The Reformed Church in America in Kansas

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The work of the Reformed Church in America (RCA) in Kansas is a fascinating tale of optimism, variety, and struggle. It originated in the early 1820s with a cooperative foreign missionary venture to the Osage Indians. Beginning in the late 1860s, the immigration and westward movement of the Dutch resulted in the establishment and closure of Reformed Churches in several areas. More recently, the RCA has been involved in a variety of other ministries as well. The work of the RCA in Kansas offers some significant insights into the perceptions, mentality, and vision of the larger church. This essay provides an overview of the ministry in Kansas, a sketch of the individual congregations established, and a description of the various enterprises in which the RCA was a partner. The final section offers explanations for our limited success in Kansas because the experience of the RCA in Kansas is also shared in other places.

Mission to the Osage Indians

The United Foreign Missionary Society (UFMS), forerunner of the American Board of Commissioners of Foreign Missions (ABCFM), was created in 1818 to facilitate the promotion of the gospel to the uncivilized people of the world. Formed by the Presbyterian, Congregational, and Dutch Reformed Churches, the UFMS determined to work among the natives of America as well as the indigenous peoples of other lands. On 13 May 1818 a Board of Managers was elected. Stephen Van Renssaler, a wealthy and influential Dutch Reformed layperson, was elected president. The noted pastor and theologian, Rev. John Henry Livingston, D.D., was elected vice-president.

Congregations of the Dutch Reformed Church were supportive of the UFMS with their gifts, prayers, and volunteers. The roll of churches contributing to the UFMS in 1820 included the following Reformed Dutch congregations: the Garden Street, Franklin Street, Market Street, Nassau Street, and New Utrecht Churches in New York City; the Second Dutch Church in Albany; the Churches of Kingston, Catskill, Schenectady, and Poughkeepsie elsewhere in New York; and the Six-Mile Run and Hackensack Churches in New Jersey.

In 1821, the Rev. Benton Pixley founded a mission to the Osage Indians near Harmony in Bates County, Missouri under the sponsorship of the UFMS. That same year Mr. and Mrs. John Seeley from Rockaway, New Jersey and Mrs. Mary Weller from Bloomfield, New Jersey left for the Osage Mission. A
farewell was held at the Nassau Street Reformed Church. Public meetings were held and collections taken in several Dutch churches. They set out by steamboat and "at Philadelphia they arrived on the 10th day of March and were received with great attention and kindness." The group left the East on 10 April and arrived in the vicinity of the Osage Mission on 2 August.

In 1823 about 2,000 of the Osage crossed the border and settled near Neosho, Kansas. In 1824 the Rev. Pixley took some of the staff from Harmony to begin preparations for opening a mission and school at Union. The Union Mission was joined by a second, Hopefield, about five miles away. Missionary work among the Osage was difficult in part because of their nomadic lifestyle. They were stationary for only about four to five months of the year. The missionary team included skilled carpenters, physicians, ministers, teachers, and farmers. Their goal was to transform the Osage into people like themselves.

In 1828 the ABCFM reported that sixty-five native children were being educated, twenty read in the New Testament, fifteen-twenty came for Sabbath School, and fifty acres were under cultivation. The influence and interest of the Dutch were not limited to financial support. One of the Osage pupils received the name of Stephen Van Renssaler when he went East for an education.

In 1827 a controversy between the government agents and the Rev. Pixley and the Osage resulted in the temporary closing of the Union and Hopefield Missions. They were reopened two years later only to be abandoned in the mid-1830s because of growing hostilities between the Osage and the whites.

Thus ended the first chapter of the RCA's work in the state of Kansas. In the dozen years of its existence, the school had received about 160 Osage pupils and ten white pupils.

