

# The Dalles Chronicle



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## Bill seeks end to ICE contracts

Rep. Bonham among those spearheading the bill

By Dirk VanderHart  
 Oregon Public Broadcasting

For nearly three years, human rights protesters have regularly picketed the regional jail in The Dalles over contracts to hold immigrant detainees for U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

Now a bipartisan duo of lawmakers is putting forward a plan to end those contracts—if they can make the case that Oregon taxpayers should pay for the change.

Under House Bill 4121, the Northern Oregon Regional Corrections Facility—known as

NORCOR—would be prohibited from pursuing new contracts with federal immigration officials if state lawmakers agree to replace revenue from those contracts with state money. That amounts to at least \$820,000 a year for the facility, which acts as an adult jail for four counties and accepts juvenile inmates from an even wider area.

The jail serves the Oregon counties of Wasco, Hood River, Sherman and Gilliam.

“In the community I live in, the jail gets picketed by folks,” said Rep. Daniel Bonham, R-The Dalles, one of the lawmakers spearheading the bill. “At the same time, the jail requires a minimal amount of funding to provide the services it provides ... At the end of the day, we tried to come up with a way to let everybody win.”

Bonham is sponsoring HB

See **CONTRACTS**, page A3



NORCOR is a cinder block regional jail surrounded by a high chain-link fence and razor wire located at 201 Webber St., The Dalles. The jail incorporates two separate facilities, one for adults and juveniles. Immigrants are housed at the facility through federal contracts, which help fund operational costs. A bill brought before the Oregon legislature seeks to stop federal detention of immigrants at the facility by providing additional state funding. Mark B. Gibson photo

## Woman dies in custody

No sign of foul play; autopsy and investigation planned

By Emily Fitzgerald  
 Hood River News

An adult woman died while in custody at the NORCOR jail facility on Feb. 4.

Just after 3:30 p.m., emergency medical personnel from Mid-Columbia Fire and Rescue responded to the medical clinic

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# Choosing their future course

Proposal would allow churches to leave if they disagree with denomination's direction

By Walker Sacon  
 The Dalles Chronicle

GIGI SIEKINNEN WAS raised in the United Methodist Church. Over the years, she moved around as she raised three kids with her husband Jim, but connection to her local United Methodist congregation was a constant wherever she went.

Siekkinen became interested in getting more officially involved in the church as her kids grew to be more independent. She found a mostly-online seminary program which made formally pursuing ministry possible.

“A series of events kind of came into play that just started planting this seed of pursuing a more official call to ministry,” Siekkinen said. “Things just really fell into place several years ago.”

Siekkinen worked out a pastoral internship at The Dalles First United Methodist with supervision from the Rev. David King, whose Hood River congregation she was a member of.

Now, two-and-a-half years later, she serves as pastor and has given her congregants opportunities to talk about discussions centered around LGBTQ inclusion at the church's representative body—the general conference—which led to a 2019 special session and a series of proposals attempting to reconcile differences between traditional and progressive groups within the church.

Siekkinen said this conversation has been going on in the United Methodist Church, worldwide, for decades. In 2016, she said, the discussion hit a tipping point which prompted leaders to look for another way forward.

Siekkinen said a recent proposal to allow local churches to split from the United Methodist Church if they disagreed with the church's direction was a “reasonable way forward,” although not an ideal scenario.

“That being said, I think it's really important to understand that it's a proposal just like there are other proposals out there that didn't make the headlines like this one did,” Siekkinen said. “Like those



Pastor Gigi Siekkinen is pictured in her office at The Dalles First United Methodist Church. She has been following high-level developments in the churches hierarchy, and helping guide local discussions on how the church should stand on issues regarding sexuality, inclusion and spirituality. Walker Sacon photo

“It's part of a bigger conversation of what it means to follow the way of Christ...If you have a close relative or a dear friend who is LGBTQ, you're following this more closely and you really are paying attention.”

Gigi Siekkinen  
 Pastor, First United Methodist Church, The Dalles

other proposals, it will go before general conference in May and that's where it will either become our new reality or not.”

The headline-garnering proposal Siekkinen referenced is one of nine proposals listed on the Greater Northwest Episcopal Area United Methodist website.

Greater Northwest bishop Elaine J.W. Stanovsky took a similar stance to Siekkinen's in a press release about the proposal.

Stanovsky's release said she believes the proposal may be the best next step for United Methodists,

though she hopes for a resolution which maintains the church's unity.

“I trust this proposal is designed to unbind us from our ‘irreconcilable differences’ and free us to focus on the future,” Stanovsky said in the release. “It does not guarantee a particular outcome, but it appears to offer United Methodists in the United States the opportunity to choose a future that is fully inclusive of LGBTQ persons.”

For her part, Siekkinen has not shied away from speaking with congregants about the developments at the church's higher levels or the

issues they relate to.

She held town hall meetings for congregants who wanted to talk about 2019's special session and said there will probably be another series around May 2020's general conference. She said her congregants have varying amounts of interest in the church's highest organizational levels.

“If you have a close relative or a dear friend who is LGBTQ, you're following this more closely and you really are paying attention,” Siekkinen said. “We have some people who are of a generation where you didn't talk about sexuality at all so to even have these conversations is a growth area.”

Siekkinen said United Methodist embraces people who think differently. She said the price for this diversity of thought is occasional conflict. She said her congregation has continued to find ways to talk about these issues which she said are all part of a

larger discussion.

“It's part of a bigger conversation of what it means to follow the way of Christ,” Siekkinen said. “It's how we love others, how we include others—how we grow into a bigger understanding of community is the big conversation and LGBTQ inclusion is part of that conversation.”

Siekkinen acknowledged that not everyone in her congregation is of one mind but reiterated that congregants have continued trying to grow.

“We're a work in progress and in the meantime we still are doing wonderful things,” Siekkinen said, highlighting a group that was meeting at the church to work on the community backpack program. “That type of ministry keeps going even as these other, bigger conversations are taking place,” Siekkinen said.

“We've got preschool kids meeting downstairs. That keeps going as the denomination is having these larger conversations.”

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