“Greatest Strategic Significance”: The Story of the CRC’s Selection of China as Its First Overseas Mission Field

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After several years of discussion about whether to open an overseas mission field, followed by two more years of investigating possible locations for a field, the Christian Reformed Church (CRC) synod of 1920 decided on the denomination’s first foreign mission field. Acting on the recommendation of a subcommittee headed by the Rev. Henry Beets, synod chose China over Africa because, in part, the gathering explained, “The conservative, intellectual spirit of the Chinese is more in harmony with our people than the emotional nature of the African natives.”

While there has been little, if any, discussion about the validity of synod’s claim concerning the harmony of the Dutch and the Chinese, more than one person in the denomination has rankled at synod’s rationale for choosing China. In 1975, to take one example, Harry Boer, a veteran CRC missionary to Nigeria, expressed his annoyance with the rationale for China when he alleged that Synod 1920 had been “moved in part by racial and cultural considerations, which in the second half of the century can only be read with embarrassment and humiliation.” Gerald Zandstra, in his biography of Johanna Veenstra, herself a rallying point for calls that the church establish its first field in Africa, makes a similar charge about the racist overtones of synod’s decision to go to China.

Was the decision for China based on racial prejudice? It certainly was, but the charge of racism in the choice of China implies that only those in favor of China were racist, when in fact all sides in the debate expressed racist sentiments. Indeed, those who favored choosing Africa over China

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1. *Acta 1920*, Art. 34, 2, a-f, 50 (trans.).
argued with equal vigor that Africans would be more easily indoctrinated with the Reformed faith because they belonged to the “child races,” and thus were more “impressionable.”

The story of choosing a mission field in 1920, however, is more than one about racism in the CRC. In addition to some strong sentiments (including some truly cringe-worthy remarks), a number of colorful personalities, and plenty of church politics, the story of the choice of China sheds light on an important chapter in the CRC’s history. This story is part of the larger story of the denomination’s sometimes-painful process of “Americanization,” the journey of moving from a church with strictly Dutch ties to one with connections to the larger American church scene and to the world. Why, then, did synod settle on China? The short answer is because the elders of the church saw China as a place where the CRC could establish a Reformed church in a country with “the greatest strategic significance.” The longer story follows.

**Rallying the Volunteers**

From the earliest days, there was a sense in the CRC of the importance of missions in general and foreign missions in particular, but it took more than half a century for momentum to gather for establishing a foreign field. The shift from what was frequently termed a “lack of zeal” to enthusiasm took place just before World War I, and calls for the CRC to open a foreign mission field reached a crescendo between 1916 and 1918. In 1916, synod called on the church to make a decision about the feasibility of establishing a foreign mission by 1918. The committee appointed to investigate the venture published its recommendation just months before synod met in June of 1918. While agreeing that a foreign field should be established, the majority report cautioned the church to examine its motives for doing so, warning that “the guiding motive for our churches must not be to imitate others, but for the Church of God the thought must prevail: to what does the Lord through His Spirit call the Church to do, thereby taking in consideration the special leadings of His Providence.”

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5 In 1857, at the second classis meeting of the newly formed denomination, one elder called on the denomination’s four charter churches to set aside time each month to pray for the extension of God’s kingdom and to collect funds for Bible distribution in the Dutch churches of Indonesia. For details of the development of missions in the CRC, see Harvey A. Smit, “Mission Zeal in the Christian Reformed Church, 1857–1917,” in *Perspectives on the Christian Reformed Church*, ed. Peter De Klerk and Richard R. De Ridder (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), 225–40.

These stern words were aimed directly at Calvin College and Calvin Theological Seminary students who in 1918 were forcefully lobbying the church to initiate foreign mission work. Specifically, the majority report’s words were a response to a discussion that had taken place in the Calvin College Chimes during the school year of 1917–1918, a discussion that had already started eight years earlier when K. W. Fortuin, one of the authors of the 1918 majority report, had been a student at Calvin seminary.

The discussion of motivation for missions had begun in 1910 when John Luidens, the organization editor of the Chimes, had written an article lamenting the poor turnout for a missions lecture given by an RCA missionary serving in Japan. According to Luidens, the low attendance demonstrated a lack of missionary zeal. Another symptom Luidens pointed to was the decline of mission societies on campus from three groups with sixty members in 1907 to only one group with twelve members in 1910. In the next issue of Chimes, Lee Huizenga, a tireless missions advocate during his seminary days, then serving a pastorate in New Jersey while preparing for overseas mission work, supported Luidens’ assessment about the tepid enthusiasm for missions in the church and offered a stark explanation. The church, he said, was simply disobedient to the Lord’s final command: “GO.” Huizenga then called on the churches to “pray for a true revival of mission spirit, for we are all guilty.”

Responding to these calls for mission enthusiasm, the next fall, Fortuin offered in the Chimes a word of caution about the motivation or spirit for missions. While supporting stronger mission interest, he urged the church to distinguish clearly between the “American mission spirit … with its dollar standard and methodistic ideas of why and how we should do evangelism,” and “the biblical approach … best expressed in Reformed principles.” According to Fortuin, the American missionary spirit was most clearly expressed in the watchword of the Student Volunteer Movement: “The Evangelization of the Whole World in This Generation.” He went on to add that “many students could not accept this motto because it was a purely human construct, based not on Scripture but on “methodistic, emotional urging of us to win souls for Jesus. It stresses not the Lord’s command but the need of poor, blind heathen.”

The back-and-forth between Luidens and Fortuin and several others about motivation for missions continued into 1911. At the discussion’s vortex was the Student Volunteer Movement for Foreign Missions (SVM). How

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10 Ibid, 236.
did the SVM, a broadly evangelical parachurch movement, come to be so involved in the internal discussions of the CRC?

The Student Volunteer Movement for Foreign Missions was both a cause and a result of the flowering of the late nineteenth-century Protestant enthusiasm for foreign missions. At a student conference organized by revivalist Dwight L. Moody in 1876 at Mount Hermon, Massachusetts, one hundred students pledged to become missionaries. Over the next several decades, the number of volunteers grew exponentially, reaching 33,726 by 1920. Only about 26 percent of the volunteers went overseas; the rest dedicated themselves to promoting the missionary enterprise at home “by their intelligent advocacy, by their gifts, and by their prayers.” Some of those who stayed at home served as traveling secretaries, visiting campuses across North America and around the world. The SVM also promoted missions through its quadrennial conventions, which by 1920 were drawing more than eight thousand participants to listen to missionaries from around the world.

