agricultural supply cooperative. During this time, he says, “My knowledge and love for Christ began to grow exponentially.” One evening, feeling weighed down with sorrow for the sin of the world and his own soul, he could no longer dismiss a growing weight of another sort: the Lord’s call to vocational ministry. “I got on my knees and surrendered my life and career plans in agriculture and embraced the call to become a shepherd of God’s flock.”

A few weeks later, an encounter

with a book he found on a coffee table introduced Otto to the life and work of pastor and apologist Francis Schaeffer. Intrigued, he sought the counsel of a local PCA pastor and began to investigate the Francis A. Schaeffer Institute (FSI) at Covenant Seminary. Thus began a decade-long journey that would lead Otto to study at Covenant; to serve at the English branch of Schaeffer’s L’Abri Fellowship; to minister in associate pastorates in Louisiana and Georgia; to read the agrarian writings of essayist and novelist Wendell Berry; and, eventually, to envision a L’Abri-like ministry centered around the rhythms and revelations of life on a farm in rural Illinois. That ministry, now known as Ithaca Fellowship, has in a very real sense brought Otto full circle—Ithaca is based on the family farm where he grew up, and where he, his wife Julie, and their six children now live in the newly renovated house built by Duane’s great-grandparents in 1910. Here, they share their lives and their love of the land with people seeking answers to life’s difficult questions.

Named for the home of the wandering adventurer Odysseus in Homer’s epic poem *The Odyssey*, Ithaca is a nonprofit agrarian study center aimed at helping visitors understand and appropriate the full depth and breadth of the reconcilia-

Clockwise from top left: Duane and Julie Otto (children not pictured). Iconic images of a silo ladder and a curious goat at the Otto farm. Phillip and Missy Jensen and their children Evan, Anabel, and Brooks. Colorful produce from the Jensen farm.

tory work of Jesus Christ. “Through occasional teaching forums, life-on-life discipleship, and a biblical understanding of God in creation, culture, and conscience, we seek to inform, educate, and help people experience the redemptive interrelationship between Christ, man, and the created world,” says Otto. “We don’t currently have the capacity to house long-term students, but we do welcome short-term visitors in need of spiritual retreat or who are trying to sort through particular issues and need guidance in doing so.”

Visitors are free to use Ithaka’s library and classroom, and they often share meals and other activities with the Otto family. Depending on the season and the length of stay, guests might help with chores or projects around the farm so they can experience the Lord’s presence in a communal setting. Otto also uses a spiritual formation curriculum that addresses core issues of the heart, and he treats these tutorials rather like informal counseling sessions.

“Our goal in all of this,” Otto explains, “is to help visitors know God in all his glory and to take more seriously the revelation of his common grace in both the wonders of culture and the wonders of creation. We want people to see the multifaceted ways that we as fallen image-bearers express our soulful longings for order, security, beauty, meaning, and freedom, and to experience however briefly a place where friendships are cherished and maintained for the long term, where families relish the support of relatives, and where life is lived humbly with a trust in the Lord. Sometimes the best way to do that is to slow down, listen, and let the biblical truths open our hearts to the glory of God around us.”

Ithaka’s logo depicts a great tree firmly rooted in the ground and

flourishing abundantly. For Otto, this is not only the symbol of a mature, wise, blessed person—as illustrated in Psalm 1—but also of the complex interpersonal root systems of life that run deep within our souls and connect us to one another and to God. Though the seed of Ithaka is taking root and growing, progress has been slow. Fundraising can be a challenge, forums and other community events are more sporadic than Otto would like, and the fickleness of the weather often makes the farming aspect of the Otto family’s life difficult. “It’s a lesson in patience, a ministry of hidden work, and an all-consuming quest to live in harmony with the land, others, and Christ,” Otto notes. “Still, we are seeing meaningful growth, the kind that has less to do with harvesting and more to do with planting, watering, and nurturing that which is weak and vulnerable. We pray that in time the Lord will grow our ministry in significant ways, but if not, we’ll still be grateful; we’re content with the daily manna that sustains us in the moment and inspires greater acts of faith for tomorrow.”

Meeting God in the “Liturgy of the Wilderness”

The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork.

Day to day pours out speech, and night to night reveals knowledge.

— Psalm 19:1–2

Meanwhile, in a little town called Ida Grove, Iowa, Phillip Jensen, his wife Missy, and their three children bring a similarly holistic view of life, work, creation, and the gospel to others through a work they call Prairie Whole Ministry. Overseen by the

board of the Earthen Institute, an incorporated nonprofit, Prairie Whole Ministry is, in Jensen’s words, “mainly a ministry to troubled teenaged boys, mostly from our local area. Our farm work becomes a deliberate pedagogical tool to engage them with a purposeful apologetic of creation.”

