

A Tale of Two Congregations: Acculturation and its Long-term Impact on Chicago's West Side Reformed Churches

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First Reformed Church of Chicago, the mother congregation in the city, celebrates its sesquicentennial in 2003. It will be the last hurrah. The church, which relocated to the suburb of Berwyn in 1945, has sharply dwindled in membership and is struggling with the decision to close the doors. Time, distance, and cultural change have taken their toll. Yet, a celebration is in order, given the congregation's illustrious past dating from the early 1850s.¹

Mobility has always been a hallmark of church life in Chicago, the nation's second city. Congregations grew, flourished, and declined as their upwardly mobile members moved to newer subdivisions or more distant suburbs, where spacious new homes with gardens on tree-lined streets beckoned. Finally, the mother churches followed their members and sold the beloved edifice to other ethnic groups. Eventually, urban renewal projects, new land uses, or simple decay dictated that the buildings fall to the wrecker's ball. The first Dutch Reformed churches, erected in the 1850s and 1860s, suffered this fate. The earliest buildings still used for worship date from the 1890s, and all now house African American congregations.

For many years there were two "First" churches standing a stone's throw from one another and competing for members--First Reformed Church of Chicago, founded in 1853, and First Christian Reformed Church of Chicago, founded in 1867. The junior body was born in a schism by fifteen families from First Reformed. That very year, the rapidly Americanizing Reformed Church in America--formerly the Reformed Protestant Dutch Church, dropped the word "Dutch" in its name.

The Reformed Church in America is one of America's oldest denominations, dating from 1628 in New Netherlands. Until the nineteenth century immigration to the Midwest, its center was in New York City, the Hudson Valley, and northern New Jersey. During the American Revolution the Reformed Church broke free of its mother--the Netherlands Gereformeerde (after 1816 Hervormde) Kerk, and aligned itself with Yankee Calvinist denominations, notably the Presbyterians and Congregationalists. All were greatly impacted by the Second Great Awakening and its revivalist methods and mission outreach programs.²

Popular institutions of Yankee piety borrowed by Reformed congregations were the annual "Visitations" and the singing schools. Visitations were marathon revivals, run in January, which functioned as "sacred festivals...to 'wake up and warm the affections of the Christian's heart.'"³ The revivals stemmed from the Fulton Street Noonday Prayer Meeting in the North Dutch Church in Manhattan in 1857, which spread across the nation, finally reaching even the First Reformed Church of Chicago. Fulton Street also prepared the Reformed Church later to embrace evangelist Dwight L. Moody, the father of urban revivalism. Moody found Chicago so hospitable to his ministry that he established a church and missionary training school there (Moody Bible Institute), which has deeply influenced Dutch Reformed believers to the present day.⁴

Yankee music teachers brought singing schools and organs into the Reformed churches. They introduced new hymnology, taught musical notation and singing in harmony, and broadened Dutch tastes beyond the traditional Genevan Psalter. Reformed congregations gladly sang the "man-made hymns" composed by non-Reformed persons and published in new interdenominational hymnals. In short, the Dutch Reformed were "methodized," along with Protestant Christianity in general.⁵

Furthermore, Reformed congregations adopted English, de-emphasized Heidelberg Catechism preaching and instruction, and practiced "open," i.e., unregulated communion. Elders were less diligent in annual "family visits," and they sat with their families in the sanctuary instead of in official pews under the pastor's nose. Further, the denomination recognized other Protestant churches as equals. In short, the Reformed Church lost some of its "Reformedness" and "Dutchness." The Americanizing influences that had captured the denominational hierarchy in New York City and impacted the churches in the East also affected the immigrant congregations on the frontier, although their orthodox theology and Dutch character died hard.⁶

While the Reformed Church embraced Yankee piety, Christian Reformed members sensed that American Calvinism was not the same as Dutch Calvinism. The Christian Reformed Church, born in a schism in West Michigan in 1857, remained an immigrant denomination that walled itself off from American evangelicalism. Its motto was: "In isolation is out strength." Indeed, the very name the denomination initially chose--True Reformed Dutch Church, signified its self image as a "bride of Christ,... a garden enclosed, a well shut up, and a fountain sealed" (to quote Guillaume Groen Van Prinsterer). The Christian Reformed Church maintained close ties with its mother church--the Christelijke Afscheiding Kerk [Christian Seceded Church] (1835), and later the Gereformeerde Kerk Nederland [Netherlands Reformed Church] (1886)]. These bodies clung tenaciously to the traditional confession of faith and church order adopted by the Synod of Dort (1618-19).

From 1857 to 1900, every one (100 percent!) of 114 clerics ordained in the Christian Reformed Church had been affiliated with the Christian Seceded Church in the Netherlands, as compared with only one quarter of 116 Dutch-born clerics ordained in the Reformed Church in America.⁷ Despite its "foreign" character, the Christian Reformed Church eventually went through the same process of Americanization as the Reformed Church. However reluctantly, it followed the path blazed by its older sister and gradually adopted ways it had once eschewed.