From Indian Lands to Ranch and Farm

Beginning in the mid-1840s, the second immigration of Dutch established colonies in Michigan, Iowa, Illinois, and Wisconsin. Kansas became a state in 1859. Although it was a free state, its shared border with the slave state of Missouri made it the site of several raids and battles. When the Civil War ended and the Pacific Railroad was reaching completion in the late 1860s, Kansas became an alluring option for immigrants and others moving west. The railroad owned nearly one-third of the state and the federal government was anxious to expand into the West. Some of the Dutch who came to Kansas were of RCA background. In their desire to keep their culture and tradition alive, they established RCA congregations. Unfortunately, details of the majority of these congregations are sketchy at best. Few records or documents remain. Most of the congregations disappeared over the years. No autopsies were performed on these churches, and most were buried in unmarked graves. The following sketches give some insights into the individual congregations established in Kansas.
The Classis of Illinois was taken by surprise when the Rev. John Stotthoff Beekman came with an application for the organization of a church in Somerset, Kansas. Somerset, located about 25 miles south of Kansas City, was surveyed and platted in May of 1871. A group of neighbors from Somerset County, New Jersey were instrumental in its establishment. The key person was the Rev. John Beekman. Although reared in the RCA, he became a minister in the Presbyterian Church. He was the organizing pastor of a Presbyterian Church in nearby Paola, Kansas. The Rev. Beekman took his former neighbors on a tour of southeast Kansas and recommended the Somerset area. They agreed and formed a Town Company comprised of Rev. John Beekman, Mr. Bungart, Henry H. Stryker, Elbert Hoagland, William A. Higgins, J.W. Taylor, James Dickey, and Jacob Skillman. They purchased a tract of 1,100 acres, platted the town, and invested about $50,000 in building the community. Somerset was a model town with large lots, zoning requirements, sidewalks, shade trees, and a ban on the sale of intoxicating beverages.

Some of the Somerset pioneer families came directly from New Jersey; others were "leapfrogging" west. One group had most recently settled in the Fairview, Illinois area and were members of RCA congregations there.

On Sunday, 21 May 1871 the First Reformed (Dutch) Church of Kansas was officially organized. The Rev. Sam A. Bumstead, pastor of the Reformed Church at Raritan, Illinois, was a participant and gave the following report:

... nearly all persons were allied to the Reformed Church. The Sabbath School was under the supervision of Mr. Peter S. Brokaw. The church was organized with 22 members. There were more than 100 persons assembled to hear the Gospel. In the afternoon the sacrament of the Lord's Supper was administered along with the ordinance of baptism.5

The town and congregation were anxious to realize their dream. The local newspaper spoke highly of the venture:

Our New Jersey friends ... are prospering finely, ... increased prosperity may be considered an assured fact. The town is filling rapidly with the best class of settlers and has excellent church and school facilities. A Reformed Church has been organized, and a fine suitable building for religious use will be erected in a short time.6

There was much optimism and enthusiasm, but money for the church was in short supply. Apparently all their resources were devoted to establishing their farms and businesses, for they soon requested financial aid. They wrote to friends in Illinois and New Jersey. They appealed to the church through The
**Christian Intelligencer.** In July of 1871, forty dollars came from a member of the Reformed Church of Kiskatom.

About that same time the Rev. John Beekman decided to sell his interest in the Town Company and move back east to follow his calling. Toward the end of 1871 disappointment began to set in. People were moving in, but the young congregation did not have the leadership or financial resources to provide for them. "The place is filling in and if we don’t act, we’ll lose out", wrote Henry H. Stryker.

On 2 May 1872 the Classis of Illinois approved a call from Somerset upon the Rev. Joseph Mayou of the late Classis of Arcot. His salary was subsidized by the Board of Domestic Missions (BDM).

In 1873 the trustees of the Church Building Fund (CBF) provided a loan, and a commodious building was constructed. In 1874 the minutes of the Particular Synod of Chicago (PSC) report that "the young church of Somerset is in embarrassing circumstances." Details of those circumstances are unknown but thereafter the Rev. Mayou was listed as "Stated Supply" in the annual report. Statistics indicate that the church at Somerset failed to grow appreciably. At its height in the early 1870s, the church listed twenty families and twenty-five communicant members. The town’s population had also reached a plateau. In 1876 the Rev. Joseph Mayou left the RCA to serve Presbyterian churches in the Somerset area.

