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REVIEW

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Highflying 'Peter Pan' show ready for Sioux Center stage

Company comes in to give cast gliding lesson

BY ALEISA SCHAT
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SIoux CENTER—This weekend when the lights go up on the Te Paske Theatre stage in Sioux Center, Michael, John and Wendy Darling will be preparing for bed in the nursery, their feet planted firmly on the ground. Minutes later, though, the magic will begin.

The nursery's large windows open and Peter Pan comes flying in, trailing fairy dust and landing softly on the floor. It is the first of five scenes in the classic 1954 musical by the same name that show performers suspended or soaring. In total, there are nine choreographed flight sequences during the play.

Before her first flight, 19-year-old Rachel Maggert of Matlock, who plays Peter Pan, was admittedly nervous.

"I was not excited at all — I was really worried about it," she said.

After working through the first scene, however, Maggert began to relax, learning how to move her body to control her position in the air, learning the lines her arms, legs and back should make to evoke carefree, boastful Peter. During some of her flights, she sings.

"It's fun — you spin a lot," Maggert said.

Eleven-year-old Annemieke Lappenga of Sioux Center, who plays Wendy's daughter, Jane, at the end of the play, is one of the youngest

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Fourteen-year-old Anneke Van Bruggen, who plays Wendy, takes her first flight while 11-year-old Asher Hespe and other cast members look on during a flight rehearsal for the musical "Peter Pan" in Sioux Center. Photo by Aleisa Schat

DENOMINATIONAL *division*

PART 2 OF A SERIES:

BY ALEISA SCHAT
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Worshippers stand and sing during a praise song at Trinity Reformed Church in Orange City. Trinity is among the handful of N'West Iowa churches to remain affiliated with the RCA, the church's historic denomination. Photo by Aleisa Schat

N'West Iowa churches affiliated with historic denominations, including the Reformed Church in America and the United Methodist Church, are splintering along political and theological lines. The choice — to leave or stay — reflects a decision to pursue renewal from within the denomination or find it elsewhere.

"My goal, and the goal of our leadership here, was to say, 'How can we make sure that we trust the Holy Spirit to work through good process.'"

BRIAN KEEPERS, TRINITY REFORMED PASTOR



REGIONAL—N'West Iowa churches began to sever ties with the Reformed Church in America in 2022, departing in droves from one of the oldest Protestant bodies in the country. Decades of dissension within the denomination took the form of an urgent question — leave or stay?

Amid the turmoil, the Rev. Brian Keepers stepped before his large Orange City congregation, which gathers each Sunday as Trinity Reformed Church. He preached patience.

"There's been an enormous amount of anxiety in northwest Iowa," Keepers said. "I've even heard some of the leadership in the RCA say that among the pockets of the RCA, this has been probably one of the most anxious pockets."

Rather than reflexively putting the

matter to a vote in late 2021, Keepers and his leadership team undertook a process of discernment with their congregation.

"My goal, and the goal of our leadership here, was to say, 'How can we make sure that we trust the Holy Spirit to work through good process,'" Keepers said. "We don't want to be anxious. We don't want to let this be a decision that's driven by our anxiety."

The RCA is home to some of the region's oldest churches, planted in N'West Iowa soil by Dutch settlers in the late 19th century. By 2021, however, the denomination was beginning to come undone, fracturing along political and theological lines.

Along with preaching a sermon series about biblical discernment that fall, Keepers and his leadership team organized small discernment groups composed of willing members of the congregation and leadership team. A congregationwide survey also was administered early in the process.

"This wasn't a matter of deciding whether you're going to renew your Netflix subscription or not — we were inviting them into discernment," he said. "But at the end, it wasn't just going to be about taking a vote to decide what

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Fight still ongoing to save Manfred House

Daughter working to rescue dad's structure

BY ELIJAH HELTON
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LUVERNE, MN—Save the Manfred House hopes to revitalize its cause with state officials blocking a restoration effort.

Built by Doon native and prolific writer Frederick Manfred, the unique building has been closed since 2015 because of water damage. The Manfred House sits in Blue Mounds State Park, just outside Luverne in Minnesota's southwest corner.

The Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, which acquired the house in 1972, determined in 2021 that the

structure, bespoke and unkempt, was not rescuable in its current form. It published options for what it is calling the Eagle Rock Vista Redevelopment Project, which would include at least a partial demolition of the Manfred House.

The late author's daughter, Freya Manfred, is leading what has grown into a yearslong effort to restore the historic building. She feels not just dismissed by bureaucracy but ignored entirely.