My paper will examine the differing acculturation processes in the mother Reformed churches in Chicago. Both immigrant congregations birthed daughter congregations, both went through the painful transition from Dutch to English services in the era of World War One, and both relocated to the western suburbs after World War Two. Here their similarity ends. First Reformed Church modeled itself after American evangelical churches, while First Christian Reformed Church remained very "Dutchy." First Reformed Church introduced mid-week prayer services; Sunday schools; the use of organs, choirs, and hymns in worship; Sunday evening worship for young people; youth ministries; mission outreach programs; English-language services; and in recent times, women suffrage and women in ecclesiastical office. First Christian

Reformed Church lagged by a generation or two in adopting these "American" ways in worship and church life.⁸

Since the Christian Reformed Church clearly remained an immigrant body, it benefited from the mass exodus from the northern Netherlands in the 1880s and 1890s. The mother denomination for both American "branches," the Gereformeerde Kerk Nederland, in 1882 also shifted its blessing from the Reformed to the Christian Reformed church. Hence, after 1882 that body gathered in most new immigrants.

These newcomers brought ideas about Christian day schools that Groen van Prinsterer and Abraham Kuyper and their followers had introduced in the Netherlands. In 1893, First Christian Reformed Church of Chicago established a parochial day school (Ebenezer Christian School), which became a "free school" (after the Kuyperian model) in 1902. It was augmented in 1918 by a "free" secondary school (Chicago Christian High School). While Christian Reformed youth went to Christian schools, Reformed youth for the most part attended public schools. After 1900, therefore, schooling became the salient marker between the two churches. These contrasting cultural practices, as we shall see, had a profound impact on the churches as institutions and on membership trends.⁹

Church Planting

Urban centers like Chicago hosted inhabitants of every ethnicity and religion. City peoples were polyglot, in contrast to homogeneous colonies like Holland and Zeeland, Michigan. Chicago's first Reformed Dutch settlers preferred the anonymity of city life, rather than contend with rural settlements thick with Dutch language and culture where social controls were tight. The city Dutch were indifferent to things religious and desirous of freedom from Old World distinctions and restraints. And there were no clerical leaders like the Rev. Albertus Van Raalte, Holland's founding pastor and leader, to gather them in. When Van Raalte visited Chicago in 1852, he found "the ravages wrought by error, worldliness, and quarreling to be great." Those who wanted religion had no choice but to worship in homes or attend English or German-language churches, despite the language and cultural barriers.¹⁰

In 1848 a few devout families, all from the Christian Seceded Church, began meeting for informal worship in homes. This was a continuation of the conventicles, or house churches, that seceders favored. From time to time, Van Raalte and Cornelius Vander Meulen, his associate in Zeeland, Michigan, came to preach and dispense the sacraments. In 1853 Van Raalte led the small band, numbering less than a dozen families, to organize as a congregation under the rubric of the Classis of Holland. This Michigan body, in a fateful decision, had three years earlier, in 1850, joined the Reformed Church in America. The nascent Chicago congregation thus tied its fortunes to this American denomination centered in the East, of which it knew very little. Thereafter, the Chicago body was often tugged in two directions; they treasured the familiar Dutch ways but had to be open to their new American friends.¹¹

For six years, until 1859, when Vander Meulen accepted a call as pastor of First Reformed Church of Chicago, elders led reading services. After five years, in 1856, the rapidly growing body managed to build a small wooden church building (6m X 14m) for

less than \$200.¹²

One of Vander Meulen's first efforts was to found a Sunday school, in keeping with denominational policy, so as "to protect the children from strange teachings." The congregation also fully endorsed the Union cause in the American Civil War. They observed President Abraham Lincoln's calls for national days of prayer and fasting, and later, after the Union victories at Gettysburg and Vicksburg, gathered for a day of thanksgiving. The congregation also took special offerings for sick and wounded Union soldiers.¹³ Hendrik Klyn, First Chicago's second pastor, instituted Monday evening prayer meetings to bring revival, and led biweekly Wednesday evening Bible expositions.¹⁴

Harrison Street Era

Following the Civil War, Dutch immigrants came to Chicago in the thousands. The membership of First Reformed Church nearly doubled in three years, 1866-1868, from 64 to 105 families, and the body completed its long-anticipated new edifice on Harrison Street to seat 400. The new pastor, Bernardus De Bey, arrived from his prominent pulpit in the Christian Seceded Church in Middelstum (province of Groningen) in time for the dedication. At 53 years of age, he was at the height of his powers, with a reputation for effective leadership in church and society. De Bey dominated First Reformed Church for the next quarter century (1868-1891).

Church life under De Bey took on more and more aspects of the American style. He was much taken with popular preaching methods and attended a nearby Presbyterian church every Sunday night to practice the English language and pick up tips on sermonizing. De Bey particularly admired Yankee ministers for focusing on the central idea of the text and applying it in practical ways to everyday life without much Biblical exegesis, analysis, or synthesis. He also marveled at the full orbed ministry of American Protestants. In a personal letter to his cousin in Groningen, De Bey reported:

In our churches here we have something going on virtually every evening of the week--prayer meetings, preaching, catechism, youth societies, choral groups.... I could no longer feel at home with some of the pious customs and exclusively Sunday Christianity which characterized my life in Groningen. Here Christianity is more a way of life, an active love, a devotion to God--preaching his Word and laboring for the kingdom.¹⁵

During his pastorate, De Bey dispensed with several standard practices of Reformed polity. He canceled "family visits," believing that they were only "superficial chats" and a "waste of time." He substituted informal Bible studies on Saturday evenings at the vestry. In 1888 the consistory gave up its customary prerogative of nominating elders and deacons in favor of the more democratic congregational selection by vote. But other changes desired by De Bey were blocked for a few years, notably the purchase of a church organ and the singing of half notes in the Psalter along with the customary whole notes.¹⁶

In 1877 De Bey brought revival to his congregation and the consistory heard the confessions of faith of 120 new believers. The next years, when George F. Pentecost, an understudy of Dwight Moody, held revival meetings in the neighborhood, De Bey

volunteered as a counselor and encouraged his English-speaking parishoners to attend. The spiritual condition of his congregation was languishing, he believed, and Pentecost brought the hope of revival.