The minutes of the BDM on 6 May 1878 record the sale of the Somerset Church to the Presbyterians for $500. The trustees of the Somerset Presbyterian Church were none other than the former consistory of the First Reformed (Dutch) Church of Kansas. Members from RCA congregations in the Raritan, Illinois area were transferred to the Somerset Presbyterian Church as late as 1887.

**Rotterdam Reformed Church: 1871-1946**

In 1869 John Renken and John Decker came to Osborne County, Kansas from Michigan to stake a claim. However, when Mr. Renken and his son Michael returned in 1870, they discovered someone else had jumped their claim. So they went to Oak Creek and bought the claim rights of a man living in the area. In 1870 the community of Rotterdam was established by a group of Hollanders who originally lived in a province on the Holland-German border. The military draft in their homeland influenced them to come to America. Cheap land and the romantic West lured them to Kansas.

Some of the first Dutch to homestead the area were A. Steginks, C. Klinkenberg, John Wolberd, John Deters, and John Wolters. They arrived on 4 October 1870 by covered wagon drawn by oxen.

John Rychel, an early settler, recorded an experience he had en route to Kansas:
I left Michigan in 1871. We traveled through Abilene in a covered wagon with the Sneller family, was a whole week going to Cawker City in the rain from Abilene, reached Peter Kramer's house now owned by Koops southeast of Dispatch, bedding was soaked through and the face washed off our clock. One-half mile below here is a beaver dam and Indians were in the hills above the creek. As soon as they saw our smoke they came to our house by two's, each couple talking English, saying, 'me good Indian, Pawnees something to eat'; took our dead dogs and chickens and ate them, the braves taking the hams and the squaws and papooses the entrails. 9

Not all of the early settlers came from Michigan. Nicholas and Mary De Young Kramer, who later donated several acres for a church site, came from Cook County, Illinois. Others came from Pella, Iowa and the Netherlands.

Early in the summer of 1871, a sod church was erected. On 21 August 1871 the Rotterdam Reformed Church was organized by the Classis of Holland. The Rev. G. Dangermond of Hamilton presided and Mr. Bultman assisted. Soon after, a log structure was erected, replacing the sod building.

Life was difficult on the prairie. Grasshoppers devoured everything in 1874, severe drought came in 1875, and terrible blizzards occurred in the winter of 1886. After twenty-five years, the congregation finally erected a wooden frame building in 1895. The congregation was without a pastor for the first seven years, and never did become strong. Twice, in 1879 and 1904, it reported its largest membership of 150 people. Rotterdam was assisted by the BDM, the Women's Board of Domestic Missions, and the CBF. The decade of the 1930s was particularly difficult. Dust storms, drought, grasshoppers, depression, and adverse weather convinced several families that Kansas was becoming a desert, and they left for the West Coast.

In 1943 the congregation seriously discussed whether to continue or to close. In 1946 sixteen members voted for and nine voted against a motion to disband. At the auction of the property, $1834.30 was received for the land, the building, and its contents. Most of the remaining families united with the Dispatch Christian Reformed Church located less than one mile away.

Grainfield: 1878-1880

In the 1870s it was said that west of Junction City there was no religion and west of Salina there was no God. In the late 1870s, during the Cheyenne Wars, a group from Pella made its way west of Salina to Gove County, Kansas to locate a daughter colony. A telegram from Salina, dated 3 October said: "Last night there were 44 Hollanders from Iowa on a train bound for Gove County."10 N. J. Gesman was the agent for the colony. About sixty-five
families moved by train or covered wagon from Pella to Gove County in 1879-80.

Two "firsts" in Gove County are credited to the Dutch. The first wedding, uniting William Watcher and Cornelia Den Burger, was performed by a Presbyterian minister, the Rev. J. Hahn, on 10 July 1880. The first worship service was conducted by the Rev. Harvey R. Schermerhorn in a railroad car in January of 1879. An Indian raid kept a Kansas Pacific train at the Buffalo Park siding over the weekend. The Rev. Schermerhorn, an RCA pastor from Pella, happened to be one of the passengers and was pressed into service.

