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REVIEW



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Feenstra writes bill to bolster beginning farmers

Part of Farm Bill, would extend crop insurance

BY ELIJAH HELTON
EHELTON@NWESTIOWA.COM

WASHINGTON, D.C.—Young farmers would get a boost from a bipartisan bill by U.S. Rep. Randy Feenstra (R-Iowa) as generational turnover looms in the agriculture

industry. The Crop Insurance for Future Farmers Act would expand who qualifies for federal crop insurance programs meant for beginning farmers. Current law covers the first five crop



Rep. Feenstra

years, and the bill would double that "beginning farmer" definition to the first 10 years.

The legislation would increase premium subsidies for veteran farmers. "I am proud to introduce common-sense legislation that extends vital crop and livestock insurance protections to new, beginning and veteran farmers to lower their insurance payments for their first 10 years in busi-

ness," Feenstra said.

The Hull Republican introduced the bill on June 6, co-sponsored by Rep. Angie Craig (D-Minnesota).

It is part of Feenstra's legislative push toward this year's Farm Bill, which has to pass the GOP-held House and a Senate controlled by the Democrats. Feenstra has referred to farm policy as a relatively easy area to find common ground. He and Craig

sit on the House Agriculture Committee.

Feenstra said securing long-term food production is a legislative priority that benefits everyone.

"I am confident that this investment in the next generation of producers will pay dividends for our economic vitality, grow our rural

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DENOMINATIONAL

division

FINAL PART OF A SERIES:

BY ALEISA SCHAT
ASCHAT@NWESTIOWA.COM

REGIONAL—Congregants of Bethel Reformed Church in Sheldon gathered in an open lot on Sunday, May 21, as the Rev. Dave Van Kley pushed a shovel into the soil and broke new ground. After a 2017 fire damaged the congregation's historic church building at 611 Seventh St. beyond use, the church had been without a physical home.

"We called it 'The Land Between,'" Van Kley said.

Like the Israelites wandering in the desert, Bethel's congregation has spent the past few years forging an identity that is not anchored in a permanent home.

"This building journey has been very difficult — and we've lost people," Van Kley said. "We've had to weather some tough stuff — but God has brought us through it. And we're seeing Him work."

Along with the challenges of maintaining a church without a permanent gathering place, Bethel belongs to a denomination that is in its own season of desert wandering. In the last couple of years, the Reformed Church in America has experi-

enced rupture and transition, and there is uncertainty about what lay on the other side.

In 2021, churches in N'West Iowa historically affiliated with the Reformed Church in America began to leave the denomination in significant numbers, a symptom of deepening division within the denomination.

The catalyst for the split was escalating disagreement about issues related to human sexuality, including whether same-sex marriages and the ordination of LGBTQ clergy should be sanctioned in RCA churches. In the last several decades, the denomination has continued to affirm a traditional stance on issues related to human sexuality, but in practice, pastors and churches have freedom to follow their own convictions in their own contexts.

As Van Kley watched churches across N'West Iowa break ties with the RCA, he has not felt the urgency to make a choice — particularly in the wake of the fire and its aftermath.

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The Rev. Dave Van Kley addresses those gathered for a groundbreaking for a new building for Bethel Reformed Church in Sheldon. Fire damaged the old church. Photo by Justin Rust

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.

"This building journey has been very difficult — and we've lost people. We've had to weather some tough stuff — but God has brought us through it. And we're seeing Him work."

DAVE VAN KLEY, BETHEL REFORMED CHURCH PASTOR

CHURCHES WRESTLE WITH SPLINTERING AFFILIATIONS

Rain, lightning fail to drown out RiseFest shows

Crowder, others play in Sheldon

BY JUSTIN RUST
JRUST@NWESTIOWA.COM

SHELDON—Rob Roozeboom tried not to watch the weather forecast for the weekend of RiseFest.

The forecasters were not being kind to the founder and president of Rise Ministries, the organization behind RiseFest.

There was a threat of rain for much of Friday and Saturday, June 9-10, with the potential for scattered thunderstorms on both evenings.

A watchful eye helped keep RiseFest relatively dry throughout the two-day Christian music fes-

tival, though. While there was rain in portions of N'West Iowa and south and north of the area, the scattered showers stayed away from the RiseFest grounds for the most part. Some lightning did cause Crowder, last Saturday night's headliner, to go on stage more than an hour after he was planned but the Dove Award winner still was able to perform a full set after the delay.

The possibility of precipitation did not keep scare away festivalgoers either. More than 9,700 people passed through the RiseFest gates on the opening night and then almost 9,300 attended last

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After a rain and lightning delay, Crowder performs at RiseFest as the headliner late Saturday night in Sheldon. The two-day Christian music event drew over 19,000 people. Photo by Justin Rust

Sioux County board revises building rule

Meant to lock down illegal construction

BY ERIC SANDBULTE
ESANDBULTE@NWESTIOWA.COM

ORANGE CITY—The Sioux County Board of Supervisors unanimously approved new language to better define what counts as nonfarmable ground.