By the middle of the second decade of the twentieth century, the SVM was also playing an important role in the politics of the CRC. Although Calvin was not officially a part of the SVM, students at the college and seminary had organized a “Student Volunteer Band” in 1907. Shortly after its first meeting, Calvin student Edward Tanis wrote that the SVM “has sprayed our school. Just enough moisture has been received to assure, under God’s nourishment, a steady, vigorous growth of mission zeal.” Tanis’s optimism proved premature, but a decade later, by 1917, “The Band,” as it came to be known in CRC-student circles, was the missionary force to be reckoned with in the denomination.

Changes in the church also help explain the growth and strength of student mission forces in the church. By the end of the first decade of the twentieth century, the waves of Dutch immigrants had slowed, and with the onset of the Great War, virtually came to a halt. While more recent arrivals clung tenaciously to their Old World identity and roots, some in the church wanted to make peace with the larger American world and with American

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12 Parker, *Kingdom of Character*, 18.


Protestantism. Young people in the CRC were especially keen to become American Christians.\textsuperscript{15} The SVM provided the young people of the church a direct line to the American Protestant world.

Though The Band at Calvin was an exclusively male bastion, women students organized their own “Girls Mission Society” around the slogan “more love for missions.”\textsuperscript{16} Together, the two groups organized activities to foster missionary zeal in the schools and the church. Perhaps their most important activity (certainly the most exciting) was hosting missionary speakers. On these intense, activity-filled days, a guest missionary would lead the morning chapel exercises at the college and speak to a denominational audience in the evening. Between these two main events, the guest missionary would meet privately with students who were considering mission work or lead sessions on spiritual preparation, meetings where students at times were turned away “because the room could not contain them.”\textsuperscript{17} Many of these missionaries worked with the RCA, but missions opened other ecumenical doors as well, including Methodist missionaries. One of these, Dr. Charles S. Buchanan, who was superintendent of the Methodist Missions in the East Indies, an Englishman who spoke Dutch and who was fond of Calvinism, packed the school’s auditorium in January 1918 despite “a blizzard raging outside.”\textsuperscript{18}

Contact with the SVM also drew CRC students out of the shelter of their religious subculture. At first, CRC students were timid about being in the larger Protestant world, something one member of the SVM noticed about Calvin students attending an SVM conference in 1917, commenting that “some of your delegates seemed shy, they didn’t mix.”\textsuperscript{19} By 1920, when The Band’s influence in the denomination had increased, CRC students, both women and men, were attending SVM conferences in large numbers, mixing better with the speakers and other delegates, and “finding little time to be together during the day but huddling together at night to smoke cigars and compare notes.”\textsuperscript{20} CRC students’ exposure to American Protestantism extended beyond the conference itself. Carolyn Van der Meer, a member of the Girls Mission Society, reported that one night, “out of curiosity,”


\textsuperscript{18} “Mission Enthusiasm,” \textit{Chimes} 12 (February 1918): 79.


GREATEST STRATEGIC SIGNIFICANCE

she attended a “Holy Rollers’ Meeting” with a group of CRC students who found that though the meeting was strange, the testimonies were “sincere.” About this meeting, Van der Meer noted, “The same blessedness of the life in Jesus Christ, which we, who are His, experience, was related in this evening.”

CRC students brought the enthusiasm of the SVM conferences back to Calvin. Van der Meer wrote, “Coming home, I was filled with an eagerness to bring back some of the spirit of the Convention to my own beloved Calvin.” As a result of connections with the SVM, mission enthusiasm grew at Calvin, especially between 1915 and 1920. In 1915, The Band had nine members, but, in the next five years, the numbers had grown to twenty-seven. By 1917, CRC students studying at other schools—schools specifically for training missionary candidates—had organized their own Bands along the lines of the Calvin Band. At the Union Missionary Training Institute in Brooklyn, thirteen CRC students, both men and women, were studying and working in city missions in order to prepare for the mission field. Another eleven CRC students were studying at the Moody Bible Institute in Chicago. In the effort to push the CRC to establish a foreign field, these Bands together proved to be a formidable lobbying force.

The CRC Bands were determined to push the cause of missions to victory, as one article in the *Chimes* declared in its title in the spring of 1917: “A Christian Reformed Foreign Mission Field by 1918.” To do so, however, they had to overcome suspicions about the nature of their connection to the wider Student Volunteer Movement. While not all denominational leaders were opposed to the SVM and its incarnation as Bands in the CRC, many were suspicious of this movement, originating as it did from outside the denomination. After The Band declared its determination to have a foreign field by 1918, one member responded in the *Chimes* to what he took as severe criticism by some individuals in the church. “Two things ought to be clear about this organization [The Band],” he wrote. “The first is that

21 Carolyn M. Van der Meer, “My Trip to Des Moines,” *Chimes* 14 (February 1920): 64.

22 Ibid.


24 Henry Beets, for one, supported the CRC Bands. In an address to The Band at Calvin College in October 1915, he encouraged students to support missions because of the world’s tremendous needs and because missions led to the “best kind of consecration.” Another denominational leader to promote missions and support the SVM Bands was Gelmer Kuiper, a CRC businessman from New Jersey. Kuiper spoke at Calvin in 1910, pleading for support of the SVM’s “watchword.” See John Luidens, “Mission Meanderings,” *Calvin College Chimes* 4 (1910): 150–51. For Kuiper’s views of the CRC and missions, see Gelmer Kuiper, “The Mission of our Church from a Member’s Point of View,” in *Gedenkboek van het Vijftigjarig jubileum der Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerk, 1857–1907* (Grand Rapids: J. B. Hulst, 1907), 239–43.
this organization is not affiliated with The Student Volunteer Movement.”

Second, this anonymous student wrote, if students knew The Band was open to students interested in both foreign and home missions, the numbers would be even higher.

