

Reformed Church in America looks to experimental mode: A variegated vision

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In and around Kalamazoo, Michigan, the Reformed Church in America offers churchgoers a surprisingly variegated vision for such a venerable denomination.

John Veld enjoys the mix of traditional and contemporary elements in Sunday services at Third Reformed Church in suburban Oshtemo. Barbara Barrett is equally satisfied with the spirit-filled activity at The River, a newly opened “postmodern” church in Kalamazoo. And Lon Bouma appreciates the chance to be part of Within Reach Ministries, a collection of cell-group churches that gathers once a week for prayer and praise in Kalamazoo’s former First Reformed Church sanctuary.

Although Veld, Barrett and Bouma are drawn to different styles of worship, they share the RCA connection and represent in microcosm the expanding forms of a denomination that has been a stronghold of Dutch ethnicity and conservative values since its founding in New York nearly 400 years ago.

In recent years, the RCA has been reconfiguring itself to meet the challenges of a fast-shifting, technology-based world without abandoning its biblical heritage. The relatively small denomination (about 900 congregations) has adapted to circumstances coast-to-coast in efforts to provide itself a niche among bigger mainline Protestant churches.

“You have immense churches with steeples. You have sod churches out west and a glass church [the Crystal Cathedral] in California,” said Donald Bruggink, coauthor of a new book with Kim N. Baker that assembles stories from RCA’s history, *By Grace Alone*. Bruggink is professor emeritus at Western Theological Seminary. RCA churches “continue to be involved in all sorts of experiments in how to express the gospel.”

In one experiment, the sanctuary of The River buzzed with energy one summer Sunday as people sang, swayed and praised God with a near-Pentecostal fervor. The church placed itself in Kalamazoo's Edison neighborhood specifically to draw in African-Americans, Hispanics, Asians and others from the area.

"We want people to come and not worry what they look like," said Barrett, a native of Mexico who worshiped at a Mennonite church before coming to The River. Led by Pastor Rob Link, the church offers hard-driving, amplified music along with a mostly casual dress code.

Like other mainline churches, the RCA has struggled over the past 40 years with declining membership. From a high of about 225,000 adult members in the 1960s, the church today has about 170,000 adults.

To stem the loss while retaining its Calvinist theology and ecumenical outlook, the denomination supports new approaches such as Within Reach and The River, said Dick Welscott, the RCA's director of congregational services, evangelism and church development. "The strategy is very broad," he said. "These churches arise from the grass roots, from people who have the vision."

Within Reach Ministries was started by parishioners from Third Reformed Church and Haven Reformed Church in Kalamazoo. Jeff Porte, senior pastor of 2,000-member Third Reformed, said he sees a move toward smaller, livelier congregations that can reach out to local communities. "Our denomination has been real intentional to work away from being a one-ethnic-group denomination," he said.

John and Mary Veld, members of Third Reformed for years, have come to like the traditional approach leavened with contemporary themes now offered at Third Reformed. "There are old-timers like us who like the older songs and hymns," John Veld said. But Third Reformed's experiment also strikes the couple as progressive and flexible.

Within Reach is a low-key, loose-knit congregation made up of several house churches, also called cell groups. Begun about five years ago with 16 people meeting in a living room, the congregation has few traditional trappings. Organizers say it is about one-on-one interactions at house churches and parties, around campfires, over the phone or in other everyday circumstances.

Within Reach doesn't advertise, doesn't have a phone number and doesn't offer a Christmas or Easter program or a Sunday school, nor does it have an office. Although it is open to those seeking a different approach, it isn't necessarily looking for members.

"We're not here to save people or to take care of their needs," said Rick Patterson, a former atheist who leads Within Reach as pastor. "We know we're successful if we look more like Christ today than we did yesterday." *-based on a Religion News Service story by Chris Meehan*