He is a blessed awakening whom my people (as many as understand English, and most do) attend regularly. I also attend as often as possible. He holds meetings four times each day.... Hundreds remain until 10 p.m. to receive added counsel from Pentecost and other pastors, and I am also among the counselors. Here in this land our divine worship is a lively activity. Conversion and renewal are the fruits of Rev. Pentecost's work.¹⁷

Thus, De Bey adopted the spiritual rhythms of American evangelism--conversion, backsliding, and renewal. His biannual reports to the regional church body, the Classis of Wisconsin, concerning the spiritual condition of his congregation were couched in the idiom of revivalism. An 1881 report was typical:

Chicago reports a good attendance upon the means of grace and points to evidences of their good effect in general. There is a spirit of mutual appreciation, peace, love, and labor of love. Of the many conversions resulting from a general revival a few years since, some have persevered, others give but feeble tokens of full consecration, others seem quite worldly minded. At present it seems children of the covenant do not understand what God has sealed to them upon their foreheads [i.e., in the sacrament of baptism]. Conversions and returns to God are scarce. Planting and watering is however continued in obedience and faith that God will give the increase.¹⁸

For De Bey, First Church was clearly in a "dry season" spiritually.

Another of the "fruits" of revivals was ecumenism, which De Bey adopted wholeheartedly:

We have here a number of churches or denominations, and in very many of these the gospel is preached, and they contain a good Christian element. The best denominations are included in the general category of evangelical churches.... Besides working in their own circles, these churches work together for the general promotion of Christianity. Thus, there are combined gatherings, prayer meetings, and other occasions in which there are no references to particular denominations. Together, then, they preach, speak, and pray to influence the unbelieving world and lead sinners to Jesus.

I have a high regard for that work because, after all, faith in Jesus, turning to God, and renewal of the Holy Spirit are really what counts where Christianity and eternity are concerned. Fighting for one's own church and the remote, unimportant, and speculative doctrines has no significance for true Christianity and eternity.... A practical Christianity--faith, living, and doing--is earnestly recommended everywhere.... I tell you, cousin, I feel genuinely at home in this Christian life.

After quoting this very telling letter at length, historian Herbert Brinks concluded: "Though not explicitly embracing the nondenominational dictum 'No creed but the

Bible,' De Bey's perspective clearly encompassed the essence of that peculiarly Anglo-American anticredal expression." Immigration had happily offered him the opportunity to throw off the Old Dutch Reformed ways and associate with evangelical American churches. As Brinks put it succinctly: "Fine theological distinctions, denominational boundaries, and traditional piety were, from his perspective, no longer crucial." De Bey did not even subscribe to the religious periodical of his mother church. "I do not get the Bazuin or the Wekstem," he wrote. "All I receive from the Dutch press is the *Provincial Groninger Courant* [a weekly newspaper]."¹⁹

De Bey's views about American Christianity were in step with those of his denomination, which had earlier embraced the revivalism of the Second Great Awakening. He had come a long way from his religious roots in the Secession of 1834. No wonder that he criticized "our separated brothers" in the Christian Reformed Church for "proceeding along the old paths." They were, in his words, "beneath criticism." Ignore the self-righteous "True Brothers" and they would quickly disappear. "They can say and write what they want," he declared, "and no one pays any attention to them. That is the best and quickest way to kill them off."²⁰ People in the Old Country did not understand that the split between the two daughter denominations in the United States on issues of Americanization was irrevocable.

In the years 1880-1884 the explosive issue of freemasonry came to a head in the Reformed Church in America. The Masonic Lodge had become a quintessential American institution and many clerics and leaders in the East had gladly joined. The Particular Synod of Chicago, made up of the two Midwestern immigrant Classes of Wisconsin and Michigan, condemned the "God-dishonoring sin of Freemasonry" in the strongest terms, and it would not admit a freemason to membership in any congregation. Nevertheless, the denominational leadership centered in New York insisted that freemasonry was entirely permissible in congregations elsewhere. This "local option" policy did not satisfy the Midwestern congregations, who saw it as forcing them to be "unequally yoked" to those who had joined an "anti-Republican," "anti-Christian," and "anti-Reformed" organization. Many congregations were torn and saw members secede over "this evil in the church." Moreover, the mother church in the Netherlands held the same views and henceforth would commend its departing members only if they joined the Christian Reformed congregations.²¹

Some 10 percent of all the members of the Particular Synod of Chicago went over to the Christian Reformed Church because of this issue. De Bey was in the middle of the controversy, which was on the agenda of every session of the Classis of Wisconsin for four years. Thus, the infant Chicago flock was inextricably bound up in Reformed Church polity and practice.²²

Before the issue wreaked havoc in the Midwestern wing of the Reformed Church, De Bey approved his denomination's local option policy. He believed that freemasonry in the United States was not irreligious like its European counterpart, but an American social club that had proven to be compatible with Christianity. But when De Bey saw the Christian Reformed Church gaining thousands of members because of his denomination's acquiescence in freemasonry, he concluded that freemasons must be rooted out. His consistory condemned such secret, oath-bound societies and

warned members not to be polluted (*besmet*) by them because they were incompatible with Christianity.

