

KUYPER

College News

A Publication for Alumni & Friends

Welcoming DAN CHURCHWELL AS PRESIDENT

On the first day in office for new President Dan Churchwell, members of the Kuyper community came together in prayer to welcome him and offer words of encouragement.

For Dan Churchwell stepping into the role of Kuyper College president this summer felt right.

During his tenure at the Acton Institute in Grand Rapids, he had become more deeply acquainted with and appreciative of the work of Abraham Kuyper.

“I fell even more in love with the Reformed faith and how it works itself out in the world. When the opportunity to come to Kuyper came about, it felt providential,” he said. “I think I’ve been uniquely equipped to take on a role like this.”

That conviction carried him through a national search process (conducted by the Presidential Search Committee in

partnership with Grand Rapids-based Specialized Recruiting Group), and at the end of that process Churchwell was chosen to succeed Patricia Harris, following her retirement.

“Kuyper’s mission to form lifelong learners for purposeful lives of work and service to God and neighbor resonates deeply with my own journey,” Churchwell said.

Churchwell’s background includes a wealth of experience in Christian

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An Invitation to Collaboration



Stepping into my role as new president, I recognize Kuyper College's rich story of graduates who have served in a variety of ways across the generations and around the world. With 87 years of deep history, there's so much to celebrate of God's faithfulness. That history took root in particular environments and seasons.

And yet, it's important to recognize that though past successes are evident, none of these guarantee our future. While we continue with an unswerving commitment to train and equip students with God's Word, and integrate faith with learning, there's wisdom in pausing to assess where we are and what are our best next steps as God leads. Throughout each day I ask for God's wisdom, applying this to humbly asking questions that provide clarity of Kuyper College's unique value propositions, the kinds of students we're best positioned to serve, and how we can provide excellence in training and equipping minds, hearts and stable faith formation in our students.

Over the past few months, I've sat down with every member of our faculty and staff, asking them questions about their vision for Kuyper College, our culture, their work capacities, and what they need to succeed. I've also been connecting with students, constituents, board members, and trusted peers to ask advice on what they sense are the best steps forward.

No surprise, there are many answers.

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the parts of this place really are. A change in one area, whether academics, athletics, or KuyperWorks, doesn't stay contained there. It ripples through the whole environment we are trying to cultivate.

"What's become clear is how interconnected the parts of this place really are. A change in one area, whether academics, athletics, or KuyperWorks, doesn't stay contained there. It ripples through the whole environment we are trying to cultivate."

The reality is we face some serious headwinds that threaten momentum. The trends are that there are fewer students entering into colleges and universities, especially private institutions. Kuyper College is not exempt. Between needing

added financial support, providing expanded academic programs that translate into viable vocational calling opportunities, offering meaningful ways for students to foster community, and ensuring financial strength through supporting partners, each of these is a real challenge. When one part of an ecosystem is under strain, the whole system feels it. Ours is no different.

For those who know me: I move fast and decide with conviction. But the right next steps for Kuyper won't come from me alone. They'll come from asking the right questions, together, before we land on answers. I want to invite you to collaborate with us on this journey in Kuyper College's next chapter. Please join me in praying for God to provide all that we need to carry out His vision and mission for a school that measures successes in square inches, tending each sphere of this place, academics, athletics, work, and faith formation alike, for God's glory.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, reading "Dan Churchwell".

Dan Churchwell
President

The First Chapter

Summer Orientation welcomes Kuyper's newest students with the people, resources, and connections they'll rely on throughout their college experience.

Emily Perton remembers being a new student on an unfamiliar college campus. Now, as Kuyper's Assistant Dean of Students and Work, she works hard to ease that transition for each incoming class.



Emily Perton

A primary vehicle for that is Summer Orientation, held in three sessions, the last of which wrapped up in early August.

"It helps give students the chance to get things like housing, financial aid, enrolling in classes, and KuyperWorks employment squared

away early," Perton explained. "Having already visited the campus and met some of their classmates helps them feel more at home. After coming to one of the sessions, they can just focus on moving in and becoming part of the community."

The final summer 2026 session kicked off bright and early. Perton and several colleagues, including President Dan Churchwell, Academic Dean Tim Detwiler, and Admissions Counselor Caitlin David, were on hand to greet students and their families with a smile. After picking up personalized schedules and some free campus gear, everyone gathered in Walters Dining Hall for an official welcome.

"Today will help you get all your questions answered and connect faces with their titles, so you know who you can lean on during your four years at Kuyper. It's a very essential part of what we do here," said Churchwell, before opening the day with prayer and a short reflection.