The most serious criticism of The Band, however, was its attempt to usurp the church’s prerogative to lead its members; in other words, instead of being led by the legitimate leaders of the church, Band members were attempting to lead the church and thus were “disregarding the guiding hand of God.” During the 1917–1918 school year, another debate broke out in the *Chimes* over the issue of who should lead whom. In the fall, John W. Brink, a missionary to the Indians in New Mexico, addressed an alumni letter to the *Chimes* about the rising interest among students for a foreign mission field. On the one hand, Brink expressed approval of the students’ interest in missions and his belief that their “calls” came “as a part of wholehearted consecration.”

On the other hand, Brink wondered why students were agitating for a foreign field when there was plenty of work to do on the Indian field. He questioned their approach of pushing for a foreign field and rejected the idea that individuals should lead the church. The rule according to Holy Scripture, Brink stated, is that the “Spirit leads the Church into all truth and the individual believer in and through that Church.” He put the matter bluntly. “First the Church and then the men. Nobody should strive to induce the Church to go abroad because some of her sons are called to do so. But rather the sons should be urged to go when and because the Church, their spiritual Mother, is Spirit-led to a foreign field.”

Careful to show this missionary statesman all due respect, students none-the-less challenged Brink in the next several issues of the *Chimes*. In an article entitled “‘First the Church and Then the Men’: What Does History Say about It?” student-editor William Goudberg disagreed with Brink about the principle at stake. Citing a long list of examples, Goudberg argued that throughout its history the church had not been interested in missions but had been prodded to missions by visionary prophets, such as William Carey, calling the church to faithfulness. “Usually,” he concluded, “the Holy Spirit called the Church by the means of the very men whom he had set aside for the work, and that sometimes these men were ‘voices crying in the wilderness.’ ” Simon Dykstra, another student respondent, suggested that Brink’s “polemical attitude” was, perhaps, an indirect response to the

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27 Ibid, 351.

28 William Goudberg, “‘First the Church and Then the Men’: What Does History Say about It?” *Chimes* 12 (February 1918): 59–63.
“many shafts of criticism” directed at the Indian field.\textsuperscript{29} Dykstra went on to reject Brink’s principle of “first the church, then the men,” as a “misleading antithesis.” “The antithesis is wanting,” he wrote.

We have imbibed our mission enthusiasm in our own Church. We have labored in her mission societies, we have listened to her missionaries, we have been inspired by the sacrifice of her own sons. No Methodistic revival has stirred our emotions. Our own Reformed principles impel us to action. They err who question our Calvinism. Is there no mission spirit possible in our own circles except it be imported? \textsuperscript{30}

In his conclusion, Dykstra reiterated his rejection of the antithesis and stated that the operative principle should be “\textit{first the Church through the men}.”

A month after Dykstra’s article appeared, the majority report of the synodical committee on recommending foreign missions reported in the \textit{Banner}. Although their report did not directly refer to the argument taking place in \textit{Chimes}, it clearly had that discussion in mind when it sternly reminded students that the desire to imitate others was not a legitimate reason for extending the mission work of the church. “The extension of heathen mission is possible,” the committee wrote, “but it should be done primarily out of obedience to the Lord’s command in the Great Commission and in order to glorify God.”\textsuperscript{31} As to where the church should begin its first overseas venture, in another shot clearly aimed at the student Bands, the committee suggested it should be a decision of the church and not according to the whims of students.

Two months later, Synod 1918, remembered as a “visionary synod,” decided to extend the denomination’s mission program overseas.\textsuperscript{32} From being a nagging obligation less than a decade earlier, the cause of foreign missions had moved to an important item at the forefront of the church’s agenda. The role of Student Volunteer Bands in this shift cannot be over-estimated. At a pivotal time in the denomination’s history, as immigration slowed down and the process of Americanization had reached a critical


\textsuperscript{30} Ibid, 108. See also Dykstra’s letter to John De Korne on the controversy. His letters not only reveal the deep sense of camaraderie the CRC students felt in their cause to push for a foreign mission field but also Dykstra’s conviction that one of the professors at the seminary, Samuel Volbeda, would oppose the students because he always “fought the tendency to seek norms in mission history, and our sturdy Calvinists perhaps would never consent to copy history even if it prove the usual method of the Holy Spirit which Goudberg has presented.” Simon Dykstra to De Korne, February 21, 1918 and April 27, 1918; De Korne, personal folder.


phase, students, with their ties to the larger American Protestant world, aggressively campaigned to force their largely reluctant elders to participate in missions.

About their victory, John De Korne, formerly the head of the Calvin Band and at that time serving as a pastor in New Jersey, wrote to fellow Band members: “Nothing but a solid stone wall of indifference will keep us from reaping for our church the fruits of the victory for which our CRC mission enthusiasts have been fighting so long.”

A significant number of these mission enthusiasts (including John De Korne, Lee Huizenga, the brothers Simon and Harry Dykstra, and Nicholas De Vries) went on to become the pioneer missionaries of the denomination, carrying to the field their ideas, passions, and conflicts. Although they had won this fight to establish a foreign field, the next battle lay in choosing where that work would be established.

“A Neglected Continent”

At various times, voices in the church had called for opening mission work in Cuba, Latin America, South America, Indonesia, Arabia, Abyssinia, Africa, and China. Even the committee appointed by synod to recommend the feasibility of a foreign field could not agree on where that field should be.

The majority committee’s report recommended extending the denomination’s Indian work in the southwest part of the United States down through Mexico and Central America to South America in order to form a chain of connected mission stations. Such a plan, they argued, would utilize the church’s valuable experience gained on the Indian field and make a contribution to what they termed a field “ripe for the harvest.”

Work in South America, they continued, would also be commensurate with the “relatively small strength of our Church.” Most important, the majority report concluded, extending from the church’s existing work would allow the CRC to work independently of other churches, because, it warned, “Co-operation with others endangers our confessional character and authority, both of which are necessary for the teaching of the Word and for discipline.”