In other respects, the Dominie from Middelstum had become the American preacher. He was enamored with the practice of taking the faith into the public square, unlike the "Sunday Christianity" of the Netherlands. His six children lived out these convictions; three entered the profession of medicine and became community activists. Only three remained in the Reformed Church.²³

Late in his ministry De Bey could not avoid "worship wars" involving the "language question" and singing of "Gospel Hymns," which for all his Americanizing ways he had forestalled for years. The Old Dutch Psalms from the Genevan Psalter tugged at the heartstrings. De Bey humored the congregation by selecting only a few dozen favorite Psalms from the opus of 150, notably those that had melodic tunes and were committed to memory. Two Reformed congregations in Chicago, but not First Church, had adopted the controversial Evangelical Hymnbook of the Netherlands Reformed Church, which the youth favored because of the contemporary tunes and quicker tempo. These and other songs, however, were used at First Church only in the evening English services for several decades.²⁴

The language issue came to a head in 1885. This was one year after the Reformed Church Synod adopted a requirement that any immigrant congregation that received aid from the board of domestic missions must adopt an English service.²⁵ This ruling sorely tempted De Bey's eagerness to enter the American Protestant mainstream. He stubbornly held to the Dutch language at First Church, even though young people were voting with their feet. "They disappear gradually in all kinds of English churches and are thus lost to our denomination," lamented a classical committee.²⁶ When De Bey's own consistory decided to hire an English-speaking "evangelist" to preach "on occasion" in the evening service, he stymied the plan by refusing to share the pulpit. And when the Classis moved to launch an English congregation a mile from First Church, De Bey complained; "Father must live too."

Nevertheless, Classis gave its approval without the blessing of the First Church consistory, and De Bey had to contend with dozens of progressive members transferring to the new congregation--Trinity Reformed Church, founded in 1891. Under the energetic leadership of Rev. Peter Moerdyke, the English church built an impressive brick edifice one mile away to seat 500, but membership peaked at only 300 in 1895 and declined steadily thereafter, until the church closed in 1919. During the Chicago Columbian Exposition (1892-93), Trinity took the lead in promoting a Reformed witness at the World Fair. As an unabashed American patriot, Moerdyke also welcomed governor and then vice president Theodore Roosevelt to the worship services. On one occasion, the Vice President, a faithful Dutch Reformed layman, was invited to mount the pulpit, and he gave an impromptu homily on the Gospel of James.²⁷

While First Reformed Church went through the throes of change, First Christian Reformed Church maintained a steady course. The first pastor, Jan Schepers, brought a conservative, separatist mentality that set the tone for the congregation. Schepers' roots in the stern northern wing of the Secession of 1834 stood in sharp contrast to the more latitudinarian and outward-looking De Bey. The pioneer churches in Chicago were

so alike and yet so different. Groningers dominated in both, but one was ready to interact with the American scene while the other looked inward and guarded its Dutch theological and cultural treasure.²⁸

Ten years after its founding, in 1877, Rev. Willem Greve, another separatist and the third pastor of First Christian Reformed Church, started a Sunday school, but the consistory kept teachers under tight control. The Heidelberg Catechism always took pride of place and every prospective member had to demonstrate a literal mastery of the Compendium. The church did bow to pressures by installing an organ, and adopting English in the Sunday school and half days in its parochial school.²⁹

The declining Harrison Street community broke up in the 1880s and 1890s as Dutch families began moving away. Some went two miles distant to the rising Ashland Avenue area, but others sought the truck farming districts on the outskirts of the city, particularly Englewood, Summit, and Cicero.

In a familiar pattern, the churches followed. First Christian Reformed Church in 1883 and First Reformed Church a decade later relocated to the Ashland Avenue neighborhood. First Reformed also mothered First Englewood (1886), Bethel in Summit (1892), and West Side in Cicero (1911). First Christian Reformed Church of Chicago birthed five daughter churches. Except for First Englewood (1887) and Archer Avenue (1911), three of the new churches stood within two miles--Douglas Park (1899), Third Chicago (1912), and Fourth Chicago (1923). Before the "split-offs," First Christian Reformed Church had grown steadily and reached parity after twenty-five years with First Reformed Church, each had about 1100 souls in 1894.

Ashland Avenue Era

When Rev. Ralph Bloemendal took the helm of First Reformed Church in 1891, the congregation faced "disintegration" due to the forces of "centralization and Americanization from within," according to the editor of the *Christian Intelligencer*. Bloemendal's challenge was to cling to the Dutch heritage and yet help the members adapt to living in the heart of urban America. He and the consistory met the challenge admirably. Under his pastorate (1891-1895), said the *Intelligencer*, "this old church is renewing her youth. Prayer meetings, Sabbath-school, and catechetical classes have all the vigor of new life." Indeed, forty-six adults joined the church by confession in early 1892.³⁰

Rense Joldersma, Bloemendal's successor, took ministerial training at both Western Theological Seminary in Holland, Michigan, and in Chicago's McCormick Theological Seminary (Presbyterian). Early in his tenure, Joldersma and the consistory had to deal with charges by various members that the congregation's new youth program, Christian Endeavor ("C.E." in popular parlance), was unReformed, i.e., Arminian. [C.E. was a nondenominational youth ministry founded in 1881 by a Congregational pastor that became a big success with 500,000 members in 7,000 local societies by the late 1880s.] In 1888 the Reformed Church Synod endorsed the program and strongly recommended it to all pastors and churches. The C.E. focus on prayer meetings and missionary outreach bore the unmistakable marks of American evangelicalism, rather than the traditional Reformed emphases on God's sovereignty

and covenantal faithfulness.³¹

The issue of C.E. festered for months at First Reformed, and for a time the consistory considered disaffiliating. But finally the body reaffirmed its support of the program after one of its most prominent members, attorney George Birkhoff, Jr., Netherlands Consul General in Chicago, wrote a strong letter demanding continuing affiliation.