From there, students jumped into a high-energy icebreaker before rotating through stations set up around the dining hall, getting a head start on class registration, financial aid,



Students rotated through stations at summer orientation, giving them the chance to meet directly with staff and faculty who will help them be successful at Kuyper.

tech access, and other essentials. Staff from the Spiritual Life, Academic, and Student Development teams then laid out their vision for supporting students in the year ahead.

"We want you to be very aware of the fact that we are a good place, we're solid, we have good faculty," said Detwiler. "You're going to learn about engaging the world around you."

A hearty lunch was followed by a KuyperWorks job fair, where students met potential supervisors and got a preview of their soon-to-be campus jobs. Later sessions walked through the details of the KuyperWorks program and student housing, and the day closed with an in-depth campus tour, leaving students more familiar with the campus, more connected to the people, and one step closer to finding their place in the Kuyper community.

"This is one of my favorite days of the year," Perton said. "I love getting to meet new students and help get their year started off on the right foot by making the connections that will make Kuyper feel more like home."

"We want you to be very aware of the fact that we are a good place, we're solid, we have good faculty. You're going to learn about engaging the world around you."

education, reflecting a passion that began in his childhood home in Rapid City, South Dakota.

His father served as a county prosecutor, while his mother gave herself fully to raising their family at home. Devout Christians and lifelong readers, his parents filled their home with books, and with the conviction that ideas mattered. It was in that household, steeped equally in faith and inquiry, that his own love of learning first took root.

“Because of that, I grew up with about 100 visions for what I wanted to do,” he recalled, smiling. “All of those books opened up so many potential worlds for me.”

That sense of curiosity eventually led him to a Bachelor of Arts from Northland International University, a Master of Arts in Biblical Studies from Central Baptist Theological Seminary, and further graduate studies in Philosophy of Religion and Ethics at Talbot School of Theology at Biola University, study that would prove formative to his intellectual life.

Seeing how God’s Word speaks into every area of life during his academic work ignited a desire to share that truth with others, and his calling to Christian education finally came into focus.

“Education should enliven the soul so that, no matter where God takes these individuals, that sticks with them. It



Dan Churchwell began his time as Kuyper’s next president getting to know students, staff and faculty.

helps set a framework for students to understand the world,” he added.

A Calling to Christian Education

Now, after over two decades living out his vocation, Churchwell brings to the Kuyper presidency a deep theological grounding and a proven record of institutional growth, program innovation, and financial stewardship.

His formal work in Christian higher education began at Whitworth University, where he served for three years as a full-time lecturer in business and social ethics.

Next, he spent seven years at Moody Bible Institute’s Spokane campus, where he contributed to 300% institutional growth, led Washington State accreditation efforts, developed curriculum across four academic departments, and placed more than 800 students in internship and service experiences with national organizations.

At both institutions, Churchwell’s work focused on the intersection of learning, vocation, and community engagement, helping students discover their calling through hands-on work serving with community members, and addressing real needs.

“I served on both the teaching side and the administration side. I was deeply involved in the process of learning how a smaller campus can grow, and what it means to create a vibrant campus culture,” Churchwell recalled.

Most recently, he served as Director of Programs and Education at the Acton Institute in Grand Rapids, where he oversaw a global portfolio of educational programs, managed multi-million-dollar grant relationships, and led strategic partnerships with universities, businesses, and nonprofit organizations worldwide.

During that time, the Institute was also responsible for a significant project, translating and publishing over 50 percent of Abraham Kuyper’s work, the very project that, as he described earlier, deepened his appreciation for Kuyperian thought and gave him a unique connection to the College he would eventually be called to lead.

A nationally recognized speaker, Churchwell has addressed universities, conferences, and churches on the relationship between faith, work, economics, and culture, a platform that positions him well to serve as Kuyper’s

Kuyper News and Events

Marriage

Alyssa Blom (2013) and Stephen Vajko were happily married in June of this year.

Birth

Monica (2021) and Daniel Xayabout welcomed baby Timothy on May 29, 2026.



Professional Development

Julianna Kempema (2019) became an ordained Minister of Word and Sacrament in the denomination of the Alliance of Reformed Churches.

Dylan James O'Brien Pahman (2009) published a new book, *The Christian Roots of American Liberty: A Reader*.



The Churchwell family from left to right: Selah, Dan, Julie, Sojourn, Aletheia, and Ariston.

ambassador to donors, church partners, and the broader Reformed community.

“As I deepen my connection to Kuyper College, I’m looking forward to the opportunity to help share the work we’re doing here,” he said.

The Dignity of Work

That focus on the interaction between faith and work aligns closely with one of Kuyper’s most distinctive characteristics: its designation as a federally recognized work college.

As one of only eight such institutions in the United States, Kuyper integrates

academic study with meaningful campus work as a core component of every student’s education.

Churchwell sees this model as both a strategic advantage and a deeply biblical vision for higher education, one that directly addresses student debt, vocational confusion, and the cultural question of what work is ultimately for.