One of the leading families of the colony was the Niermeyer family. Their home became the worship center. The minutes of the BDM state that "... the enterprise at Grainfield, Gove County Kansas, has not yet been organized owing to the difficulty of sheltering a pastor in any kind of house."11

In 1880 the prospects for a church evaporated when the area experienced its second year of severe drought. Most of the Dutch left, some returning to Pella while others went to Nebraska, Iowa, and other parts of Kansas. A 1930 history of Gove County reports that the remaining families of the Dutch colony were: "Kryn Van Zee and members of the Verhoeff, De Boer, and Van Marter families."12

Reformed Church of Philadelphia: 1878-1934

In early 1877, three or four families from Holland, Nebraska came to Phillips County, Kansas, on a trial basis and planted wheat. A good harvest convinced them to relocate. Other families followed from Nebraska, Greenleafston in Minnesota, and Wisconsin.

These early settlers observed the Sabbath and expected the entire congregation to do the same.

Your committee appointed in the matter of Wm. Van Egmond met with named Van Egmond on Sunday June 28 in the parsonage. Upon the question about his absence from Public Worship, this was his answer in the main. He was going to church in Almena and then stayed a couple of hours by a certain Mrs. Wolf and then came home in the evening in time to do the milking. In answer to the question whether he could not go to see the woman during the week, so as not to leave his place in the church empty, he answered simply because of the reason that I do not have time on week days. I do not see any harm in it. Because I want a wife and must have. After warning not to fail to keep the Sabbath Holy at the cost of his earthly desires, he was not bettering himself, his answer was: He would come the first of the next month because then that
woman was going to Emporia, Kansas and that was too far for him to go to see her. But later he didn’t know. Maybe he would come regularly and maybe not at all.¹³

They gathered for worship in each other’s homes and read printed sermons on Sundays. In 1878 they constructed a sod church, and six years later approached the Classis of Wisconsin for official organization. On 14 August 1884 the congregation was organized with fifteen charter members. Arie Van Der Velde and Jonkje Renerdink each donated five acres. A small frame shanty was built to serve as a church. In addition to its meager financial resources and lack of leadership, the church was severely tested when an elder announced his departure and attempted to recruit others to follow. After eight years of existence, the Rev. D. Scholten came to serve as their first pastor. About that same time the name, Philadelphia, was changed to Luctor.

The colony and church experienced growth through immigration and westward movement by the Dutch. In 1888 a new church building was erected and by 1899 the membership was 358. Conflict then arose over the question of language. Many of the immigrants wanted to retain the Dutch, but the younger generation wanted to change to English.

In 1899 a group of twenty-eight members living a few miles to the west around Prairie View petitioned for a monthly afternoon service in the English language. The Luctor consistory refused. The group brought the issue before the classis. Classis decided it was better to have a two-point charge than a split, and supported the Prairie View group. In 1903 the classis granted the request of the Prairie View contingent for the establishment of a new church.

In 1907, when the Prairie View church was established, they called the pastor of Luctor to serve them, and he accepted. Luctor’s membership went from 445 in 1907 to 165 in 1908. Mortally wounded, the church immediately applied for, and was granted, missionary status and aid. Never again was Luctor self-supporting.

When the Great Depression came, the congregation at Luctor lost several families, and on 1 May 1934 it was disbanded by the classis. John Erickson bought the building for $175 and sent the check to the BDM. John received a letter from the BDM stating that they had paid out $14,000 in aid to Luctor and considered that a lien on the property. Although the BDM was not impressed with the amount of the check, the classis assured them that they had received full payment for the value of the property and building. Most of the seventy-five remaining members transferred to Prairie View. After twenty-seven years, the two had again become one.
Prairie View: 1907-

In 1885, when the Burlington Northern Railroad was laying track through Phillips County, they passed Luctor by about four miles. A stop, named Prairie View, was established nearly straight west of Luctor. It soon outgrew Luctor and became the center of Dutch activity in the area.