"The DNR's response to everything we've been trying to do for quite some time has been silence, a wall of silence," Manfred said. "So, you have to try to figure out some way to jump over the wall

See MANFRED on A5



The Manfred House at Blue Mounds State Park outside of Luverne, MN, still stands. It was built by Doon native and writer Fred Manfred and his daughter wants the house restored. Photo by Elijah Helton

Sioux board cultivates new policy language

No action taken yet for farmland matter

BY ERIC SANDBULTE
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ORANGE CITY—Sioux County zoning director Shane Walter presented new language that could better define what counts as nonfarmable ground for conditional use permit applicants seeking to build houses on agriculture zoned land during Tuesday's county board of supervisors meeting.

There was no action taken on the matter at the meeting since it was presented to the board for informational purposes and to garner feedback. The board wanted more time to consider

the proposed changes and plans to provide feedback at its June 13 meeting.

The purpose of the proposed changes is to continue to protect the county's farm ground, according to Walter.

The existing ordinance allows the issuance of a conditional use permit to build a house on less than 35 acres of what's considered nonfarmable land if one of these three conditions are met:

■ At least 75 percent of the site contains soil unsuitable for agricultural operations.

■ The site is an irregularly shaped lot that because of its area, size or shape has limited potential for ag production.

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ABOUT HALF OF AREA CHURCHES

DECIDE TO REMAIN LOYAL AND STAY WITH RCA

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NEWS



Kate Reuvers sings a praise song next to Rosalyn De Koster and Angela Kroeze-Visser at the front of the sanctuary of American Reformed Church in Orange City. It is among the handful of regional churches to remain in the RCA. Photos by Cory Schmitz

Deciding to remain faithful to RCA

CHURCH

Continued from page A1

we do — because that's not necessarily the biblical model of discernment."

Keepers encouraged his congregation to consider its relationship to the RCA as a covenant, like a marriage.

"Sometimes, the covenant has been so broken, the healthiest thing is for there to be a divorce," Keepers said. "But that's like a last resort, right? And if we have to go that direction, we don't want to take that lightly. So, have we done everything we can to really be faithful to our part in this covenant?"

Dissension

Trinity's discernment process ended in a decision to remain committed to its historic denomination — ultimately, there was no vote. The church, which has a satellite campus in Hospers, is one of only two historically Reformed churches in Sioux County to stay in the RCA, and the churches that have left often have done so citing a desire to settle definitively questions related to human sexuality, including same-sex marriages and the ordination of LGBTQ clergy.

The RCA is not alone in facing dissension within its denomination, and along with the United Methodist Church, it is among the latest Protestant denominations to strain to a breaking point. Like the UMC, the RCA officially holds to a traditional stance on marriage and human sexuality. However, in practice, some of its congregations are "open and affirming," and in the last decade, efforts to codify a traditional stance in its Book of Church Order have not received the necessary votes.

Despite the denomination's official stance, departing churches are not satisfied with a church polity that allows individual congregations to welcome gay members and sanction same-sex marriages. Many have voiced a concern that their denomination is straying from a faithful interpretation of the Bible.

"The presenting issue is human sexuality," Keepers said. "But the deeper thing, I really think, is 'How do we engage difference with one another — maybe at times deep difference, where there's some strong passion in terms of what we believe?'"

Divisions within these historic denominations register the deepening political divisions of the culture at large, but within churches, the battles are waged in terms that are doctrinal and theological. At stake are questions about how Christians should read the Bible and make sense of its implications for life today, Keepers said.

"What we were wanting to do was to say, 'You can have your convictions. In fact, it's good to have convictions,'" Keepers said. "You and I can still be connected, and with humility, still be in dialogue with one another, knowing that our unity, as brothers and

sisters, is in Christ and His life, death, resurrection — it's in what He's done for us."

Officially, Trinity has reaffirmed its historic position on matters related to human sexuality; however, the church preserves space for sincere Christians to disagree.

"We have clarity as a church — and maybe not everybody who's part of Trinity is in the same place — but as a church, our overall stance is that we hold to a more traditional position on human sexuality," Keepers said. "Equally important is that we want to have a posture that loves all people, and that seeks to embrace all people. And we realize holding that position, and that posture, is often messy."

Making space for disagreement is not the easy way out, according to the Rev. Elizabeth Hardeman, whose Orange City congregation, American Reformed Church, remains affiliated with the RCA. While Trinity officially continues to affirm a traditional view of marriage and human sexuality, it remains in covenant with churches like American, which is home to some gay members. Rather than choose an official position, American has charted what co-pastors Elizabeth and Mike Hardeman call a "third way."

"It's actually much easier to pick a side," Elizabeth said. "This is the harder way — because I do have a strong personal opinion, and so the easier way for me is to hang everything on that. It is much harder — much harder — to try to bring people together who don't have the same ideas."