“Kuyper is well-positioned to help young people understand the dignity of work, the integration of faith and vocation, and the call to serve neighbor as a deeply biblical vision of human flourishing,” he said. “As President, I will work to champion this distinctive

identity while strengthening the academic foundation that makes it possible.”

Rooted in Community

Churchwell’s commitment to integrating faith with all areas of life is a personal one as well. An ordained elder and committed student of Kuyperian thought, he brings to the presidency a deeply rooted understanding of the role the local church plays in shaping lives.

“My father was also an elder, so that was modeled for me growing up. I learned at a very young age that the power of the local church in a believer’s life cannot be overstated,” he emphasized.

He and his wife, Julie, were married in 2001 and now make their home on the northeast side of Grand Rapids with their four children: daughters Sojourn, Selah, and Aletheia, and son Ariston.

As a homeschooling family, the Churchwells are woven into the local homeschool community, and in their spare time, they’re often on the road, having racked up thousands of miles together on cross-country trips.

Churchwell emphasized that he and his family are eager to join the Kuyper community and become part of the College’s next chapter.

“I believe God is doing something special at Kuyper, and I am honored to be part of that story,” he said.

Join us to Celebrate
The Inauguration of President Dan Churchwell
 October 7, 2026
 Kuyper College Campus | 10:30 AM
 A livestream will be available for those who wish to watch online.

Green Bananas

Several years ago, Dan Vos Sr., founder of Dan Vos Construction Company, invited me to stop by his home for lunch. Dan was a generous benefactor to Kuyper College (then Reformed Bible College), championing the vision of students equipped with biblical and

theological understanding they could apply to every area of their lives.



Nate Vander Stelt
Interim Chief
Advancement Officer

Well into his 80s, Dan had physical limitations, but his mind was razor sharp. As we sat over soup and a sandwich, I asked, “How are you doing, Dan?”

“Well,” he replied, “I have green bananas on the counter.”

Perplexed, I asked what he meant. “Those bananas are good for at least a week,” he said with a smile. “And so am I, as far as I know.”

Then he grew serious. “Don’t ever underestimate what God can do in and through you, no matter how young or old you are, whether you feel prepared or not. Just be ready to serve Him every day with everything you have.”

As I think about Kuyper’s need for financial support, I’m reminded it’s not just the funds people give. It’s also wisdom, encouragement, and prayers. Across generations of alumni who have served locally and globally, there’s a holy ripple effect as God has used this institution to train hearts and minds to weave His Word into every sphere of life. Faithful supporters stand alongside that legacy, and we are profoundly grateful.

Working closely with Dan Churchwell over the past several months, I have seen deep respect for Kuyper’s past, his candid assessment of where Kuyper stands today, and his forward-looking anticipation of how God will use Kuyper to train and equip hearts and lives for Kingdom service.

Together, may we invest in the next generation of those who will serve and lead to advance His Kingdom, maximizing every day, every moment, every resource, for His glory.

Green bananas, anyone?

In My Words

MORE THAN MAINTENANCE

My journey to Kuyper began the way most journeys do—well before I knew it had started, and long before I understood I was being prepared for it.

I grew up in a family where survival was the primary way of getting through life. Looking forward to the next meal, or even the next day, was about as far as my vision was trained to go. When I found

Christ and discovered that those things are taken care of—that He loves me and raises me up as His son—life became a mission rather than a matter of getting by. My mission took shape around a simple idea: to become the person I always needed when I was younger.



Clint Nickoles
Director of Physical Plant

That mission led me in several directions at once. After serving in the military, I started a family and began taking college courses at night. I worked a wide variety of jobs, including maintenance work, to make ends meet while I studied.

Eventually I pursued degrees in ministry leadership and social work, and found a deep love for working with students as a behavior specialist and building relationships with families through the public school system. Each season added something new—skills, perspective, empathy.

For a long time, I believed my long-term calling was to become a social worker. But somewhere along the way I realized I already was that person. And there were people right where I was who needed me.

When a friend mentioned that Kuyper might be looking for a maintenance person, I prayed about it. What I sensed from God wasn’t simply a nudge toward a job—it was a call: *Go, but not as a maintenance worker. Go as my disciple.* So I did.

Now, as Director of Physical Plant, I draw from every chapter of my life—military service, church ministry, public schools, facilities work—to serve this campus and the students on it. I work closely with students through KuyperWorks, teaching practical skills while hoping to model something deeper. I want to show them that no matter what role you hold, you can show up as a servant, a mentor, and a witness.

The students here have shaped me as much as I hope to shape them. I see their passion for their fields, their desire to grow in faith, and their willingness to wrestle with hard questions. It reminds me daily that this place is more than a campus—it’s a community of purpose.