Joldersma pushed English-language preaching and in 1898 he gained consistorial approval on a trial basis to deliver the Sunday evening sermon in English. This proved less than successful, however, and after a year the service was changed to an hour of prayer (in Dutch). First Reformed at this time also allowed a representative of the American Tract Society to speak in an evening worship service and take up a collection for the work. Another sign of acculturation was the decision to schedule a season of prayer with three evening sessions the first week and each Wednesday evening thereafter for a month.³²

The Sunday school strongly supported mission outreach. The children were encouraged to put their pennies in jars and once a year in the spring, a "jug-breaking" (kruikjes breken) service of celebration was held on a midweek evening. At the 1902 jar-breaking fest, the pennies totaled \$1,000, making it a banner year. Customarily about half that amount was tallied. Two-thirds of the monies went to support foreign missions and one-third funded Chicago projects, such as the Hebrew Mission, Tract Society, Bible Society, and the Cook County Sunday School Association.³³

Nicholas Boer, during his short pastorate (1907-09), quietly encouraged support for the local Ebenezer Christian School (now parent-run but still closely tied to First Christian Reformed Church), even though most youth in the congregation attended nearby Clark Public School. First Reformed Church began scheduling collections for Ebenezer, allowed graduation exercises to be held in its auditorium on occasion, and opened the church for "propaganda" meetings by Christian school advocates in the Reformed Church, such as Western Seminary professor Nicholas Steffens, a neo-Kuyperian.³⁴

Just before World War One, Rev. Henry Schipper (1913-1918) guided First Reformed Church "into further paths of Americanization" by making the transition from Dutch to English. In 1915 the primary morning service and all catechism classes turned to English. In 1918 they also introduced English in the afternoon service every other week, which in effect reduced Dutch services to two times a month. This momentous change, according to a classical report, in what must have been a gross understatement, "slightly ruffled the calm" of the congregation.³⁵

Schipper supported the war effort from the pulpit, which led one member to protest by walking out during the service because, as the consistory minutes note, he "did not want to hear any preaching about the War." The elders rebuked the member for humiliating Pastor Schipper, but the man insisted that the pastor's remarks were inappropriate.

Following the War, the congregation made further concessions to modern ways; it substituted plates for the offering "sacks" at the end of long poles, it allowed women members to vote in congregational meetings, and deacons came to the front of church

for a pastoral prayer before the collection. The church also appointed a "reception committee" for morning worship services to "look out for strangers...[and] to shake hands."³⁶

In the three decades from 1890 to 1920, First Christian Reformed Church attracted new immigrants with great success. "The pastor of the Seceders is commendably prompt and zealous to welcome these strangers," admitted Moerdyke, "and he is gathering nearly all that kind of material into his church, where they find a really Holland congregation, and feel at home."³⁷

But pressures for change were building. Younger families demanded English worship and catechism classes, and they left when the consistory put them off. Ebenezer Christian School had cut Dutch instruction to only an hour a week, and the churches had to change too. In 1912 the mother church and its Dutch-language daughter, Douglas Park, jointly birthed the initial English-language congregation among the Christian Reformed--Third Church.³⁸ Although the leaders of both mother churches gave the new congregation their wholehearted blessing, not everyone was happy with it. Mrs. Cornelius Kickert, as a seven-year-old, recalled hearing how angry her uncle was when he learned that her parents had left First Church for Third Church. But the reason was obvious. "None of the children could understand the minister's Dutch--evidently our parents thought it was time we understood what the church was for."³⁹

While all immigrant churches felt the forces of Americanization during the upbeat postwar decade, the pulpit at First Christian Reformed Church was filled with a pastor from the Netherlands holding a doctorate from the Free University of Amsterdam. John Van Lonkhuyzen (1918-28), a friend of Abraham Kuyper, was fluent in six languages and had served as a former missionary pastor to Dutch Reformed immigrants in Argentina. In recognition of his talents, the owners of Chicago's Dutch-language newspaper, *Onze Toekomst* (Our Future), quickly recruited him as editor.

Van Lonkhuyzen was the most educated and traveled pastor ever to serve the congregation and also its last "Dutch" Dominie. He was a throwback to fifty years before when all the Christian Reformed pastors were foreign-born. His thick accent and Dutch mannerisms made him stand out. Thus, despite his gifts, this intellectual giant often seemed out of step in Chicago.⁴⁰

In the pages of *Onze Toekomst* Van Lonkhuyzen addressed the key issues of the day--Christian schools, the language question, and the rising pre-millennial movement. The denomination stood solidly in support of Christian schools, but friction arose over the issues of English usage and millennial teachings. The conservatives "wished to maintain the Dutch language in the worship services, fearful that a change to the English language would break down the barriers to the inroads of modernism, while the younger generation growing up in an American climate of English usage would be lost to the church." One stalwart elder of the congregation expressed the sentiments of many, declaring (in Dutch): "When English is preached, the Devil is in the pulpit."⁴¹

The regional assembly, Classis Chicago, after years of agitation, in 1923 organized a second English-speaking daughter church--Fourth Chicago Christian Reformed Church--over the bitter objections of Van Lonkhuyzen and his elders, who considered the new church to be "unnecessary, unordered, and unlawful." Yet, his

twelve hundred-member congregation could well spare a few hundred souls.