Although the majority report claimed that “this extension [to South America] is favored by a majority of our people,” one advocate stood out:

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53 De Korne to fellow members, November 27, 1918; De Korne, personal folder.
56 Ibid.
Lee Huizenga.37 By 1918, Huizenga had been agitating for a foreign mission in South America for almost a decade. At his graduation from Calvin Seminary in 1909, he had given a commencement address entitled “South America, an Open Yet Neglected Mission Field,” in which he had outlined the dimensions of the continent and then had pleaded for the church to send missionaries to meet the dire spiritual needs of the South American people, he said, lived under the “pall of Roman Catholicism.”38

A year after graduation, while serving a church in New Jersey and studying medicine in preparation for work as a missionary doctor, Huizenga wrote a five-part series of articles lobbying for CRC mission work in South America, expanding on the themes of his commencement address and drawing particular attention to the plight of South American Indians.39 Huizenga’s campaign for South America reached a climax in 1913: Avoiding the difficulty of a synodical appointment, he convinced Classis Hudson to send him there as their missionary. When synod rejected this power play to force the issue, Huizenga moved to New Mexico to work on the Indian field where he continued to agitate for South America.40

Not everyone agreed with Huizenga and the recommendation for South America; in fact, the subject touched a raw nerve in the CRC. Soon after the recommendation was made, Henry Beets, in a three-part article, took strong issue with South America as a CRC mission field. Though he cautiously agreed with the idea of opening a foreign field, suggesting that the church wait until the end of the war in Europe, he rejected the recommendation for mission work among the Indians: “Without desiring to in the least belittle the majority report, … we do not agree with its findings and are not in accord with its advice and recommendation.”41

Beets argued that the “Native Americans are uncivilized and ingrainedly prejudiced against whites … making them extremely difficult subjects for the missionary venture.” Taking a not-so-subtle jab at the chief proponent of South American work, Beets continued: “In last week’s ‘Wachter’ Dr. Huizenga informed us that he ‘often’ meets cases of our ‘converts’ reverting to heathenism, while but a ‘few’ ‘remain faithful to the Lord.’ ” Only

through their children can they be reached with the gospel, a method, he added, that “is not always crowned with success.” Anticipating the question of why the CRC had started a mission among the Indians in the first place, Beets wrote: “The main argument set forth was that we robbed the Indian of so many things of a material kind that we should try to bring him a substitute of a spiritual nature, in fact, the best substitute in the world: the gospel.”

“Humanitarian, patriotic, and altruistic” motives were fine for selecting the Indian field as a domestic field for missionary work, but in selecting a foreign field, Beets continued, biblical principles—and specifically Pauline principles—should govern the choice of extension. When the apostle Paul chose a new field for mission work, according to Beets, he chose locations that would be relatively easy and in highly populated urban centers. Moreover, Paul chose people of promise, who would in turn make a contribution to the development of the Christian faith. In Beets’s mind, the Pauline principles for choosing a mission field could be summarized in the term strategicity.

Beets expanded on the idea of strategicity in a series appearing just before synod met in 1918. While he may have coined the term, the ideas were those of John R. Mott, leader of the SVM and a leading missionary spokesman. According to Mott, stated Beets, “while all men everywhere are in need of the gospel, there are what are called strategic races and places the reaching of which means much more for the whole cause of missions than the reaching of others, in less significant positions.” As an example of a strategic race, Mott pointed out the importance of the Chinese, and Beets, supporting this conclusion, added: “Comparatively speaking, the Amarinds [sic] are far inferior to the Chinese…. Indeed, the Chinamen have been called the Anglo-Saxons of the Orient.”

As far as strategic places were concerned, Beets argued that it was not good stewardship to send “a consecrated and highly educated worker” to minister to a handful of Indians when he could minister to “hundreds more if located in a more thickly populated” area, such as Tokyo, Shanghai, or Bombay. At the end of the article, though Beets refused to be pinned down on where he thought the church should establish a foreign field, he did suggest China as a good possibility and, perhaps, the Dutch Indies. The church’s choice, he concluded, should also be based on what Mott had called at the World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh in 1910, the

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43 It is unclear where Beets found the term strategicity.
“principle of urgency,” evident in the Christian movements taking place in India and China.45

Beets’s articles rejecting South America as a mission field show that missions was a portal through which some CRC leaders could sympathetically view the larger Protestant world. They also reveal the frustration many in the church felt about Indian missions. After more than a decade of work in the Southwest, the CRC could claim only one convert—a girl of thirteen who died shortly after her baptism.46 Denominational critics continually questioned the wisdom of mission work among the Indians. Some wondered if Indians, given their nomadic lifestyle, could be gathered into one place to hear the message of the gospel. Others were harsh in their estimation of Indians’ ability to receive Christianity at all. One critic stated that “preaching would have little effect on Indians because they were stupid and hard-hearted, and should they be converted, their lazy and roaming nature would prevent them from forming well-organized, self-supporting churches.”47 On the floor of synod, another opponent even went so far as to suggest that “any race which ate the entrails of animals was simply ‘beyond redemption.’ ”48

Less than a month later, Synod 1918 took Beets’s advice and rejected the majority report’s call for expanding missionary work from the Southwest into South America, noting that work with Indians was expensive and that “there is in our church a strong antipathy against further expansion of mission to the Indians.”49 After rejecting South America, synod narrowed the choice of foreign fields down to two possible locations: Central Africa or China.

“Ethiopia Shall Haste to Stretch Out Her Hands”

To investigate whether the church should establish a field in Africa or China, synod appointed two ordained men to provide the synod of 1920 with a recommendation. The men selected for the task, Lee Huizenga and John De Korne, were both obvious choices.

Huizenga, as noted above, had been an early and strong proponent of work with the Indians of South America. After suffering a nervous breakdown during his seminary years, Huizenga had gone to New Mexico to rest and to do maintenance work for the CRC’s Indian mission. After graduating

48 From Herman Fryling, personal memoir. Quoted in Hoezee and Meehan, Flourishing, 3.
49 Acta 1918, Art. 65, 86 (trans.).
from Calvin Seminary in 1909, Huizenga had alternated between serving as pastor of the CRC in Englewood, New Jersey, and doing mission work in the Southwest, all while studying for a medical degree and teaching at the Union Missionary Training Institute in Brooklyn. He also continued to agitate for missions in the denominational papers.\footnote{Huizenga frequently contributed mission articles to \textit{The Banner}, \textit{De Wachter}, \textit{de Heidenwerld}, and the \textit{Sabbath Day Instructor}.} John De Korne, though less well-known in the church, was also an important missions advocate. First as president of the student missions Band and then later as pastor, De Korne more than any other person, rallied the CRC student mission enthusiasts during the crucial years leading up to the 1918 decision to open a foreign field. After graduating from seminary in 1917, De Korne had taken over as Huizenga’s replacement at the Englewood church, while at the same time serving as an army chaplain at Fort Merit, New Jersey.\footnote{The Englewood church was one of the strongest mission-supporting churches in the denomination. In part, no doubt, this was due to the pastors who served there, including De Korne and Huizenga, and John Dolfin (1904–1909) who later served as the secretary of the Board of Missions for more than thirty years. The Englewood church had come into the CRC from an earlier split with the RCA in the 1820s, and, as a church already more sensitive to issues in the larger Protestant world, this background, too, may have contributed to the congregation’s interest in missions. John De Korne’s work as a military chaplain suggests that military and YMCA chaplaincy was another avenue for members of the CRC to connect with the wider American Protestant world, especially for those interested in missions. Of the fourteen CRC men who served as chaplains during WWI in camps in the United States, four were involved in the denominational debate over missions, three of whom later served in China (John De Korne, Harry Dykstra, and Richard Pousma). See Dick Harms, “The First Chaplains,” \textit{Origins} 23, no.1 (2005): 9.}