Jensen’s road to a ministry through farming took a different route than Otto’s. His family moved around a lot when he was young, and though his parents always chose solid, Bible-believing churches to attend, the denominational affiliations were quite diverse. “Probably the most shaping Christian ethos of my home and childhood was that of L’Abri,” Jensen says. “No matter what church we were in, my parents always gave a certain L’Abri shape to





PHOTO BY PHILLIP JENSEN



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life and ministry. They emphasized hospitality, giving honest answers to honest questions, and the lordship of Christ over all creation, while also recognizing the brokenness that runs through all spheres of life.”

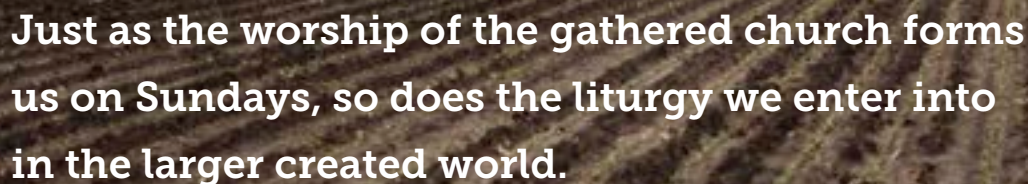
After difficult periods of depression in his first two years of college, as well as too much of what he calls “hypocritical, packaged, and un-earthly Christianity,” Jensen dropped out of school and went to live in a remote cabin in the far north of Minnesota, where he worked as a canoe guide and lodge keeper. “Perhaps it was because life slowed down during that time, but the Lord became very real to me in ways that I had never experienced before,” he recalls. “Everything became more deliberate, and I could consciously experience the Lord’s care for us in creation. I’ve

in my soul, and I saw this as profoundly subversive to the prevailing culture and the packaged Christianity I had known. So I began to pursue ministry in that vein.” This led to his return to college and the formation of a hospitality ministry at Iowa State University in Ames, Iowa. This served as a seedbed for the further development of the ministry ideas Jensen had envisioned in the wilderness. From there, he pursued studies at Covenant Seminary, largely because of the school’s connections with Francis Schaeffer and L’Abri, and eventually returned to Iowa to begin what is now Prairie Whole Ministry.

Jensen sees farm work as a way of introducing others to the “liturgy of the wilderness” he discovered in Minnesota; through it he hopes to shape the hearts and lives of the

large, home-cooked meals, and sometimes the boys help with that. We talk and enjoy each other’s company. We reflect on the work we’ve done together. We talk about the boys’ families, schools, and futures. We pray together. We include our three young children in this dynamic, and after dinner often becomes a time for everyone to play with the kids. I sometimes feel that this is the most important part of our ministry.” A nearby farmhouse called Cherry Creek Farm serves as an additional ministry home where families in need of shelter or a place of refuge are often cared for.

Jensen’s hope is that all of this makes the gospel more personal—and therefore more believable. “What we’re trying to do is invite the boys, the families at Cherry Creek Farm,



Just as the worship of the gathered church forms us on Sundays, so does the liturgy we enter into in the larger created world.

come to think of this as the ‘liturgy of the wilderness.’ Just as the worship of the gathered church forms us on Sundays, so does the liturgy we enter into in the larger created world. This doesn’t diminish or replace the primacy of the ministry of the Word, gathered worship, the sacraments, the centrality of Christ, the message of the gospel, or any of the means of grace, but all these things take place in a purposefully created world that is constantly singing its Creator’s praises. Sometimes it just takes a wilderness experience to help us fully appreciate the gifts and grace of God.”

It was out of this milieu that Jensen eventually discerned a call to “the pedagogical nature of a certain path in ministry.” He explains, “I had experienced something that per-formed a deeply winsome apologetic

troubled teens who visit his farm. “Most of the boys we get here are at the margins of family, school, society, and church,” Jensen says. “We want to involve them in creation and give them the gift of good work—away from TV or video games or just hanging out. We work several times a week through the school year and more often during the summer. The number of boys varies depending on the season, their schedules, and the work that needs to be done. I figure that, because the ministry began about two and a half years ago, we’ve had close to 30 boys work at our place.”

Meals with the Jensen family and deliberate engagement in their home and family life go hand in hand with the boys’ work on the farm. “We invite them into our house and to our table,” Jensen says. “Missy makes

our church family, and our supportive community to inhabit an alternative plausibility structure. We certainly do all sorts of things poorly and may be misguided on some, but we are trying to demonstrate a little picture of a holistic gospel that fits contextually within this little corner of creation. Though we haven’t seen any fireworks—or even a pillar of fire—many boys who come here have changed for the better in one way or another. God is at work here.”

Rick Matt is associate director of print communications at Covenant Seminary and serves as a ruling elder at Cornerstone Presbyterian Church (PCA) in South St. Louis County. He and his wife, Rebekah, have four children and live in Crestwood, Missouri.