Over the next years, Van Lonkhuyzen succeeded in gradually introducing English, but only by doubling the number of services from two to four. Usually a guest pastor conducted one or two of the services, but his successor, the energetic Benjamin Essenburg (1929-45), led all four. Even more amazing, a few zealous, bilingual members could boast of attending all of them.

Because the language issue pitted the older generation against the younger, the transition to English could come only in small steps. Reformed congregations introduced English a generation ahead of Christian Reformed congregations, but the first step in the mother churches of both denominations in Chicago was the same--to release pressure and buy time by establishing English-language daughter congregations. Eventually, the mother congregations themselves would adopt English, usually first in the evening service, which was geared to young people. Reformed churches simply replaced Dutch with English, while Christian Reformed churches often added English services. Over time, however, as the older generation dwindled, Dutch was relegated to the afternoon service until it was no longer needed.

The use of English helped First Reformed Church retain established families but turned away fresh immigrant families with children who only knew the Dutch tongue. As already noted, in 1891 the body began the transition to English in the Sunday school, catechism classes, and young peoples' societies. After 1915 only the morning worship service and the Wednesday evening prayer meeting remained in Dutch. English was introduced in the prayer meeting in 1925 on alternate weeks. But the congregation clung to the Dutch service until 1937, when after financial pressures had mounted and a minister had resigned over their refusal to change, they voted by a two-to-one majority to eliminate the Dutch service.⁴²

In the junior denomination, the Third and Fourth Chicago congregations were English-speaking from their inception. But the major congregations, First and Douglas Park, worshiped entirely in Dutch until the late 1920s, when English services were added in the afternoon and evening at First and in the evening only at Douglas Park. The Sunday schools were permitted to adopt English much earlier, however. First Chicago did so in 1893 and Douglas Park changed around 1915. By 1921 English-speaking societies were organized for men and women. Attendance at the Dutch service declined steadily in the 1930s; in 1938 First Christian Reformed Church dropped the afternoon Dutch worship service and ten years later, in 1948, the morning Dutch service was moved to the afternoon, with English in the morning and evening services. The last Dutch worship was on Christmas Day of 1955. This was eighteen years after First Reformed Church dropped all Dutch services.

The long pastorate of Rev. Benjamin Essenburg at First Christian Reformed Church of Chicago spanned the Great Depression and World War Two. This marked both the high point and end point for the Groninger Hoek on Ashland Avenue. Essenburg and his congregation first shared the glory years and then the "empty nest syndrome," as one after another of the Dutch families fled the deteriorating Old West Side, leaving only a remnant behind.⁴³

Essenburg was the most effective pastor ever at the church. He was a very

popular preacher, a "pulpit pounder," who drew large audiences with his dynamic messages, which he modeled after the renowned British evangelist, Charles Spurgeon, much to the chagrin of some "amateur theologians" in his congregation who thought Spurgeon's Reformed Baptist theology too Arminian.

Essenburg was an activist pastor with a heart for community outreach and Christian political action. His congregation organized a "Community Mission" in 1931, which included a Sunday school and evening gospel meetings for the white underclass in the neighborhood.⁴⁴

Cicero-Berwyn-Oak Park Era

The high point of the Ashland Avenue Dutch community was the 1920s and 1930s. In the early 1940s the two mother churches disintegrated rapidly as the last Dutch Reformed families--the poor and the elderly, moved west to the adjacent towns of Cicero, Berwyn, and Oak Park. This was a culmination of a four-decade process of outward migration by truck farmers, upward mobility by businessmen and professionals, and finally "white flight" by working families in the face of an overwhelming African-American influx. Already in 1911, West Side Reformed Church of Cicero was formed. And in the next decades came First Christian Reformed Church of Cicero (1925), Second Christian Reformed Church of Cicero (formerly Douglas Park) (1927), Oak Park Christian Reformed Church (formerly Fourth Chicago) (1935, 1945), First Chicago Reformed Church of Chicago in Berwyn (1945), and Ebenezer Christian Reformed Church of Berwyn (formerly First Chicago) (1945).

In Cicero, the two Reformed Dutch branches continued to Americanize. In 1929 the English-speaking, First Christian Reformed Church of Cicero allowed its choir to sing during the morning worship service for the first time. The denominational synod subsequently gave its blessing to such choirs, and in 1934 synod commissioned the first Psalter for worship that included hymns as well as the familiar psalms. In the 1930s the Second Christian Reformed Church of Cicero changed from Dutch to English, but not without the pastor suffering a nervous breakdown because of the rancor.⁴⁵

Bellwood-Elmhurst-Lombard Era

In the 1970s the relentless suburbanization continued, taking the West Side Dutch Reformed into Du Page County, the next county west of Cook County (which includes Chicago). South Side Dutch moved further southward into Will County, Illinois, and Lake County, Indiana. The congregations sold their former edifices and used the monies, plus many more dollars, to build large new buildings with sanctuaries to seat 1,000, magnificent organs, choir lofts, and Sunday school classroom wings. These impressive edifices announced that the lowly Dutch Reformed, now fully suburban Americans, had "arrived."