On 8 May 1907 the daughter church of Luctor was organized in the Methodist Church of Prairie View with 35 families. The congregation was comprised of 78 communicant and 115 baptized members. They worshipped in the Methodist Church while constructing their sanctuary. In 1924 that building was partially destroyed by a tornado. Through volunteer labor and congregational giving, a new building was dedicated debt free on 27 August 1925.

In 1911 English-speaking services were begun in the evening. Eleven years later English was introduced in morning worship. After a struggle over language, English was established for the "growth and flourishing" of the congregation.

Prairie View received aid in her early years from the Women’s Executive Committee of the BDM, the Board of Church Extension, and individuals and churches in New York. Although hard pressed in these years, Prairie View contributed regularly to denominational causes. Sabbath observance, faithfulness in worship, lodge membership, and holy living were frequent issues of discussion among the elders. At a meeting around 1915, the elders called on Dr. Jeurink after it was alleged that he had embraced and kissed a nurse.

The 1930s were difficult years. When Luctor closed, fifty-nine members came to Prairie View bringing their total membership to 431. It was the largest membership in their history. Yet the church struggled to pay their pastor and to maintain itself.

Although presently at less than one half its largest membership, Prairie View continues to play a significant role in the life of Phillips County. It faithfully worships, serves the community, and supports the ministry of the RCA at home and abroad.

Palco Reformed Church: 1907-1911

In the early 1900s the community of Palco was established about forty miles south of Prairie View by two men, Palmer and Cole. A group of Hollanders from the Prairie View, Rotterdam, and Luctor areas purchased 7,200 acres to the west of Palco for a Dutch colony. By 1906 only twelve families had settled the area. On Sunday the Hollanders worshiped at Asbury, a country school which they shared with the Methodists. The church at Asbury was organized 29 October 1907 with seven families. There were ten communicant and twenty-one non-communicant members. Together they staffed a Sunday school.
A school house is used for a place of meeting, where also a joint Sunday-school with the Methodist Episcopal Church holds its regular sessions. A better place is looked for, and the desire for a House of Worship is expressed. The appointments of the pulpits-supplies were well filled and highly appreciated. There is prospect for growth in the future and her faith is in the Lord.\textsuperscript{14}

The optimism expressed proved to be unfounded. The church never got beyond pulpit supply. In 1908 its first and only report to the General Synod listed twelve families, comprised of ten communicant and thirty-two baptized members.

No explanation of the church's fate is recorded. However, the Palco Methodist Church listed some of those Dutch among their membership in the ensuing years. Others of the congregation returned to the Prairie View area. Sometime in 1911 the congregation quietly passed away.

**First (Dutch) Reformed Church of Wichita: 1911-1923**

*The Christian Intelligencer* reported the following in June of 1911:

A new and promising field at Wichita, Kansas applied for organization. A committee was appointed to visit said field and to organize a Reformed Church at Wichita, Kansas if conditions were favorable. The theological student, B. Flekkema, was transferred from Archer, Ia. to Wichita, Kansas, for the summer.\textsuperscript{15}

On 12 June 1911 the first (Dutch) Reformed Church of Wichita, Kansas was organized as a part of the Classis of Iowa. The church had fifteen families comprised of thirty-four communicant and thirty-one baptized members.

The Wichita congregation was unique in both location and leadership. It was situated on the growing edge of a sizable community, at the intersection of two major thoroughfares, and it was provided with trained leadership from the beginning. Seminary students were assigned for the summers, classical supply was appointed regularly, and the classis' missionary provided supervision. In 1915 they recorded their largest membership. The Rev. D. J. DeBey was called in 1917. He was considered a good minister.

He was first of all an expositor of Scriptures, his sermons were therefore always instructive and attractive for those who desired to know "what the Spirit saith to the churches," and his delivery was forceful . . . . While one of the people he never forgot the dignity of his office, so he was respected as well as loved by his people.\textsuperscript{16}
Wichita, however, did not flourish under the Rev. DeBey. He died on 10 March 1920 just 2 1/2 years after arriving. The Rev. F. B. Mansen was appointed supervisor. It appears, however, that by this time the Classis of Iowa had lost interest in Wichita. No further reports are filed, no mention is made in the synod reports, and the church simply disappears from the General Synod Minutes in 1924.

