

A Big Day for Red Mesa

Launching the Leadership Development Network

by Jack Klumpenhouwer

Rising leaders in the Red Mesa churches no longer have to leave their homeland to get training for the ministry. Classis Red Mesa has begun a three-year course of study to train new leaders in their local churches. The first group of about twenty students began their studies this fall. "The students are very excited," said coordinator Rev. Raymond Slim. "I guess they've been waiting for this."

Slim says Red Mesa needs more leaders. Many churches are without a full-time pastor. Ever since the Christian Reformed Church founded its first congregations in the area more than 100 years ago, native leaders who hoped to become pastors have had to leave home to attend seminary in culturally strange places like Grand Rapids. "Some of them just came home defeated and discouraged," said Slim. "We decided we should have our own training center here."

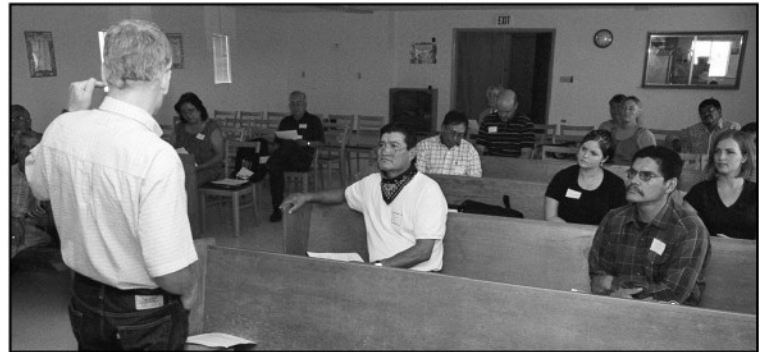
The training is called a Leadership Development Network (LDN).

Students study part-time, attending monthly classes taught by ordained ministers within the classis. They also do homework, meet with mentors and complete practical assignments for their churches.

The first class session on August 30 at Bis Dootl'izh Deez'áhi Fellowship CRC in Newcomb, New Mexico was also a celebration. Slim encouraged the students from Proverbs 1:5, which says the wise add to their learning.

Ernie Benally also spoke up, urging the students to stick with the training. Benally began pushing for the LDN a decade ago when he learned of the format while serving as ministry director of Classis Red Mesa.

"Search for how God will guide you," Benally told the students.



Rev. Keith Bulthuis lectures on Biblical Interpretation

"When others see you set the model in place, they will want to join and develop a formal training school. This has been needed for many years. I just pray that this school you have begun will grow and grow to God's glory."

Rev. W. Keith Bulthuis of Bethany CRC in Gallup gave a lesson on biblical interpretation, and everyone ate lunch together. Students eagerly shared why they were beginning the training.

"I'm in leadership now and want to do better," Evelyn Bennally told the group. She and her husband are lay leaders at Red Valley CRC, which has no full-time pastor. One purpose of the LDN is to give some formal training to such leaders.

Organizers also hope some students will complete all three years of the training. That would make them ready for ordination as ministry associates who might then become much-needed pastors.



Students Roland Bitsilly and Caleb Dickson (front row) listen to the first LDN lecture.

Roland Bitsilly of Church Rock CRC said becoming a pastor appeals to him. He said he's been using his work as an artist to talk to clients about God. He gave his testimony at Cottonwood Pass Bible Conference and has given devotional talks to students at Rehoboth Christian School. He said those experiences have helped him hear God's call to ministry, and the training can help him respond to it. "Everyone likes the way I've been ministering to the kids," Bitsilly said. "I hope this will make me a better man, get me where I couldn't get before."

Caleb Dickson of Maranatha Fellowship CRC in Farmington also thinks he may become a pastor. He says the training gives him a chance to explore God's call without leaving his job or uprooting his family.

"This is a way to step out and start doing something instead of just talking about it," said Dickson. "To be on the ground floor of something like this is exciting."

Home Missions Regional Team Leader Rev. Stanley Jim said he's excited by the thought of leaders who'll be ministering to their own people. "Instead of looking to someone else coming in and doing the work for you, the local leader will be able to do the work themselves," he said.



Students listen to instructions from Ruth Benally.

The CRC Synod recently decided to

allow ministry associates, who often lack a seminary degree and aren't called "reverend," to become pastors in congregations that are culturally different from the larger denomination. The rule is intended to help churches like those of Red Mesa, where it's hard to raise up pastors in the usual CRC way.

Jim said he's happy for the chance to train pastors locally, and also hopes the LDN will encourage some students to pursue further studies at seminary.

As one of the LDN teachers, he promises rigorous standards for those who take the Red Mesa route to becoming a pastor. The course includes training in Bible knowledge, Reformed theology, ministry skills and personal spiritual development. "We don't want to make it look like it's easy to get to be a ministry associate in Red Mesa," he said. "You're on almost equal par with a regular pastor. In fact, in some ways there's more accountability required of these ministry associates."

The LDN has been a long time coming. In the 1920's, Rev. L. P. Brink arranged for the CRC Mission Board to purchase enough land in Farmington for a future Native American seminary alongside a church and parsonage. That seminary was never built, but for many years summer Bible training was offered in Rehoboth at "interpreters' school."

In the 80's, Dr. Don Tamminga mentored a number of Navajo men who went on to study at Calvin College and Seminary. Rev. Jim and Rev. Slim are among them, and in 2003 they planned the first Red Mesa LDN. Those classes didn't take hold, but led to the current three-year curriculum created by the Theological Education and Ministry Skills Committee of classis and modeled on other LDNs in the U.S. and Canada.

Committee member Susan LaClear, pastor of Maranatha Fellowship CRC in Farmington, called the new training's first session "monumental."

"It was not just a class, but an answer to hundreds of prayers over the course of almost a century, which became more like desperate pleas over the last few years as we saw many of our churches dying for lack of a pastor," she said. "Many of us believe that God will use this LDN to restore many of these broken and struggling churches, and we are grateful to God for helping us bring it to pass."

THE LDN : An Investment in the People who will Lead the Church in Red Mesa

The planners and coordinators for the LDN were hoping for ten students in the start-up phase of the LDN. Amazingly, over twenty have come out! Although the LDN has some seed money through Classis Red Mesa, the planners need to raise approximately \$1200 per student to support the program for the long term. Students each pay tuition of \$135. They also purchase their own books and pay for transportation to the group meetings. Some churches are helping students from their churches with these costs. To make a tax-deductible contribution directly in support of the LDN, please send a check to the Red Mesa Foundation at PO Box 4470, Gallup, New Mexico, 87305. Please clearly mark your check for the LDN. You may also donate on line at www.redmesafoundation.org.