Originally presented during the May 31 board of supervisors meeting, the changes were proposed to continue to protect

Sioux County's farm ground. With the approval on Tuesday, the resulting ordinance will have a first reading at the June 27 supervisors' meeting.

The ordinance set to be redefined allows the issuance of a 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

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WEATHER:

SATURDAY

HIGH: 81
LOW: 60
CHANCE OF PREC: 70%

SUNDAY

HIGH: 81
LOW: 60
CHANCE OF PREC: 30%



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NEWS

'An incredible sense that God is doing something'

CHURCH

Continued from page A1

"We did not want to get distracted from doing the tremendously hard and engaging work of going through all this — especially if the denomination hasn't changed its position," Van Kley said. "But there's this pressure — there's such incredible northwest Iowa peer pressure. If somebody else is doing it, well? And then it feels like a lack of action is a statement."

Breaking new ground is a sign of hope for Van Kley's small congregation, but it also is an apt metaphor for something new happening within the denomination, despite painful losses.

Footprint of impact

One of the oldest Protestant bodies in North America, the RCA is a relatively small denomination, but according to the Rev. Michael Hardeman, it has always had an outsized footprint.

"Our denominational footprint of impact is much larger than the actual size of our feet," Hardeman said.

After eight years as co-pastor of American Reformed Church in Orange City, he and co-pastor Elizabeth Hardeman accepted a call from Second Reformed Church in Pella this summer. Hardeman said the RCA's posture of ecumenical openness, along with its historic commitment to global mission, helps account for its profile among mainline denominations that are three and four times its size. Still, in one way of looking at the numbers, the RCA's footprint has grown smaller.

In a report delivered at last year's General Synod, the denomination's annual meeting, RCA general secretary Eddy Alemán painted a grim picture: 68 churches had left the RCA since 2021 when the denomination approved a pathway for "mutually generous separation" for churches and pastors wishing to leave the RCA.

Before the split, the RCA already had fewer than 200,000 members and 1,000 churches. As of today, more than 200 churches have indicated their intention to leave the RCA or already have left. Many of those churches were part of the Synod of the Heartland, which stretches from Texas to Minnesota and includes all of the RCA churches in N'West Iowa. In neighboring Dakota Classis, which covered North and South Dakota, every historically Reformed church broke ties with the 400-year-old denomination.

Explosive growth

The flight of theologically conservative churches represents a significant loss, but the RCA is not alone. What is happening in the denomination fits into a larger story of decline in mainline Protestantism. In the last several decades in North America, Protestantism has been undergoing a major realignment and the RCA and the United Methodist Church are the most recent historic denominations to splinter along political and theological lines. And yet, there is something new afoot.

The Rev. Brian Keepers, lead pastor of Trinity Reformed Church in Orange City, has grieved the loss of churches in his denomination. However, according to Keepers, there is another story to be told with numbers that point to explosive growth in the denomination — and in some unlikely places.

"We are in a season of pruning and things that are dying — and I think



The Rev. Brian Keepers reads a biblical passage during a Sunday morning service at Trinity Reformed Church in Orange City. While some RCA churches have left the denomination, Keepers is celebrating growth, including new Spanish-speaking church plants in Latin America and the U.S. Photo by Aleisa Schat

that there are new things that are being birthed as well," he said. "A mentor of mine has said that 'God doesn't produce new fruit on a dying tree.' And I think we are seeing new fruit. There are some people who only see the narrative of the RCA as a narrative of loss and decline. But what they're not seeing is that there is growth that's happening — there is new life that is happening."

As the RCA strained to a breaking point in the years leading up to 2021, something new was quietly unfolding within the denomination. Across the central plains of the United States, and in a number of countries across Latin America, Spanish-speaking churches and church planters began expressing eagerness to join the historically Dutch denomination.

"This is part of the story that doesn't get told," Keepers said.

This spring, Rick Clark, a member of Trinity and a retired Northwestern College Spanish professor, traveled with a group of RCA representatives to Argentina where he served as an interpreter. A two-day training seminar for church leaders took place in Mar Del Plata and during that seminar, around 40 pastors expressed interest in affiliating with the RCA.

One member of the group was the Rev. Fabio Sosa, Hispanic coordinator for the Central Plains Classis and mission advancement director of the Regional Synod of the Heartland, which is based in Orange City and is one of eight regional governing bodies in the RCA. Sosa, who grew up in Argentina, is the son of a pastor and church planter, and according to Keepers, Sosa has played a central role in forging connections between the RCA and Hispanic churches in the United States and Latin America.