From their base in New Jersey, De Korne and Huizenga began investigating the two possible locations selected by synod. They gathered the bulk of their information about both fields at the Missionary Research Library in New York, which touted itself at the time as the best missionary library in North America.\footnote{The library claimed in 1918 to have a total of 1,674 volumes of bound reports and periodicals and 4,823 pamphlets on missionary subjects. This information comes from a Missionary Research Library pamphlet in De Korne, personal folder.} In addition to reading, the two attended meetings sponsored by the Foreign Missions Conference of North America and interviewed some of the leading mission experts of the day. About this last activity, in a letter to a friend, De Korne boasted that they had “been able to have conferences with the biggest missionary men our country can boast. How is this for a partial list: Zwemer, Kumm, Speer, Fennell P. Turner, Burton St. John, E. C. Lobenstine, Harlan P. Beach, Charles R. Watson, W. I. Chamberlain, J. Lovell Murray. And the biggest of these men were the most willing to give us all the time we needed to place our problem before them.”\footnote{De Korne to Henry Verduin, Nov. 22, 1918; De Korne, personal folder. De Korne’s list of missionary statesmen, include: Samuel Zwemer, RCA missionary to Islam, widely regarded...}
Though synod gave them a mandate to investigate the feasibility of both locations, from the start both men leaned in favor of Central Africa, more specifically the Sudan. Synod 1918 had chosen Central Africa as a potential location for establishing a mission field because, it noted, “there are lately in our church voices calling for opening a mission field in Central Africa; a very favorable report was received recently concerning a field there, and even one member of our church already has been named to work there.”

The member alluded to was Johanna Veenstra, who played an important role in drumming up interest in Africa. After accepting an altar call as a teenager in a Baptist church in New Jersey, Veenstra had become interested in missions. While a student at Brooklyn’s Union Missionary Training Institute, she was chosen in the summer of 1915 to represent the school at an SVM conference at Lake Geneva, Wisconsin. There she heard missionary speakers from all over the world, including Karl Kumm speaking about the Sudan. As Kumm spoke, Veenstra related a decade later, “I sat spellbound! Not a word of this message escaped my attention! I was profoundly impressed and deeply moved! I went to my tent and retired, but sleep refused to still my thought! I spent three days in meditation.” Before she left the conference, Veenstra sought out Kumm, the head of the Sudan United Mission (SUM), and volunteered for missionary service in Africa. Although Kumm readily accepted her application, as a health precaution, he told her, she would have to wait three years until she reached the age of twenty-one.

Karl Kumm was a peripatetic missionary-circuit speaker during the first two decades of the twentieth century. Born in Germany to a deeply pietistic

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54 In the following section, the term Sudan refers not to the present-day nation-state of Sudan but to the large swathe of territory, sometimes called the Greater Sudan, stretching from the west coasts of Nigeria and Cameroon across central Africa through Chad and east to the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan (present day Sudan). For a detailed description of the Sudan, see John De Korne, *To Whom I Now Send Thee: Mission Work of the Christian Reformed Church in Nigeria* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1945), 21.

55 Acta 1918, 86.

56 De Korne, *To Whom I Now Send Thee*, 23.
Lutheran family, Kumm had studied at Heidelberg, Jena, and Freiburg, earning a doctor of philosophy degree and studying Arabic in Egypt, all for the purpose of doing mission work among Muslims. Through marriage to the daughter of a British missionary working there, Kumm had found his life’s passion: the Sudan. His interest in the Sudan developed into a “veritable obsession” that he channeled into a mission organization founded with his father-in-law in 1902, the Sudan United Mission.\(^{57}\) The “whole raison d’être of the SUM” was to construct a bulwark of mission stations across the Sudan in order to prevent the growth of Islam in the south.\(^{58}\) Kumm, who had only lived in Africa for a short time, spent the bulk of his time crisscrossing Europe and America, recruiting mission organizations to plant stations in the Sudan. By all accounts, he was a highly charismatic speaker, who, when he spoke at Edinburgh in 1910, was able to “hold the audience in his hand and turn it any way he wanted.”\(^{59}\)

Kumm certainly had that effect on Johanna Veenstra, as well as others in the CRC. Determined to go to the Sudan with the SUM, Veenstra moved to Michigan in 1915 and began taking classes at Calvin. She also joined the Girls Mission Society, convincing Student Volunteer Band president John De Korne to bring Kumm to Calvin as a guest missionary speaker in 1917. Writing two decades later, De Korne recalled Kumm as standing head and shoulders above the crowd, with a fine head of bushy, iron grey hair, and “giving stirring addresses so that a number of church leaders were ready to overture synod to take over one of the sections of the Sudan in order that the advance of Islam might stop.”\(^{60}\) Inspired by Kumm, Henry Beets published a series of Kumm’s articles on the Sudan in the Banner just before synod convened in 1918.\(^{61}\) Following synod, Beets ran two more articles about mission work in Africa, this time about the United Presbyterian Church’s mission work in Ethiopia, adjacent to the Egyptian Sudan.\(^{62}\)

\(^{57}\) Jan Harm Boer, Missionary Messengers of Liberation in a Colonial Context (Amsterdam: Rodolphi, 1979), 114.

\(^{58}\) Boer, Missionary Messengers, 114. According to Boer, though Kumm thought of himself as a visionary and a pioneer in the “bulwark strategy,” his was only a more ambitious version of an approach already accepted by his predecessors.


