

Columns

Technically Speaking

Derek Schuurman



This past July we made a move to Sioux Center, Iowa. When I applied for my work visa at the U.S. border, the immigration officer had only one question for me: “Why Iowa?” The answer at that time was that I was going to work for a year at Dordt College. As we drove into Iowa, our U-Haul trailer in tow, we heard a radio show on the history and etymology of the word “corn” – a fitting introduction to this Midwestern state. However, there is much more to Iowa than corn, as I have discovered.

The first president of Dordt, B.J. Haan, recounts an incident in his memoirs when a former president of Calvin Seminary quipped to him in front of a group of colleagues, “How’s your little college coming along out there?” Haan was taken aback but quickly replied, “Well fellas, when you plant a little tree and every wind blows on it and every dog in the neighbourhood takes a turn at it and the tree still grows, that is going to be a good tree.” And indeed, during my time so far at Dordt College, I have observed a solid tree which has since grown on the Iowa plains.

I have been impressed with the strong commitment to Reformational thinking at Dordt College and its flourishing programs in areas close to my heart, such

Impressions from Sioux Center

as engineering and computer science. People are tremendously hospitable. Within minutes of our arrival, a crew of Dordt professors met us at our house to help unload. For the first several weeks we were invited for dinner to numerous homes. My 13-year-old daughter likewise experienced tremendous hospitality as several girls from her grade reached out and befriended her, sending her messages even prior to our arrival in Sioux Center.

Milk jugs and more

However, as Canadians we gradually began to detect some differences in the culture, ranging from the mundane to the more perplexing. We are amazed that in this day and age, a town still exists where very few people lock their doors, bikes or cars. As someone who grew up in Toronto, I have not been able to relax my fastidious door-locking instincts. We were also surprised to see that most stores are still closed on Sundays (a weekly rhythm now lost in large cities) and most churches still have second services. As home delivery of mail was being phased out in Canada, we were delighted to arrive in the U.S. where home delivery is still the norm (including Saturdays!). We have also grown accustomed to the mournful train whistles in the night and the tornado warning siren that wails three times daily,



at noon, 6 p.m. and 9 p.m. The first time we heard the test siren we considered dashing into the basement despite the clear blue sky overhead. Moreover, we have also learned to mimic the “farmer wave,” a ritual gesture in which you raise two fingers off the steering wheel to oncoming motorists as a friendly Midwestern greeting.

But some things seem still strange to my Canadian sensibilities. Seeing people routinely drive motorcycles without helmets seems foolhardy to my Canadian eyes. Being in Iowa, we also have a front-row seat for the presidential primaries and the circus that U.S. politics can be to outside eyes. A Donald Trump political sign stands resolutely on the lawn a few doors down from us. And then there is the U.S. health care system. Despite having medical coverage, being required to pay a \$30 deductible at the family doctor would likely seem an abomination to many Canadians.

We have also observed the excitement surrounding high school and college sports, in particular football. We attended a few school football games, which were cultural experiences in and of themselves. Dordt’s football team comes equipped with the “cannon of Dordt,” a small canon enthusiastically fired whenever

a touchdown is made. One local person confided that sports can border on the idolatrous here; however, I think Canada is not immune to this (albeit with different sports).

I am now convinced that getting milk in jugs is far superior to the Ontario practice of milk in bags. But there are other things that we have missed. We miss Tim Horton’s, but Sioux Center is home to The Fruited Plain, a delightful independent cafe run by two Dordt alumni which serves a wonderful cup of coffee (not to mention Spaghetti Wednesdays). And, of course, we have greatly missed our three oldest children who are currently attending Redeemer University College.

This past year was filled with many unexpected changes. At this time last year I would not have believed we would be in Iowa now. After the Christmas break, however, when we return to Sioux Center, if the border guard again asks “Why Iowa?” I will have much more to tell him about this place. ➤

Derek Schuurman is currently a visiting professor at Dordt College. He moved to Sioux Center this past summer with his wife, Carina, and their youngest daughter.