I came here to help keep a campus running. God had something bigger in mind.

New Coaches Join Kuyper Community



KUYPER COLLEGE
COUGARS

Experience on the court and a passion for mentorship will guide two women's programs forward.

Kuyper College Athletics has named new head coaches for both the women's basketball and women's volleyball programs, bringing decades of combined playing and coaching experience to the Cougars.



Coach Nikki Thompkins

"I am beyond excited to start my head coaching journey with Kuyper College."

She went on to a professional career spanning eight years, training with the WNBA's Detroit Shock in the league's early years before playing internationally in Israel, Portugal, Switzerland, and Turkey. Since retiring as a player, Thompkins has stayed rooted in West Michigan basketball as a coach and mentor, founding the nonprofit Big Nik Inc. and its AAU program, BNB Basketball, which pairs skill development with academic support and community service for young athletes.

"I am beyond excited to start my head coaching journey with Kuyper College," Thompkins said, adding that she's grateful for the chance to lead and make an impact both on and off the court.

Nikki Thompkins takes the reins of women's basketball, while Aubrey Bates is the new head coach of women's volleyball.

Thompkins is a Grand Rapids native and graduate of Grand Rapids Creston High School who then played collegiately at Central Michigan University from 1991 to 1994, finishing with 1,258 career points and 780 rebounds while setting a program record for career field goal percentage that still stands today.

A Coopersville High School graduate, Bates built one of the most decorated careers in Siena Heights University history, earning induction into the Siena Heights Hall of Fame for the 2025–2026 class. She left the program as its all-time leader in assists (4,751) and service aces (214), was named a NAIA All-American in 2022—the first in program history to earn

that honor—and was the WHAC Setter of the Year in 2021. Bates also recorded more than 1,300 career digs, showcasing her all-around game.

Since graduating, she has coached within West Michigan's club volleyball scene, building relationships with many of the region's top young players that are expected to aid Kuyper's recruiting.

"My goal is to build a program founded on hard work and accountability," Bates said, adding that she wants student-athletes



Coach Aubrey Bates

"My goal is to build a program founded on hard work and accountability."

to grow both in the classroom and as individuals.

Athletic Director Tyler Whitcomb welcomed both coaches to Kuyper, noting that each understands what it takes to compete at a high level and shares the college's commitment to developing well-rounded student-athletes. He pointed to Thompkins' track record of shaping athletes on and off the court, as well as Bates' championship pedigree as a player and mentor, as strong fits for the direction of Kuyper's athletic program.

Follow Kuyper College athletics at kuypercougars.com

STUDENT TO WATCH

Nathanael Liberty

I grew up all around metro Detroit. My family experienced a lot: loss, death, divorce, addiction, and plenty of tension along the way. Good influences weren't always around, but every one of those events shaped me into who I am today. I wouldn't change a thing.

I went to Troy High School, where AP literature classes sparked a deep interest in philosophy and the existence of God. My parents both went to graphic design school in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. My mom is now a nurse and my dad is a plumber and electrician. I had Christian roots from childhood, and through that exploration I found truth in Jesus Christ. When it came time to choose a college, the combination of athletics and a biblical education made Kuyper feel like a great fit. I was right.

If you want a "normal" college experience, then Kuyper isn't the place to be. It's not like larger universities. Kuyper is a place where you will have more spiritual growth and growth in true wisdom than anything else.

Kuyper has shown me the evidence pointing to the validity of the Bible and the history of the church. Beyond that, I've grown

"Kuyper has shown me the evidence pointing to the validity of the Bible and the history of the church. Beyond that, I've grown in maturity, literacy, social ability, and the art of conversation."

in maturity, literacy, social ability, and the art of conversation. My professors care about me deeply, and my friends inspire me to not just follow a religion but to live it out with action and authentic faith.

The professors here have each left a mark. Dr. (Anthony) Bradley stands out above the rest. He has made a genuine effort to be part of my growth into manhood—one of the most humble men I've ever met, with a true appreciation for others and their situations. He is encouraging and kind, yet bold and honest. I'm not sure where I would be without his advice throughout my young adult life.

I am a business leadership major and plan to graduate in 2027. Since I was young, I have always wanted a career that could change the world for the better. I don't know exactly where that will lead, but any door that opens, I will be walking right through.

My family is historically Catholic, and my interest in faith has been present throughout my childhood. But it was at Kuyper, through a real education in theology, that it was truly fulfilled. Looking back, God has always had a hand in my life. I wouldn't say life gets easier year by year. What I would say is that I am made stronger, growing in the fear of the Lord and the fruits of the Spirit by His divine grace.



CLASS **2027**
HOME **Troy, Michigan**
MAJOR **Business Leadership**