

Jeff's Jottings

A chronicle of change

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Greetings from Storm Lake, Iowa. Synod School, the popular, family-focused educational / fun / reunion-ish gathering sponsored annually by the Synod of Lakes and Prairies, happens here, on the campus of Buena Vista University, a college affiliated with the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

While Storm Lake has for some time now been the location of Synod School, the juxtaposition of this year's theme and place is striking. Our plenary speaker, Dr. Deirdre Johnston, is leading us through daily reflections on "Cultivating Civil Community ... in our Age of Incivility" in the town where Steve King, the race-baiting, far-right congressman, grew up. A few weeks ago,

Pete Buttigieg was here for the Fourth of July parade, stumping for votes in next winter's Iowa presidential primary (and Beto O'Rourke before him). Doubt Steve and Pete would have agreed on much.

Storm Lake itself is also dramatically changing, too. In 2017, there were nearly as many Hispanic households in town as white, with a sizable Asian population as well. Needing workers at the nearby packing plants and the increasingly massive farm operations will do that. Art Cullen, the editor of the Storm Lake Times, a twice-weekly newspaper, won a Pulitzer Prize in 2017 for stories about agri-business, and has a new book, "[Storm Lake: A Chronicle of Change, Resilience, and Hope from a Heartland Newspaper](#)." It is, Cullen's website notes, "Part memoir, part cultural history, 'Storm Lake' is a story of how the rural Midwest has been washed out over the past 40 years — family farms disappearing to the consolidation of industrial agriculture; small towns bleeding jobs and population; a once-comfortable way of life supplanted by low-wage meatpacking jobs, environmental degradation, and a cultural sense of loss and upheaval. It's a story of how the Farm Crisis ('a 1980s rural depression that saw farmers hanging themselves in barns') damaged the economy and psyche of the Midwest in ways that many communities have still not recovered from, about the Red and Blue roller coaster of Iowa politics and how right-wing anti-immigrant voices like Congressman Steve King became a harbinger for the rise of Donald Trump. It's a story about family and community and survival, and how climate change now threatens all that the Heartland has built — and the very notion of food security in America."

Diana Butler Bass called last week [a really bad week for the God of Love](#). My Iowa friend James Schaap wrote about race and change in "["Pig-headed in Hog Country"](#)." In that context, nearly 650 (mostly) Presbyterians have spent this week in, of all places, one of the most dramatically changed and racially diverse small towns in Iowa asking, of all the questions we might ask, what our place and role is in our increasingly divisive society. And with this direct reminder: "*This (question) is not finally about them. It is about us. We cannot lead people where we ourselves are unwilling to go.*"

That's what I'll be wrestling with on the drive back from Iowa, asking what my specific part to play will be in this age of incivility — asking what I must do,

where I must go, that I was unwilling to consider before, to help create the kind of inclusive world God longs for us to be. That's a big ask, and it's time for me to pay up.