In navigating that "third way" which makes space for disagreement within her congregation, Elizabeth looks to the model of the early church, a diverse first-century movement that took uneven shape across a broad swath of the ancient world.

"There was so much diversity, and really disagreement, about what it looks like to be followers of Jesus," she said. "And they kept trying to cobble together a community out of that, by focusing on the main issues around, 'Who is Jesus? And what is grace?'"

Attrition

In 2021, Trinity's attendance numbers were already down, perhaps a symptom of the COVID-19 pandemic, which caused attrition in church attendance across the country. More specifically, Keepers speculates that pandemic protocols at Trinity may have upset some members who resisted masking and mandates. The steepest drop off in regular attendees, however, happened after the discernment process was underway.

"Attendance before the pandemic was around 1,000, consistently," Keepers said. "Now, after the pandemic and everything we've been through, it's probably closer to 700 on a Sunday."

Even with smaller but steady attendance numbers, Trinity is among the largest churches in N'West Iowa. Each Sun-



The Rev. Elizabeth Hardeman, who creates space in her church for deep disagreement, talks to a congregant after a Sunday worship service at American Reformed Church in Orange City.

day it holds two morning worship services in its vast, theatrically lit sanctuary. Demographically diverse, the congregation includes older parishioners and young families; it also draws a large but shifting number of area college students who fill its seats by the hundreds. Among the worshippers who ultimately left Trinity, many found new homes in the region's breakaway churches.

According to RCA communications director Christina Tazelaar, since January 2020, the RCA's East Sioux Classis has lost, or is in the process of losing, roughly half of its churches. Seven have left or are in the process of leaving, and seven have stayed, although the number rises to nine if satellite campuses are counted. Together, the East and West Sioux classes cover and extend slightly beyond the coverage region of The REVIEW.

In the West Sioux Classis, 13 churches will remain, including one new congregation, Maria Magdalena Reformed Church, which was established as an official RCA church plant in February. Twelve churches have left West Sioux Classis or are in process of leaving.

Wanda Korthals, a member of American Reformed Church, was president of the East Sioux Classis in 2022 and in 2021, she was in the first of her three-year term on the leadership team. Keepers is this year's president.

"It became very clear three-quarters of the way through the year that these alliances that were first just talked about, and then we're starting to form, had become a very real thing, and had really begun to stir churches who wanted to leave the denomination," Korthals said. "By November of that year, we had a special meeting, and I could already in my mind identify the churches that wanted to leave."

Many breakaway churches have gone on to join newer, and somewhat looser, denominational structures, including the Alliance of Reformed Churches, a cooperative of independent churches that share resources and align theologically on issues like same-sex marriage. Since it was founded in 2021, 149 partner churches have joined the ARC, 32 of which are in Iowa.

For years, human sexuality has remained front and center

of debates within the RCA, and in 2018, the denomination's governing body, the General Synod, recognized the RCA was at an impasse.

"The RCA has had and continues to have a traditional position as a denomination on same-sex marriage and ordination," said RCA church member Kim Van Es. "However, when it comes to church discipline, there's no way that the denomination can enforce that on classes. That's not how our denomination works."

This year, Van Es, who lives in Sioux Center and has served as an elder at American Reformed Church, was elected moderator of the General Synod Council, the leadership team that guides the RCA in carrying out the work of the General Synod between annual meetings. She also will serve for the third time as a delegate to this year's General Synod. The RCA has an essentially Presbyterian form of government, and much of the decision-making power is invested in church consistories and in classes, the next level of governance that includes representatives from churches grouped by geography.

"There's been a number of classes and churches that have ordained gay people, or put them in other offices, or who have conducted same-sex marriages, and that has been very upsetting to other members — more conservative or traditional members and churches — in the RCA," Van Es said. "There were various attempts to change the polity to enforce a traditional position, and those attempts failed. When that became clear, that is when a number of churches decided that they could no longer stay part of this denomination."

In 2018, the General Synod appointed a Vision 2020 team to discern a way forward for the 400-year-old denomination. Keepers was one of those appointed to the team, which guided the RCA General Synod's 2021 decision to adopt measures for "grace-filled separation" with departing churches and to appoint a team to develop a restructuring plan for those that remain.

Given the RCA had fewer than 200,000 members and 1,000 churches before the recent split, the flight of theologically conservative churches represents a significant loss. Korthals has witnessed the resulting upheaval firsthand

NOTHING NEW:

The Reformed Church in America has been debating issues related to LGBTQ inclusion since the 1970s, and to some degree, division within the denomination can be explained in geographic terms. Many of the RCA's more liberal churches are located in the east, where the denomination first took root in North America in the 17th century. Many conservative churches are located in the Midwest and West, where they were established during the 19th century by a second wave of Dutch immigrants fleeing state control of the church in the Netherlands.

