

**Portraits of Dutch Saints on the Plains:
Portrait of a Domine: Dr. Herman Kuiper**

Mike Vanden Bosch

Not many people are alive who remember Dr. Herman Kuiper as a young domine, but he served his first charge in First Rock Valley CRC. He looked like a domine; he behaved like a man who believed in the divine right of domines. As a boy I saw him approach a stop sign with his suitably grey 1946 Dodge. He stopped at stop signs--that much deference he had to the law--but he looked neither right nor left before he proceeded into the intersection. He was the saintliest stiff-necked man in town.

He always dressed like a domine. I think he went to the barber shop in a three-piece suit. I may be wrong, but I do not recall even on the hottest Sunday afternoons, long before we dreamed of air conditioning, that he ever shed his suit coat with tails while preaching.

But let me go back 30 years before I saw him, back to when he served his first charge. In Rock Valley, as in many towns in northwest Iowa, the First Reformed Church was barely a block east of the Christian Reformed Church--I think four houses stood between the two churches. (In Northwest Iowa Reformed and Christian Reformed churches, often built within a few years of each other, were seldom built across the tracks from each other or even across town.) In those days, the Christian Reformed church had two Dutch services, one in the morning, one in the afternoon. In the evening they had Young People's Society, also in charge of the domine.

My mother was 18 or 19 at the time. She had heard that the First Reformed Church had an interesting Young People's Society. They sang lots of English hymns. They had interesting discussions. But it met at the same time as the Christian Reformed Church's Young People's Society. Nevertheless, on Sunday my mother showed what passed for rebelliousness in her day, and that evening went to the First Reformed Young People's Society. She rode with her older brother in a buggy to the Christian Reformed Church, then walked to the First Reformed Church. What she didn't realize was that Dr. Kuiper, who lived across the street from the Christian Reformed Church, was looking out his livingroom window and saw her go.

I do not know if he entertained a notion to run out and physically detain her from yielding to temptation, but I do know that early the next morning Dr. Kuiper was on the farmyard of my grandparents. He knocked on the door and when my grandmother answered the door, he said had to speak to one of the daughters--the one who the night before had skipped the Christian Reformed Young People's society and gone instead to the First Reformed Young People's society. My mother was on her knees with her sister, mopping the kitchen floor and perhaps praying, for she had overheard the conversation. Though she was no doubt shocked to see the domine and to realize that she had been caught, she was not as intimidated as you might expect a

teenage girl to be, having been caught in what the domine apparently considered a grievous sin. She stood up and defended herself, saying the Young People's Society of the First Reformed Church was also Christian so she'd done no wrong going there for one Sunday evening.

When my mother told me this story, she was a little vague on just what Dr. Kuiper had said in reply, but she remembered being warned about what going to the Reformed Young People's Society would "lead to." He first warned of the theological gulf that divided the churches and then, becoming more practical, told a heart-wrenching story of a sad "mixed marriage" that had begun with just such a seemingly innocent visit to the forbidden church. That is my mother's story of how one young shepherd guarded his flock.

My story of Domine Kuiper would end there if he had not returned to First Rock Valley CRC in the late forties when I was 13. I had him for catechism teacher. On the very first Saturday afternoon, I noticed that he didn't close his eyes when he prayed. Don't ask me how I knew that he didn't close his eyes, but I was self-righteous and legalistic enough at that naive age to go up to him after class and tell him I had been taught to close my eyes when I prayed and I thought he should close his eyes too. He probably thought, "Aha! Clearly a child of his mother." Then he told me that the reason people were taught to close their eyes during prayer was to help them keep their mind on what they were praying--help them concentrate--but he said that he could concentrate without closing his eyes. If he had said he needed to keep one eye open to watch us eighth grade boys, I'd have understood, but I remember thinking his response seemed somewhat arrogant, though it did free me from considerable guilt.

Nevertheless, I remember him as a great preacher and some years ago wrote this sonnet, which was inspired by his sermons:

Sonnet to Dr. Kuiper

I saw your stony face as hard as law.
I heard you stop my father's thoughts of golden harvest:
"Earthly treasures soon will mold.
Love them, you'll not escape the devil's claw."
I wondered if this claw had caused my flaw
Of loving one shetland pony too old
To sprint with colts, one pup who barked too boldly,
one sheepdog who shook hands with his paw.
Then as you pictured hell like Iowa mud,
Your stone face sobbed so that you could not speak.
I thought you'd thunder that another flood
Would whoosh us down a sin-avenging creek.

But no! You said Christ's overflowing blood
Could whisk us from the devil's bony beak!