The Wichita congregation had purchased a prime piece of real estate for $1,050 in 1911. Shortly thereafter they bought a church building from the West Side Baptist Church and moved it to this site. On 30 November 30 1923 H. Tamboer, P. Wilderom, and J.M. Leendertse, the trustees of the church, approved the sale of the land and building back to the West Side Baptist Church for one dollar, a curious business transaction for Dutchmen. That corner became the site of a mission of West Side Baptist mission. Today the land and facilities are appraised at nearly a million dollars. The sanctuary seats several hundred and is at the intersection of two, four-lane thoroughfares in an older, well-maintained, residential area.

Crossroads Church: 1980-

Crossroads Church resulted from the RCA’s emphasis on church growth begun in the mid-1970s. West Sioux Classis selected the Overland Park area as a rapidly growing suburb with great potential for a new congregation. In 1979 the writer was called to begin the work. A core group was gathered, and plans for the ministry were made. On 4 December 1979, 140 people gathered at the Brookridge Country Club to launch the new congregation. Crossroads Church was organized on 4 May 1980 with forty families and a total membership of seventy-five. The congregation and classis purchased five acres of prime land for $300,000 in late 1980. The church rented space in an office complex and a synagogue prior to completing its $550,000 building project in 1984. The congregation is comprised of people of diverse denominational, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds. The church carries on a significant ministry to the community through its Apple Tree Preschool and Mother’s Day Out, Mothers of Preschoolers, and dinners for people in transition.

Harvest Community Church: Wichita 1991-

A realignment of classes and synods in the Mid- and Far West gave birth to Central Plains Classis in 1990. Due to its numerical and financial weakness, Central Plains Classis was joined by West Sioux Classis to plant a congregation in Wichita. The Rev. Dave Henion was called as the church-planting pastor. His strategy for gathering a core included telemarketing, canvassing, and small groups. Thousands of calls were made by supporting churches, friends, and the gathering core. In mid-November of 1991, worship was launched at the Kensler
Elementary School. The first service was attended by eighty-seven people. The average attendance for the first nine months was approximately forty.

The focus of ministry is the unchurched baby-boomer families (ages 25-45). Door-to-door canvassing with a soft-sell evangelism is a part of the strategy. An additional approach was instituted in early 1992 when Mike Herring joined the staff as youth minister. Targeting three schools on the west side, he works to build relationships with youth, to meet needs, and to connect the unchurched with Harvest Community Church. That congregation offers opportunities for people to gather for fellowship, study, and sharing. Groups focusing on family issues, relationships, rising above co-dependency, and spiritual growth are available.

**Other Ministries**

Dr. Walter C. Roe, a very influential and beloved Indian RCA pastor, teacher, and evangelist, played a significant role in Kansas and RCA history. In 1908, while at Yale, he and Henry Roe Cloud, a Winnebago Indian who was to become one of the most influential Indian advocates and education reformers of all time, developed a friendship that was to make a significant change in Indian education. They requested that Yale provide funds for the establishment of an Indian high school or college preparatory school. It was difficult for Henry Roe Cloud to raise funds, so in 1910 Walter C. Roe began to help him. By the time of his death in 1913, Walter had raised $5,000 for Henry. In 1915 Henry Roe Cloud opened the Roe Institute in Wichita. The school, named to honor Dr. Walter C. Roe, was later renamed the American Indian Institute (All). Its purpose was to train Indian leaders to deal with religious, economic, and health issues among the Indians as well as to prepare them for further education. "The fact that this school was established represents a watershed in Indian educational history, for it was one of the first all-Indian high schools established in 20th century America."[17]