"The Global South is where, right now, there's the most growth in Christianity — and you're seeing this with the RCA, and those who want to come into the RCA," Keepers said. "It's going to be less a 'Reformed Church in America,' and more a 'Reformed Church in the world' — which I think is beautiful."

According to Keepers, who is presi-

dent of East Sioux Classis, another classis in the Synod of the Heartland, many Hispanic leaders eager to join the RCA have expressed an admiration for Reformed theology.

Rooted in the sermons and treatises of 16th century Reformer John Calvin, the Reformed tradition provides the theological and liturgical framework many independent or charismatic churches lack.

Hispanic church leaders inside and outside the United States also have expressed their eagerness to utilize the denomination's resources, including its network for training pastors and supporting congregations.

According to the Rev. Dale Assink, executive strategist for the Synod of the Heartland, in countries like Argentina, Chile and Uruguay, "there are hundreds of churches" waiting to join the RCA, which is in the process of creating pathways for global churches to affiliate with the denomination.

Assink, who is based in Omaha, NE, said a revival in the denomination is happening within U.S. borders, too, and in a surprising place — the Central Plains Classis, which stretches from Nebraska to Texas.

"We had 13 churches, and when we looked at the stats, 11 of them were declining rapidly, and two of them were plateaued," he said. "And it was at that time, also, that the division in the RCA was really heating up."

In 2017, facing stagnation and decline, churches in the classis began with prayer and confession, according to Assink. They emerged with renewed commitment to fulfilling the Gospel imperative to "bear much fruit."

"We literally got on our knees and confessed, and out of that, the challenge for multiplication came," Assink said. "It was my task to pull together a multiplication team."

The team set an ambitious goal. Instead of 13 churches in decline, the Central Plains Classis would be home to 25 churches and ministries by 2025. Instead of 2,400 members, the classis would grow to include 5,000. The goal has already been surpassed.

"In January of 2018, we were 13 churches," Assink said. "Today, we're somewhere around 43 and the majority of them — probably 85 to 90 percent of them — are Hispanic ministries."

Many of the new churches were formerly independent — not connected to any denomination — although some had loose ties to Pentecostal or charismatic movements or to the Catholic Church. While the new RCA churches represent a variety of Latin American cultures, almost all of them hold services in Spanish.

It's here

In the Central Plains Classis, the growth in new Hispanic churches and ministries is concentrated in Texas, but similar growth is happening in California and the southeastern United States where a new classis, Classis de las Naciones, reflects in its name the composition of its churches, which are mostly Spanish speaking.

This trend also has surfaced with somewhat different contours in N'West Iowa, where in recent decades, successive waves of immigrants from Latin America and elsewhere have reshaped the region.

María Magdalena Reformed Church is the RCA's newest church plant in the region. Established last year in Sioux Center, where every church historically affiliated with the RCA left the denomination, the new church, which is bilingual and multiethnic, became a part of West Sioux Classis in February.

Sioux Center resident Martha Draayer, director of intercultural development at Northwestern College in Orange City, is one of the lead-

HOSPITALITY HERE:

While the Reformed Church in America lays the groundwork for new churches — on American soil and around the world — some regional RCA churches see signs of hope and new life within their own historic congregations.

Among them is Orange City's American Reformed Church, the first church to offer English-language worship services in its historically Dutch community.

"We were established as a church for the Other — for the people who were coming who didn't speak Dutch and didn't really know the culture and all the stuff that you were supposed to know," said the Rev. Elizabeth Hardeman.

Co-pastors Elizabeth and Michael Hardeman left their positions on June 4, having received a call to Second Reformed Church in Pella.

"As we read the stories of Jesus, we're pretty convinced that He is all about those on the margins — all about those who are ostracized and marginalized for all kinds of reasons," Michael said. "I think that kind of vision has drawn us to those who are on the outskirts."

American Reformed Church member Kim Van Es said the recent division in the RCA has not left her feeling hopeless, and she is encouraged by her congregation's commitment to remaining in communion, despite theological and political differences.

"I think that you can bind — you can choose to be a body — based on a mutual love and respect for each other. That includes differences," Van Es said.

ers of the Sioux Center church plant, which is supported by its sending church, Trinity Reformed Church in Orange City.

"We see the RCA changing in terms of their vision for what diversity looks like — embracing brothers and sisters in Christ who don't have a Reformed upbringing," Draayer said. "We want to be part of that."

Draayer is commissioned as a teaching elder by the RCA, which means she can teach and preach in the new church. She said the choice to affiliate with the RCA — even in a time of turmoil and deepening division — was deliberate.

"There are some things that we've wrestled through, regarding human sexuality, within the RCA — but it's a very small piece of this greater conversation," she said. "I just think that we have so much more to share with one another than to divide one another."