Portrait of an Elder: Cornelius Van Duyn

I want to look at two elders from just a few angles. First, let's look at one as an office bearer in the church. He was an elder at Lebanon, Iowa, at a time when elders often served much of their adult lives as elder. One elder served in the First Reformed Church in Sioux Center for 37 years. A whole generation of young people in the church grew up thinking that elder was his first name. I don't know how many years my great uncle served, but even if Lebanon had 3-year terms, he could have served more than 20 years. At any rate, one can easily see that elders nearly always out-lasted preachers, and thus the authority of each succeeding preacher was subject to the laws of attrition.

Now you may have heard, as I have, of domines who ruled as well as served consistories. Dr. Herman Kuiper, of whom I just wrote, was perhaps such a domine in many ways. It is not surprising that some consistories were intimidated by domines who often had years of education beyond any of the consistory members. But I present the true story of my great uncle Cornelius Van Duyn to show that some elders could quite literally tell a minister where to get off.

Lebanon is ten miles west of Sioux Center. It has not post office--never did, so far as I know. It so happened that the domine of Lebanon got a call. I don't know where it was from, but let's just say it was from Pella. When the three weeks of considering the call was nearing the end, Elder Van Duyn volunteered to drive the domine to the post office in Sioux Center to mail his letter to the calling congregation. A buggy, of course, was a fine place for a conversation about matters theological and practical. So Elder Van Duyn inquired of the domine, "Well, domine, may I know what your answer is to the church in Pella?"

"Ya, Cornelius, you may know. After spending much time in prayer, I have come to a hard decision, but I have written to Pella to tell them that the Lord has not shown me that my work in Lebanon is not yet finished. I am declining my call."

"Well, domine," replied Elder Van Duyn matter-of-factly, "I don't know how the Lord spoke to you, but I think you have misunderstood his message. I suggest that you change your letter and tell Pella that your work in Lebanon is finished, that you will be glad to come and serve them."

I don't know what the domine thought, but I do know what he did: he opened the envelope, took out the letter, and wrote another, accepting the call.

I tell this story as I heard it told, not to glorify my great uncle or to denigrate the anonymous domine, but merely to show that some uneducated elders, though they had great respect for the Word, were less mysterious than ministers in their understanding of how God calls and doesn't call preachers.

Portrait of an Elder: Lane Vanden Bosch

Elder Lane Vanden Bosh would have said uncle to Koene Vanden Bosch, the only domine in the CRC when it began. He was a cousin of Tamme Vanden Bosch, the first home missionary in the CRC and later first minister of Harrison CRC and New Holland CRC.

Lane Vanden Bosch, my great uncle on my father's side, taught catechism in the 1940s when he was near 80, already walking with a cane. The first story I'm going to tell you about him is one that comes from my friend, Bernie Van't Hul, who was three years older than I and also grew up in Rock Valley. Bernie had my uncle for catechism during the World War II years. By 1944 when this story took place, Rock Valley CRC had nearly 100 service stars on its service flag, which hung at the front of the sanctuary. I can recall only two young men of the church between 18 and 24 who were not in the armed services. Boys from 6-16 saw these sailors, soldiers, and airmen as their heroes. But no one was a bigger hero than the only pilot from Rock Valley, Lawrence Kooima. He had already flown twenty bombing missions over Berlin by 1944.

Well, one Saturday the whole town had been alerted that Lawrence Kooima was going to fly over Rock Valley and all who wanted to pay tribute to him should be outside watching. (Lawrence Kooima was actually not CR bur PR, but we CR's adopted him as our hero anyway. In Rock Valley he boys were magnanimous about ignoring denominational lines in adopting heroes during the war.) But, back to my story, Saturday afternoon was the usual time for catechism, and neither wars nor rumors of wars would cancel catechism for Uncle Lane. And for the young catechumens, never was the conflict for loyalty between church and state--or more precisely, between church and hero--sharper than on that day.

Parents and Uncle Lane said, "Catechism comes first." But the ears of every catechumen were turned for one sound--that of Lawrence Kooima's 4-engine bomber flying low over Rock Valley. The minute Bernie heard it, he jumped up and started for the door. But amazingly 80-year-old Uncle Lane got his cane up and hooked the sleeve of Bernie's new jacket, ripping it off completely. That didn't stop Bernie--he ran out and saw the plane.

That evening my Uncle Lane paid a visit to the Gerrit Van't Hul family to apologize for tearing the sleeve off Bernie's coat. He took his job as catechism teacher

seriously, but he felt he had to give an apology than get one from a too-eager 13-year-old caught up in the frenzied hero-worship of the moment.