In 1926, when the All was in a $75,000 fund-raising campaign, Mrs. Walter Roe served on the steering committee. Further evidence of the RCA's impact at the All was the student and faculty dormitory named Voorhees Hall. The relationship between Walter and Henry profoundly affected at least two other Indian leaders in the RCA, Robert Chaat and James Ottipoby. Robert Chaat, a Commanche Indian, was a student at the All before being ordained in the RCA. At the All he caught the vision of his people's great need and made the decision to give his life to them. James Ottipoby was the first Commanche Indian in America to graduate from college. He received his degree from Hope College in 1925 and was ordained in the RCA in 1938. He served on the faculty of the All for a number of years prior to becoming a missionary at Winnebago in 1938. In 1946 he transferred to the Presbyterian Church.
Currently there are several chaplains in Kansas. The Rev. Arthur DeHoogh, a member of the Dakota Classis, serves as Vice President of Development for the Newton Medical Center in Newton, Kansas. The Rev. Harry Tysen, a member of the Central Plains Classis, serves as the Director of Chaplaincy at the Asbury Salina Medical Center in Salina, Kansas. The Reverends Dennis A. Westbrooks, Harry Ter Maat, and Kenneth Sampson serve as chaplains in the U.S. Army. The former two are stationed at Fort Riley and the latter at Fort Leavenworth.

Conclusions

My reflections on the RCA’s work in Kansas suggest five major reasons for its limited success.

1. Presuppositions:

Through debates, expenditures, action, inaction, resolutions, priorities, programs, and structures the church’s understandings, convictions, and beliefs become "incarnate." The debate over the priority of planting churches has gone on for decades. In 1887 the PSC complained bitterly that a disproportionate amount of money went to foreign missions. At the time the ratio was ten to one. The priority of educated ministers and settled ministries made it difficult for the RCA to relate to the masses of uneducated and compete with other groups. The Methodist preachers moved over a wide area, often preaching in at least seven places each week, appealing to people’s emotions, and gathering them into congregations. The message of the Baptists and Methodists was very appealing to the men and women of the frontier. The gospel of free will, free grace, rugged individualism, and personal responsibility resonated with their sense of justice and fair play. The RCA’s assumptions that a good preacher would make a church grow, that more money would produce greater results, and that the churches were primarily for Hollanders made a significant impact on the outcome.

2. Leadership:

Momentum, opportunity, and enthusiasm were sacrificed when the church operated from a responding/reacting stance rather than from a proactive, visionary leadership. A reading of the minutes of the PSC for twenty years, beginning with 1870, documents the frustration experienced by this synod which lived in the midst of the opportunities but could not effect change in those who controlled the decisions.

... if General Synod ... thinks that both the Church and the laborers have been mistaken (to work in the West), let them say so, for to us this is a matter of life and death, ... We do not want to go on building what the Church may consider to be
wood and stone and stubble; we do not want to waste our lives and money . . . If the Church continues its missions, we ask for a wholesouled sympathy; a taking hold of the work in real earnest, . . . a sufficient outlay of money; a fair support of our missionaries, . . . an efficient administration of the work . . . ; a personal visitation by the secretary and members of the Board . . . we are suffering the consequences of some of the great mistakes of a former generation . . . .

The frustration carried over into the twentieth century. The 1915 minutes of the PSC record that "our Domestic work has a 'fly in the ointment.' We are trying to grow a tree in a flower pot."

National leadership for domestic mission vacillated, structures for mentoring and supervising were flimsy, and unrealistic expectations were placed upon the churches. Churches begun on a shoestring were left to a slow and painful death. Ministers were taught to be chaplains, pastors, and servants, but not leaders. They could pray at potlucks, preach expository sermons, call on the sick and shut-in, officiate at funerals and weddings, and teach the catechism. The result was biblical preaching, loving pastors, and faithful workers. Ministers were not equipped to raise money, influence decisions, make many and significant changes, deal with difficult problems, develop structures that motivated people to become who God created them to be, resolve conflict, inspire vision, and lead the congregation into discovering, sharpening, and using their gifts for ministry. The ministers perceived their role to be servants. It was the responsibility of the consistory to lead.

3. Congregationalism:

The organization and disbandment of congregations was initiated by groups of people. There was no denominational plan to plant or close them. The Somerset Church is a good example. Isolation and distance from other RCA churches motivated it to request transfer to the Presbyterian Church.