\(^{60}\) De Korne, To Whom I Now Send Thee, 23.


Synod 1918 had affirmed this growing enthusiasm for the Sudan by selecting Africa as one of two possible sites for beginning mission work. Although De Korne and Huizenga were given a mandate to explore both China and Africa as possible mission fields, from the start their interest was clearly in Africa; on the cover of their final report, which appeared in mid-December of 1919, they quoted Psalm 68:31: “Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands unto God.” They believed the Sudan to be the best location for the CRC to open its first mission field.

They gave a host of what they considered weighty reasons for why the church should choose the Sudan. First, they claimed, the Sudan was virtually without missionary presence, with only one church working there (the United Presbyterians) and three missionary societies (the Sudan United Mission, the Sudan Interior Mission, and the Church Missionary Society). “The need is extremely great,” they argued, and “it is possible to block out forty squares, having an average population of a million, not one of which has a missionary.” Second, they noted, the African people are emotional but impressionable, which makes their conversion to Christianity more likely than other, more sophisticated, people. Third, the United Presbyterian Church, a church with which the CRC was on friendly terms, was urging the people of the Christian Reformed Church to take up work there. Fourth, in recent years, the results of mission work had been considerable. Fifth, and finally, it was a strategic field as far as its importance to Islam, in which, according to a number of experts on Islam, most notably Samuel Zwemer, a Reformed scholar of missions held in very high esteem in the CRC, the conversion of even one tribe might be enough to swing the whole region over to Christianity.

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64 De Korne and Huizenga defined the Sudan as “that part of Africa which stretches from Abyssinia in the east to the Senegal and the Niger in the west and from the Sahara in the north to the tributaries of the Congo.” “Report on Mission in Sudan or China,” English ver., 25.

65 The UPC was a Scottish Presbyterian church with some Dutch connections. Between 1888 and 1898, the two denominations had considered merging. The union failed, however, because the UPC wanted an “organic” merger, which the CRC rejected, fearing it would lose its distinctive identity. See Zwaanstra, Reformed Thought, 19.

66 About Zwemer, the committee wrote: “Dr. Samuel M. Zwemer, well known among our people as missionary to the Mohammedans, and heralded by the Laymen’s Missionary Movement as ‘probably the world’s greatest living missionary,’ permitted us to confer with him on several occasions, and after having given our problem some thought, he said tersely, ‘Africa, of course.’ ” “Report, 15.
These reasons outweighed some potentially serious drawbacks for choosing the Sudan. Transportation difficulties loomed large, they noted, because the Egyptian Sudan was located some fifteen hundred miles from Port Said, making travel and missionary education a challenge. They would have to buy a steam-launch, which would cost somewhere between $2,000 and $10,000. The climate of the Sudan was also far from ideal, with temperatures reaching a scorching 116° F in the hot season. British colonial control could make obtaining permission to work in the area difficult. Finally, the report explained that although there were some disadvantages in the African character for developing a Reformed church, these could also be seen as positive. They wrote:

African tribes are usually said to belong to the emotional type of people, and we Reformed people usually belong to the intellectual type as contrasted with the emotional type. There is, no doubt, some truth to the statement that these peoples would take more readily to the teachings of Methodist missionaries than to the sterner teachings of Reformed missionaries, but that statement would hold good in some degree at least, for any type of people. And this objection loses its force largely when we remember that the Africans belong to the child races, and that their further development depends largely upon the kind of teaching they receive.67

To add at least an aura of objectivity to their recommendation for the Sudan, De Korne and Huizenga also examined China as a field. They noted some significant reasons why China would be a good choice for a CRC mission field. First, they pointed out, China had its own language and a body of rich literature, which could “be of great value to the missionary.” Second, the community life of China was well organized, “which would provide safety and comfort to our missionaries.” Third, in contrast to the Sudan, they pointed out, the “climate is healthful—suitable in every way for Americans.” Fourth, there were good transportation and communication facilities as well as facilities for educating the missionary children. Fifth, China was growing in world importance, which made the “Chinese of great strategic significance from the missionary point of view.” Sixth, the CRC had a “splendid opportunity” to work with the RCA, a sister church that had played no small part in “awakening missionary interest” in the CRC. Seventh, a number of CRC members were already working in China, supported by CRC churches.68 Last, the committee stated: “The conservative spirit and intellectual qualities of the Chinese people give us many points of contact with them.” 69


68 Because the CRC did not have a mission field, CRC young people were forced to go to the mission field with other denominations. One example is Tena Holkeboer who went to Xiamen (Amoy) with the RCA in 1920. See Edward Van Baak, “Dr. Tena Holkeboer,” Banner 100 (December 10, 1965): 10–11.

However, China also had drawbacks as a potential mission field. Among these, De Korne and Huizenga noted the difficulty of the Chinese language. The rising nationalism, fanned by the “various Oriental exclusion acts,” resulted in strong anti-American sentiments and contributed to a political situation that was highly fluid. Cultural reasons also made mission work with the Chinese difficult. They wrote:

The character and temperament of the people makes it extremely difficult to reach them with a Christian message. They have a civilization and a culture of their own; they are well satisfied with themselves; and they feel a contempt for these poor, ignorant foreigners who come to them to tell them of a Christ who was born 500 years later than their own Confucius.

These factors would make mission work in China difficult, but the most compelling strike against China had nothing to do with that country itself. De Korne and Huizenga reported that they had found that “the missionary leaders of China do not seem to be very anxious to have another, very small, church commence missionary operations alongside of the well-organized work that is found there now.” Specifically, they mentioned their conference with E. C. Lobenstine, the executive secretary of the China Continuation Committee, who, they noted, was “referred to by several missionary leaders as the greatest authority on China missions.” While not exactly discouraging them from opening a mission, they reported Lobenstine “did not encourage us to open a mission in China.” They could only conclude that his reasons for not doing so were that there were already so many different boards operating in China that the contribution of another small board to the “evangelization of China would be very slight—almost negligible compared to the extended work now going on there.”