Kim Van Es, a member of American Reformed Church in Orange City, has held multiple leadership positions in her church and its national denomination, the RCA.

"From my experience, the people from all over the denomination who I've interacted with take the Bible very seriously and see it as the inspired Word of God," Van Es said. "Their interpretations may be different — but here's the thing: That's been true throughout the denomination's history. There have been very serious differences, including over women in office, including over the status of conscientious objectors. So, this is not new. But I think what's been missing in conversations in some churches has been a historical perspective."

Rebecca Koerselman, a lifelong member of the RCA and professor of history at Northwestern College, an RCA-affiliated institution in Orange City, agrees current debates would benefit from a deeper sense of the denomination's history.

"One of the things the churches leaving don't fully recognize is that we have a denomination that wrestled with questions of polity, of theology, of practice and membership. We've dealt with things like race and gender and theological differences in our culture for a couple hundred years," she said. "We have theologians, we have a rich body of scholarship, and we have seminaries and colleges that connect young people to our denomination. I'm not saying you can't do all those on your own, but it's much harder to create them than it is to use existing networks. And that's something you don't know until you leave."

Koerselman's father is a minister ordained in the RCA, and she is a member of American Reformed Church. She has always felt at home in the denomination, which has a strong intellectual and academic tradition.

"There's something very reassuring to me about a tradition that isn't afraid of asking hard questions — that's not afraid of being wrong or exploring things," she said.

The RCA belongs to the Reformed branch of Protestantism, and it is rooted in the Dutch expression of the movement inspired by the writing and sermons of 16th-century reformer John Calvin. Calvin stressed the absolute sovereignty of God, and while historically, some expressions of Calvinism have taken somewhat stern or rigid forms, Calvin's high view of God's power was intimately linked to his understanding of human nobility. Calvin saw humans as fallen creatures, yet marvelous, made and able to be remade in the image of their creator.

"Northwestern was the place where that really came together for me," said the Rev. Brian Keepers.

Keepers is lead pastor of Trinity Reformed Church in Orange City, which remains affiliated with the RCA. Before he earned his doctor of ministry degree from Western Theological Seminary in Holland, MI, he graduated from Northwestern College.

"There was this sense you can think deeply and critically about the faith — that we don't have to be afraid," Keepers said. "This is why I fell in love with Reformed theology — the sense that all truth is God's truth."

NEXT IN THE SERIES:

■ N'West Iowa churches that have decided to remain committed to their historic denominations have an uncertain path ahead of them — but there are signs of hope and new growth. The next installment in this series will tell the story of N'West Iowa churches that are looking beyond grief and toward the future of their denominations.

— she was present at all of the separation meetings required of churches departing from the East Sioux Classis.

"I grieved a lot last year," she said. "There were tears in some of those meetings — not my tears, but their tears. They had made decisions that were tearing them from a denomination they'd known forever, but they truly felt that they needed to leave."

In spite of loss and grief, Korthals remains hopeful about the denomination's future, which includes the possibility of new growth. A number of churches in Latin America and many Spanish-speaking churches in the United States have expressed eagerness to join the RCA.

"I'm excited," she said.

Belonging

Like Korthals, Keepers hopes new churches, and new church members, find a place of belonging in the RCA. That is his story, too. Unlike many who attend Reformed churches in N'West Iowa, Keepers is not ancestrally Dutch, but after becoming a Christian in high school, he began worshipping at Hope Reformed Church in Spencer with his family.

"They embraced us. My parents went through a divorce, and they loved my family and me in our pain, and they loved us through our pain," Keepers

said. "That's where I experienced a real sense of belonging in the family of God — which is part of my heartache right now with everything that's happening."

He grew to love his church's tradition in the way you come to love something unchosen — something that first embraced you.

"There are these deep roots but also this generosity that's in the tradition. There's room, — there's space. It's almost like the deep roots of a tree and these branches that extend out far," Keepers said, nodding to the denomination's spirit of ecumenical openness. "I found myself rooted in a tradition that allowed me to be rooted, even then, through that tradition to the more historic church."

The tree has lost some of its branches, but Keepers already has seen signs of renewal in his own congregation's discernment process.

"We said, 'We're going to wrestle with all this stuff, but what if we could do this in a way that we affirmed that our unity is already in Christ?'" Keepers said. "Maybe that's part of our witness right now for the world: In a moment such as this, when there is so much division and polarization, maybe our most winsome witness right now can be if we can show the world, 'Here's a way to disagree.'"

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