Distances between churches were great, especially at a time when horse and train were the chief means of transportation and communication. The individual churches were often far from their classis. Rotterdam was about 800 miles from Michigan. Luctor was about 750 miles from Wisconsin. Wichita was about 500 miles from Iowa. Each congregation was in a different classis, and one wonders if they even knew of each other's existence. This isolation permitted and promoted a congregational spirit for there was little contact, help, support, understanding, or encouragement from the classis.

The sense of isolation was even more acute among the significant immigrant constituency in almost all of the churches established before 1930. They were fearful strangers in a foreign land, unable to communicate with outsiders. They clung to their own familiar traditions and people.
4. **Dutch Ethos:**

The Dutch were greatly respected and appreciated in their communities because they were tidy, moral, thrifty, honest, hard-working, and religious. They were strong-willed, determined, and frugal. However, these characteristics set them apart from the community in which they lived. Jokes poked at their ‘yankee Dutch’ speech patterns and clothing.

Their churches became gatherings of ‘like-minded people.’ Primarily, the Dutch churches were instituted to provide the spiritual atmosphere to which the Hollanders had been accustomed, for Christian fellowship and the culture of their own souls, and for the education of their own children.²⁰

The church was as much a social gathering as a place of worship. Assembly with compatriots offered a rekindling of their cultural past, a time to be warmed by the fires of the mother tongue, and a chance to relish the safety of their memories in a foreign land. Neither the church’s name nor its hour of worship appeared in the local paper. There was no need. The Dutch all knew and the non-Dutch were not interested, perhaps not even welcome.

The church was thus a kind of nurturing mother. She provided security, safety, and a continuation of the heritage. The congregations were quite small and survival was a more frequent subject than welcoming the non-Dutch. The Dutch language was retained even though it meant the loss of the next generation. Resistance to change and reluctance to act resulted in missed opportunities.

5. **Economic Factors:**

The Dutch in Kansas were quite mobile. They were motivated to come by the wonderful tales of cheap land, the romantic west, crowded colonies in the East, a healthier climate, and promises of unlimited opportunity. When they came they discovered dust storms so thick the chickens went to roost, grasshopper invasions that stripped every green thing, droughts that lasted years, recessions, and depressions. Many left as their optimism and hopefulness turned to despair, discouragement, and cynicism. The rise and fall of economic tides directly affected the churches. Booms and busts brought towns into and out of being in a few short years. The railroad could make or break a town, depending upon whether or not it passed through. The productivity of the land was marginal. The pioneers’ money was spent on building up their farms and businesses. Little was left to provide adequate support for the church’s ministry. Most of the churches disappeared from the prairies, leaving behind a cemetery, a few pictures, and an entry in the office of the Registrar of Deeds.
Postscript

The story of the RCA in Kansas portrays neither glowing success nor utter failure. In the past dozen years the RCA has expanded her ministry in Kansas with the beginning of two new congregations. Their understanding of mission and ministry is significantly different than those of the previous era.

Their future would be enhanced by serious consideration of the following innovations. What if each classis meeting included a ninety-minute segment of leadership training for consistories? What if classes selected and trained people to give ongoing mentoring to new church starts rather than rotating them on a three-year basis? What if the new churches in each synod gathered annually for a time of sharing and encouragement? What if the synods provided resources and encouraged pastors and congregations to network programs and ideas? The challenge is to accept our past, to determine our non-negotiable norms, and together to build upon our strengths to provide hope for each new generation.
ENDNOTES


3. Ibid., 1821, 23.


5. Ibid.

6. Miami Republican, June 24, 1871.

7. The Christian Intelligencer, 42 (October 5, 1871).

8. Minutes of the Particular Synod of Chicago [hereafter Minutes, PSC], 1874, 175.


13. Luctor Consistory Minutes, August 12, 1903.


15. The Christian Intelligencer, 82 (June 14, 1911), 388.


19. Minutes, PSC (1915), 614.