In addition to their published report, De Korne and Huizenga used other propaganda to convince the church to select the Sudan. When their original plan to visit both fields fell through, they organized a barnstorming crusade to raise money to finance the new field, and, no doubt, to push for the selection of the Sudan. Between the spring of 1919 and the end of the year, they visited all of the churches in the denomination except those in California and Canada. They also enlisted Band members to write articles in the *Chimes* and to visit churches during the summer holidays and give illustrated talks using a stereopticon presentation on the Blue and White Nile regions of the Egyptian Sudan. De Korne, Huizenga, and The

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70 “Report on Mission in Sudan or China,” 22.

71 De Korne, personal folder.

72 Though Synod 1918 had mandated the investigating committee to travel to both Africa and China, the Mission Board balked at the trip when it realized how much it would cost in terms of time and money. For details on this misunderstanding, see De Korne to “Fellow volunteers, who are also newspaper reporters,” November 27, 1918; De Korne, personal folder.
Band members had forced the denomination to open a foreign field; now they were determined that the field should be the Sudan.

The Last Word

De Korne and Huizenga’s efforts to marshal support for Africa did not convince everyone in the church. Some were already strongly in favor of going to China. Support for China had been building steadily for a number of years in the CRC. In fact, the first mention of mission work made in a church paper was in reference to China in 1872 in De Wachter when a reader wrote to stress the great needs of Chinese children. At the turn of the century, another correspondent in De Wachter stressed the pressing need for preaching the gospel in China and asked, “What are you doing for China, reader?”

Over the years, other articles had appeared in CRC church papers suggesting China as a location for the denominational mission work. Thus, it was no surprise when in the spring of 1918 the Rev. Harold Bode, in his minority report appearing in the Banner, recommended China as a site for the CRC’s first overseas mission field.

Bode, pastor of the First CRC, Wellsburg, Iowa, a church belonging to Classis Ostfriesland, made up of a cluster of German-immigrant churches, recommended China over South America, for what he termed as “eminently practical reasons.” Among these reasons were the homogeneity of the Chinese race, the cost of living in China was “ridiculously low,” the CRC work could link up with the China Inland Mission, and the cultural level of China was high.

Bode’s argument obviously played well in the denomination, for just a month later, Synod 1918 rejected South America, narrowing the choice down to either Africa or China.

After China was chosen as a field for investigation in 1918, however, it slipped behind Africa as the field of choice, mostly because De Korne and Huizenga were more interested in Africa. However, once they published their report in the fall of 1919 recommending Africa, China quickly came back into focus. Articles soon began appearing in church papers criticizing De Korne and Huizenga for how they had carried out their mandate and also arguing that China was a better choice for the denomination’s first mission field.

Writing in the December 1919 issue of De Wachter, the Rev. Peter Hoekenga, a home missionary on the West Coast, questioned the committee’s failure...
to provide more information on China, which, he said, effectively hindered synod from making an informed decision. “If the synod receives full and complete information on one field and incomplete on the other,” he suggested, “it will be difficult to make a definite decision and clearly choose for one and against the other.” One could only conclude, Hoekenga said, that the committee appointed to investigate fields had misunderstood its mandate in recommending to synod which field to choose. Before giving his reasons for preferring China, he mentioned that the fact that “a member of our church has already been named for work there” was not alone a strong enough reason for choosing the Sudan.

Hoekenga then went on to argue the case for China. Among the “seven facts of great importance” for why the church should choose China over the Sudan, Hoekenga listed its openness to the gospel, its receptivity to American influence, the pliability of the Chinese people, the vast number of “heathens” in proportion to the number of missionaries working there, and the relatively low cost of doing mission work there. The most important reason for doing mission work in China, he argued, was based on the instruction that Classis Sioux Center had given synod for deciding on a venue: Preference should be made for work “among a nation which has world-historical significance (volkerenleven).” It went without saying, Hoekenga concluded, this was truer of China than it was of the Sudan.

Other denomination leaders also spoke in favor of China. In January of 1920, the Rev. John Dolfin, pastor in Muskegon, Michigan, and secretary of the Board of Heathen Missions, had attended a Foreign Missions Conference in New Haven, Connecticut. Reporting in the *Banner*, he said he had enjoyed discussions with several RCA missionaries (“Zwemer, Warnhuis, Pieters”) and drew the following conclusion:

> From personal and private conversations with men whom we had the pleasure of meeting for the first time or anew at this Conference we were strengthened in our opinion that of the two fields, China or Africa, the former is to be preferred above the latter as the opening scene of our Foreign Mission activity. Africa may appeal strongly to sentiment and emotion but China to reason and judgment.

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76 Peter J. Hoekenga, “Aan de Synodale Commissie voor de Buitenlansche Zending,” *De Wachter* 52 (December 24, 1919): 6 (trans.). The bold text is Hoekenga’s. For help with translating this and following *De Wachter* articles, I am indebted to Prof. Henry Zwaanstra.

77 This is, no doubt, a reference to Johanna Veenstra’s commitment to work with the SUM. Band members occasionally threatened to go to the mission field with other churches or organizations if the church did not respond to their desire for a field. See *Agenda*, “Report on Mission in Sudan or China,” 157.

78 Hoekenga, “Aan de Synodale Commissie,” 6 (trans.).

Attacking from another angle, Henry Beets also entered the fray. Instead of promoting China, Beets took issue with Africa. He lamented the fact that De Korne and Huizenga’s report did not mention the work of the South African Dutch Reformed Church Mission (DRCM) in the Sudan, since “these people,” he wrote, “are so much like us, psychologically, historically and religiously, that it would pay us to ascertain how they feel about work in the Sudan, what their experiences are, their prospects and fears.”

Using excerpts from a series of articles in De Kerkbode, the paper of the Dutch Reformed Church, Beets went on to suggest some reasons for caution in choosing the Sudan.

He cited the political complications the South African Boers had experienced in gaining permission from the British colonial government to enter the Sudan and suggested that it was already too late for staving off the “Mohammedan peril.” Furthermore, he argued, the church would do well to find a field where it had to deal with paganism only, and not paganism and Islam, as it would have to do in the Sudan. Finally, he mentioned the difficulties the Boers had found working with Africans.

Three young Tivi [Tiv] people were enrolled as converts, Dec. 1918, after seven years of labor among them. Alas, all three had to be disciplined because of sin against the 7th commandment [adultery]—the great sin in Africa as well as elsewhere. These young men were already assisting in missionary work, yet they fell, although they seem to show signs of repentance.