One other story of Uncle Lane, this one told me by my father. One of Uncle Lane's oldest daughters married into the Netherlands Reformed Church. As most of you know, even older members of that denomination are much less certain of their salvation than are most members of the CRC, but many young people in that denomination, some no doubt for good reasons, live in paralyzing fear of hell.

Well, it so happened that this daughter's 17-year-old son got sick and was on his death bed, weeping because he was sure he was going to hell. As my father told it to me, it was my Uncle Lane who went to the bedside of his grandson and read to him the story of the dying thief on the cross, comforting the boy with the words of Christ: "This day thou shalt be with me in paradise." When no minister was going to tell his grandson of the marvelous grace of God, Uncle Lane stepped into the void, and with the words of Jesus himself, brought the gospel to his dying grandson.

Portrait of a Teacher: D. J. Offringa

My Uncle Pete told me this story of his grade school principal at the Rock Valley Christian school. This story happened about 1916 and is told in the words of my Uncle Pete Vanden Bosch.

"I was 16 and Pete Vugteveen and myself were too old for the country school, so Pete and I were going to finish 8th grade in Rock Valley Christian. I met with Prof. D.J. Offringa, who told me I could start in September. I would get three weeks off for cornpicking--they needed me to help pick corn, but Offringa said he would see to it that I would not fall behind in my studies.

"That man left an indelible impression on my life and on my conscience. A few other boys and I had done something not to our honor and Offringa discovered it. But before even talking to us, he walked four miles out in the country one evening to talk to my parents. My parents brought him back with the buggy, of course, but because of us, he had walked that far.

"The next morning when he came back to school, he told what had happened. I knew we were caught. The Offringa asked us guilty boys point blank:

Mark Postma, did you have a hand in it? 'Yessir, two.'

Harry Abbema, did you have a hand in it? 'Yessir, I did.'

Vanden Bosch, did you have a hand in it? 'Yessir, I did.'

"Then John G. Van Otterloo--he was the youngest, so he was not the most guilty one--so he was asked and John said, 'Yes I did.' We all remember that to this day. That evening when school was dismissed, Offringa said, 'Now you 4 boys who are guilty of this, you will stay after school.'

"Then he told us again of what we had done, and he quoted out of the Bible, showed us our error--we the oldest ones in the school, and he asked how we older ones who should see education as a privilege could do such a thing. We felt miserable.

"Then he said, 'And now we get on our knees and pray.' I'll never forget that as long as I live. Ever since that, I just revered that man. No further admonition. Just, "We'll get on our knees and pray." We'd a whole lot rather have been beaten with a stick."

Mr. Riemer De Vries

My last character was the father of Nancy Blom, Mr. Riemer De Vries. In the Netherlands Riemer had begun to study for the ministry, but dropped out. Nevertheless he had a good education and was very interested in politics and philosophy. Though he did not complete formal schooling, he read widely. By 1915 he had a family with a couple of teenage sons, a teenage daughter, Jennie, and an 8-year-old daughter, Nancy. He had a small, not too profitable bakery there, so when a chance came to come to America, he took it.

He felt he could leave Holland behind, as well as his friends and relatives, but he could not leave behind a crate the size of an army footlocker full of Dutch books. You can well imagine what such a box must have weighed, but it was carried to the dock in Rotterdam, from the dock to the ship, from the ship to Ellis Island, from Ellis Island to the train--to several trains--until at last it stood on the dock at the railroad station in, of all places, Doon, Iowa.

For a year De Vries tried to make a go of running a bakery business from the basement of his home in Doon, but most Dutch housewives baked their own bread, so after one year, De Vries took a job working for a farmer near Lebanon. Riemer knew nothing about farming--Nancy told me he did not even know how to milk a cow--but his teenage sons and daughters soon learned the ins and outs of farming, and they did all the farmer required. Within two years, the De Vries family was renting a farm and doing well, thanks especially to the children.

I do not mean to suggest that Riemer was lazy. He merely had his own agenda. The second spring on the rented farm, he announced that they would not hatch any chickens that year because he was going to use the chicken coop to work on a book. It so happens that the Lady's Home Journal had offered a huge prize to the person who wrote the best book on how to achieve world peace. Riemer was convinced that he

could win that prize because he would likely be the only one acquainted with the great Dutch thinkers.

So the chicken coop, now cluttered with Dutch books, became a hatchery for ideas on world peace. Unfortunately we'll never know what was in that manuscript, but De Vries was so convinced that he had written a great book that when he did not win, he was certain someone had stolen his ideas and he had been robbed.

The next year the chicken coop was put to uses somewhat more mundane, but I've often admired and even envied the farmer who took a sabbatical in a chicken coop so he could write a book.