Conclusion

While Reformed Church congregations followed the style of American evangelists and practiced ecumenism, the Christian Reformed Church until World War One remained an immigrant church linked to the Netherlands.⁴⁶ This ultra-patriotic

crusade forced the body, against its will, to Americanize and World War Two pushed the process even more. Thousands of American-born sons served in the war, as did dozens of military chaplains, and many returned with a new appreciation for American Protestantism and a desire for the Christian Reformed Church to end its isolation and make its mark on the American mainstream.⁴⁷

Rev. Arthur De Kruyter, pastor of the Western Springs Christian Reformed Church and editor of a Reformed weekly in Chicago, sounded the call in 1959:

It is with some dismay that one searches the newspapers to find a trace of our Calvinistic and Reformed activities in Chicago. Although there are approximately 10,000 families in this area, there still seems to be an inferiority complex among us.... What would people think if they began to hear from the Reformed community which has been here for 100 years but has said and contributed so little to the cure of our metropolitan ills?"

De Kruyter lamented the fact that non-Dutch people seldom attended Reformed churches in the mistaken belief that "one had to be Dutch to attend the services" and that "we still speak Dutch in some part of the service." And they were "confused about our separate school system and thought that we were anti-American in our approach."⁴⁸ De Kruyter in the next decade acted on his belief in cultural openness by leaving his Christian Reformed pastorate to open the non-denominational Christ Church of Oak Brook, which ministers to the affluent business and professional residents of the far western suburbs.

The passing of the generations has changed all the Dutch Reformed churches, but judging from current membership statistics the Christian Reformed has a much better retention rate. In 1899 First Reformed Church of Chicago and Trinity Reformed Church had a combined membership of 1,400 souls, compared to 1,250 souls in First Christian Reformed Church of Chicago. One hundred years later, in 1999, the eight Christian Reformed congregations in the western suburbs had a total of 3,800 members--more than a three-fold increase. In telling contrast, the six Reformed congregations in the western suburbs had 1,080 members, a loss of 25 percent. Thus in 1999, the Reformed Church had barely one-fourth the membership of the Christian Reformed Church, even though it had been more than 10 percent higher a century earlier.

Schooling affected church retention rates in another way; it impacted fertility rates. The Dutch historically had large families, but the American culture of individualism encouraged the use of birth control. This, public education and Americanization inculcated Reformed Church members earlier than Christian Reformed members with the desirability for birth control. As a result, in the postwar period 1950-65, Reformed birth rates were at least 20 percent lower than Christian Reformed rates.⁴⁹

The inbred socialization process in the Christian Reformed Church due to Christian schooling was a factor in its growth, but even more important was the success of the junior denomination in gathering in new immigrants in the period 1870-1930. Membership statistics show that most of the Reformed Church membership losses and Christian Reformed Church growth spurts occurred in the first half of the twentieth

century. In 1950 Reformed Church membership in the western suburbs declined by nearly half (1450 to 797, or 45 percent), while Christian Reformed congregations grew more than three-fold (1250 to 3876, or 310 percent). But in the last fifty years, after immigration was a minimal factor, Reformed Church membership actually increased, largely through evangelism, by 35 percent (797 to 1,080), while Christian Reformed congregations managed to hold their advantage (falling only slightly from 3,875 to 3,800 souls).⁵⁰

Christian Reformed congregations have thus changed the most since the 1950s. Many no longer stress the importance of the Reformed heritage and historic Calvinist creeds. Weekly preaching from the Heidelberg Catechism, still mandated by the church order, is sporadic or completely ignored. And midweek catechetical instruction of all teenagers by the minister gave way in the 1970s to a briefer "unified" Sunday school curriculum often taught by laypersons. In some congregations the pastor and elders neglect the honored tradition of "family visiting," and they are reluctant to discipline delinquent members.

Worship styles and liturgies have also been "modernized," often setting off "worship wars." The traditional liturgy, derived from the fifty-two Lord's Days of the Catechism, has given way to individual styles or classical forms based on the Common Lectionary. In church music, organists, choir masters, "praise bands," and soloists increasingly select contemporary Christian music, which is broadly evangelical and often charismatic. For congregational singing, the denominational Psalter Hymnal, which formerly ruled supreme, is now supplemented by generic Protestant songbooks or musical texts displayed on a screen in "Powerpoint." The Dutch Reformed in Chicago are joining the American evangelical mainstream.

Notes

1. This paper draws heavily on Robert P. Swierenga, *Dutch Chicago: A History of the Hollanders in the Windy City* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2002).
2. Firth Haring Fabend, *Zion on the Hudson: Dutch New York and New Jersey in the Age of Revivals* (New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press, 2000); Gerald F. De Jong, *The Dutch in America, 1609-1974* (Boston: Twayne, 1975), 87-108, esp. 105.
3. This and the next paragraphs rely on Fabend, *Zion on the Hudson*, 60-68.
4. *Ibid.*, 222-23; Swierenga, *Dutch Chicago*, 283, 286-87.
5. So argues Joel L. From, "Antebellum Evangelicalism and the Diffusion of Providential Functionalism," *Christian Scholars Review* 32 (Winter 2003): 177-210.
6. Quotes in Fabend, *Zion on the Hudson*, 214-15.
7. Robert P. Swierenga and Elton J. Bruins, *Family Quarrels in the Dutch Reformed Churches of the Nineteenth Century* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1999), 102. Herbert J. Brinks compiled the statistics.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, 131.
9. Swierenga, *Dutch Chicago*, 373-83.
10. *Classis Holland Minutes, 1848-1858* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1950), 111; Swierenga, *Dutch Chicago*, 80-87.
11. Swierenga and Bruins, *Family Quarrels*, chap. 2.
12. Swierenga, *Dutch Chicago*, 87-96.
13. *Ibid.*, 98-100.
14. *Ibid.*, 101-02.
15. Letter of B. De Bey to A.P. Lanting, 9 Mar. 1871, quoted in Herbert J. Brinks, "The Americanization of Bernardus Be Beij (1815-1894)" *Origins* 6, No. 1 (1988): 27-28.
16. Hans Krabbendam, "Serving the Dutch Community: A Comparison of the Patterns of Americanization in the Lives of Two immigrant Pastors," (M.A. Thesis, Kent State University, 1989) 76, 80; Amry Vandenbosch, *The Dutch Communities of Chicago* (Chicago: Knickerbocker Society of Chicago, 1927), 23.
17. Letter of B. De Bey to A.P. Lanting, 2 Feb. 1879, quoted in Brinks, "Bernardus De Beij (1815-1894)," *Origins* 1, No. 1 (1983): 28-31; Krabbendam, "Serving the Dutch Community," 74.
18. *Classis of Wisconsin Minutes*, Art. 21, 21 Apr. 1881 (quote); cf. Art. 34, 17 Apr. 1878; Art. 27, 17 Apr. 1883.
19. Letter of B. De Bey to A.P. Lanting, 3 Jan. 1878, 13 Sept. 1870, quoted in Brinks, "Americanization of Bernardus De Beij," 28-30. *Buzuin* and *Wekstem* were Netherlands church periodicals.
20. Letter of B. De Bey to A.P. Lanting, 26 May 1873, quoted in *ibid.*
21. *Classis of Wisconsin Minutes*, Art. 59, 18 Feb.; Art. 42, 21 Apr.; Art. 19, 22 Sept. 1880; Art. 8, 13, 14, 17, 20 Apr. 1881;