Born in Mexico, Draayer has lived in the United States since she was 3 years old. She is a "Dreamer," whose status is secured through DACA, or Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals legislation. Draayer said she often has felt more at home worshipping in churches in Mexico, where she has extended family, than she has in the Reformed and Christian Reformed churches she's attended.

"The North American church is really good at cognitive knowledge, and the Latino church is really good about heart knowledge — how do we behave toward, love and show up in one another's spaces," she said.

Draayer is working to bring those two things together in her young church, and while the congregation follows the RCA's church lectionary, she said its liturgical tradition preserves an openness to new cultural expressions.

Part of something

"There's an incredible sense that God is doing something in our denomination, particularly in the center of the heartland," Van Kley said. "There is a movement of ministries wanting to be a part of the RCA because of our theology, because of our polity. The Holy Spirit is moving in unexpected ways — both within the United States and internationally."

Van Kley said Bethel Reformed Church's decision to remain affiliated with the RCA reflects, at least in part, a desire to see where this new growth leads.

"There's a sense that God is doing something very new and exciting, that, frankly, I want to be a part of, and I think it matches Bethel's heart to want to be a part of it as well," he said.

Keepers, too, is looking toward the

denomination's future.

"Our Latino brothers and sisters have been welcomed into this old Dutch Reformed denomination, where they're also being invited to be a part of shaping who we're becoming," he said.

Growth is exciting, but inviting new churches into the RCA, and into a process of mutual reshaping, also brings new challenges, according to Assink.

One challenge is practical. The traditional seminary model, in which pastors receive their degrees, get ordained and enter into full-time pastorates — will need to be reworked.

Many Hispanic pastors and leaders are bivocational — employed outside the church — and they may not be able to afford seminary or to go into ministry full time. The need for a more flexible training and credentialing system for pastors was addressed last week, during the annual meeting of the RCA General Synod in Pella.

Another challenge is ideological. Churches in the global south, and Hispanic congregations in North America, are generally more traditional than mainline denominations in the United States, particularly when it comes to matters of human sexuality.

While it is possible this could lead to yet more friction in the RCA, Keepers said many Hispanic churches challenge conventional American political categories, and their presence in his denomination could bring a new kind of resilience and strength.

"On the one hand, you have this robust theology, a Trinitarian theology, that you hold to. And at the same time, it's not incompatible to think about issues like social justice. And for the Latino community, I think, 'Well, of course.' These things belong together. They don't fit neatly in categories of 'conservative' and 'liberal,' 'Republican' and 'Democrat,'" Keepers said.

Growth in the RCA also will continue to change the face of the denomination, which has grown in racial and ethnic diversity since it was first founded on the East Coast by Dutch immigrants in the 17th century.

"We are going to look very different — I think we're going to become much more black and brown, which I celebrate," Keepers said. "We are for now smaller, but I do think that there's a lot of potential growth in the future — and growth that's happening now."

"But at the end of the day, it's not about any particular denomination. I think the kingdom of God is bigger than that. And I think the Church of Jesus Christ will continue to have a faithful witness."

PROTESTANT PROTEST:

Historian Rebecca Koerselman, a history professor at Northwestern College in Orange City and lifelong member of the Reformed Church in America, said Protestantism has been remaking itself since it was born out of the 16th-century Reformation. "Protest" is contained within the movement's very name.

"One of the unforeseen consequences within Protestantism is that instead of getting along, we just leave and form a new church — and this historically has been very true," Koerselman said. "I think it's created a culture of unwillingness to sort of be connected to each other and have different points of view. I would say it kind of as a foundation — Protestants are really bad at getting along with each other because we can just leave and form a new church. We can do it in someone's basement. And it can be anything — we don't like the music; we don't like the carpet."

Within many Protestant churches, questions related to biblical authority and interpretation have collided with hot-button political issues in a deeply polarized America. The resulting foment has led to upheaval in historic denominations and the births of new movements.

"I have a lot of respect for the Catholic Church — they hold together both the liberal and conservative points of view," Koerselman said. "Maybe it doesn't mean they like each other, or that they get along, but to be Catholic is to have communion with your brothers and sisters that have different ideas."

The Reformers, instead of looking to Catholic authorities for the final word on how to interpret the Bible, signaled their trust in the capacity of faithful Christians to read and interpret Scripture together — to form convictions about how their sacred texts were calling them to live and worship. Sometimes, that meant following their convictions to new — or newly understood — theological and practical commitments.

"On the one hand, I'm grieving the fact that we weren't able to still live in unity and peace with each other despite disagreement. That's disappointing to me — deeply disappointing," Koerselman said. "I guess the flip side is we now have an opportunity to renew our commitments — our intellectual and academic and theological and practical commitments — without as much disagreement and struggle."

"We'll have more down the road — of course, we will. But in some ways now we're sort of lighter, and maybe a little bit more unified, because a lot of the dissenting voices just left."