Art. 34, 17 Apr. 1883.

22. Elton J. Bruins, "The Masonic Controversy in Holland, Michigan, 1879-1882," 53-72, in Peter De Klerk and Richard R. De Ridder, eds., *Perspectives on the Christian Reformed Church: Studies in Its History, Theology, and Ecumenicity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983).

23. Krabbendam, "Serving the Dutch Community," 81-83.

24. Moerdyke, "Chicago Letter," *Christian Intelligencer* (hereafter *CI*), 10 May 1893, p. 10; 3 Jan. 3 1900, p. 8.

25. *Acts and Proceedings of the General Synod of the Protestant Dutch Reformed Church in America*, 1884, 552.

26. Classis of Wisconsin Minutes, Art. 28, 17 Apr. 1883.

27. Swierenga, *Dutch Chicago*, 141-48.

28. *Ibid.*, 112-13.

29. *Ibid.*, 116-17, 135-36.

30. *CI*, 23 Sept. 1891, p. 11; 10 Mar. 1892, p. 11; 26 July 1893, p. 10; 19 Dec. 1894; Swierenga, *Dutch Chicago*, 153.

31. *Acts and Proceedings of the General Synod of the Protestant Dutch Reformed Church in America*, 1888, 569; 1890, 153; Timothy P. Webber, "Christian Endeavor Society," 256-57, in *Dictionary of Christianity in America*, ed. Daniel G. Reid (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990).

32. First Reformed Church of Chicago Minutes, 26 Mar., 24 Apr., 24 July 1900, 11 Dec. 1906, Joint Archives of Holland, Holland, Mich.

33. Moerdyke, "Chicago Letter," *CI*, 19 Apr. 1899, p. 9; 28 Jan. 1903, p. 56; John W. Brooks, "Chicago, Ill.," *ibid.*, 3 Apr.

1907, p. 218; "Uit Chicago, Ill.," *De Hope*, 20 Apr. 1904, p. 5.

34. Swierenga, *Dutch Chicago*, 157.

35. Russell L. Gasero, ed. *Historical Directory of the Reformed Church in America, 1628-2000* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2001), 342, 350; *Reformed Church in America, Minutes of the Particular Synod of Chicago*, 1-2 May 1918, 7.

36. Swierenga, *Dutch Chicago*, 159-60.

37. Moerdyke, "Chicago Letter," *CI*, 25 May 1892, p. 11.

38. Swierenga, *Dutch Chicago*, 176-77.

39. Mrs. Cornelius Kickert, "Last Meeting at Coffee Hour at Cicero I Church--1976," typescript, p. 2, The Archives, Calvin College.

40. Swierenga, *Dutch Chicago*, 180-81.

41. Ebenezer Christian Reformed Church, *Centennial Booklet, 1867-1967*, 6. The Rev. Eugene Bradford recalled the phrase in an interview with the author, 16 Mar. 1998.

42. Swierenga, *Dutch Chicago*, 209-10.

43. *Ibid.*, 201-09.

44. *Ibid.*, 203.

45. *Ibid.*, 218-24.

46. *Chicago Messenger*, 31 May, 27 Dec. 1935.

47. Robert P. Swierenga, "'Burn the Wooden Shoes': Modernity and Divisions in the Christian Reformed Church in North America,"

94-102, in *Reformed Encounters with Modernity: Perspectives from Three Continents*, eds. H. Jurgens Hendriks, Donald A. Luidens, Roger J. Nemeth, Corwin E. Smidt, and Hijme Stoffels (University of Stellenbosch, SA: ISSRC, 2000).

48. *Illinois Observer*, Feb. 1959.

49. Gary D. Bouma, *How the Saints Persevere: Social Factors in the Vitality of the Christian Reformed Church* (Monograph Series No. 4, Department of Anthropology and Sociology, Monash University, Australia), 1994, 19-20, table 2.3.

50. Christian Reformed Church, *Yearbook, 1999; Minutes of the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America, June 1999*; Swierenga, *Dutch Chicago*, 804-09.