At the end of his article, Beets said that though he did not want to “knock the Sudan proposal,” he thought “our Church ought to know just what it is facing,” in order to avoid the kind of discouragement and disillusionment “in view of the comparatively little lasting fruit produced so far on our Indian field.”

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81 The seven articles that Beets used from De Kerkbode are found in De Korne’s personal folder.

82 Because of a number of Islamic revolts against British rule in the Greater Sudan, the colonial administration treated Islam with a sensitivity that included prohibiting Christian mission work in the northern Sudan. The British encouraged missionaries to concentrate on the mainly animistic societies in the southern part of the region. See Peter Woodward, Sudan, 1888–1989: The Unstable State (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1990), 33.

In the months leading up to Synod 1920, Beets refrained from publicly supporting China, but he had been interested in mission work there for some time. As noted above, Beets regarded the Chinese people highly, but his high estimation had another side as well. In 1910, he had challenged CRC audiences with the following warning: “Think of China with its 4,000,000 yellow men. All bright, all capable of high civilization. Capable of defeating hosts of white people. Woe if China awakens unchristianized! Our white race will not only lose its supremacy, but may be enslaved.”

Expanding on this theme, in a 1916 *Banner* article about the importance of China, Beets wrote: “If we understand our Bible, the Far East has not completed its role in the world’s drama. Napoleon in his days, speaking about China, said: ‘Woe unto the white race if that sleeping giant awakes.’ We believe ultimately the struggle will be between the white race and the yellow—the great struggle of the last days for the world’s supremacy.”

In the spring of 1920, the tide for choosing China was clearly rising among established church leaders. De Korne and Huizenga responded to the criticism they were receiving by publishing additional materials about China as a potential mission field but not before one last voice weighed in on the choice of mission fields.

Throughout the spring of 1920, Barend K. Kuiper, professor at Calvin College and editor of *De Wachter*, the most widely read denominational periodical of the time, revealed his strong bias against Africa and in favor of China. Kuiper thought synod should also bear some of the blame for the problems with De Korne and Huizenga’s report; synod had been “caught sleeping” on the issue of where to pursue missions and thus only very quickly and perfunctorily, without discussion, narrowing the field down to Africa and China. About what he termed as their “cooked and dried” report, Kuiper said that De Korne and Huizenga had made two mistakes: first, they had failed to fulfill their mandate by only giving information

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84 Beets, “Some Reasons for Pushing the Cause of Missions Harder Than We Have Ever Done,” speech given at Broadway Avenue CRC Laymen’s Society, April 24, 1910; LaGrave Avenue CRC Men’s Supper, May 16, 1910, and Zeeland CRC, September 2, 1912; Beets, personal folder.

85 Beets, “The Yellow Peril,” *Banner* 51 (August 10, 1916): 497. For Beets’ fullest public comments on both the superiority of the Chinese and the threat they posed to the white race, see his speech to a Calvin College Alumni meeting, June 2, 1930; Beets, personal folder. There is nothing particularly original about Beets’ ideas; he was repeating sentiments common in missionary discourse of the time. Even Chinese Christians expressed these sentiments. At the 1920 SVM conference in Des Moines, Iowa, for instance, James Yen, a Chinese church statesman noted for his literacy programs, said: “It is for you, Christian men and women of western lands, not to say only, but to determine if the coming, rising China will be to the world an eternal, golden blessing to fulfill God’s mission for her to the whole world, or whether she will to the world be a yellow peril.” Quoted in Albert Smit, “The Significance of the Student Volunteer Movement,” *Chimes* 14 (January 1920): 18.

about Africa; then they had compounded their failure by giving their own opinion about choosing Africa instead of letting the church decide based on the facts.87

Known as a player in church politics, Kuiper waited until just before synod met to convey his strongest opinions about the choice of mission fields.88 In a detailed discussion, he took issue with De Korne and Huizenga’s argument that Africa should be chosen over China. Although he did not deny the importance of the issues they raised in their report in favor of Africa, he declared these issues to be accidental, and not so important in themselves. Kuiper then related what he believed was the most important consideration in choosing a mission field. “When the matter is looked at from the great Reformed principle of the honor of God,” he stated, “then the main question should be, which field has the greatest strategic significance?”89 If people would be guided by this principle, Kuiper concluded, the obvious choice of a mission field was China.

To support his argument, however, Kuiper did not tout the superiority of the Chinese; instead, he underlined the inferiority of Africans. “No one,” he said, “can deny that the Chinese in the future shall be of much more importance than the Negroes.” While De Korne and Huizenga had argued that as the child races, blacks would be more easily swayed by proselytization, Kuiper believed this was a sign that the African race would not make much of a contribution to world history. In fact, Kuiper pointed out, the specific Negro persons whom De Korne and Huizenga had held up as examples of what the Negro race could achieve were without exception born out of a mixture of blacks and whites.90 “Full blood Negroes,” he concluded, “had not yet gone very far. It is highly improbable that the Negro races will ever have world historical significance.”91

Just before Synod 1920 convened, Kuiper offered the last word on the selection of mission fields. Before doing so, perhaps in response to criticism he had received, he assured readers of his own love for missions, stating, “We, too, are very deeply convinced missions is one of the most significant tasks of the church. We, too, consider it a very lovely affair, full


88 For Kuiper’s propensity for playing church politics, see John Dolfin to De Korne, April 3, 1920. Dolfin suggests to De Korne that Kuiper got his editorship of the De Wachter “in a rather shady way,” and that he “is holding up his last articles until just before the synod when he can have his say and no one to answer him.” De Korne, personal folder.

89 Kuiper, “Het Buitenlandsch,” 2. The bold text is Kuiper’s.

90 De Korne and Huizenga had written that they believed “the African people will bring forth in the future their Crowther, their Booker T. Washington, their Lewis.” Quoted from “Report,” 32.

91 Kuiper, “De Zending,” 1 (trans.).
of significance for our church’s mission work. It should as soon as possible become one of the highest ideals.”92 He went on to list all of the places that he considered worthy of mission endeavor, and then he gave his own preference for China—its “world historical significance.”

In the rest of the article, Kuiper urged the church to “think more deeply into the issues of missions,” and offered several suggestions for doing mission work. He advised the church to send only the very best candidates to the mission field. Missionaries should be ordained men, he argued, who had received an exceptional amount of training in philosophy and the history of religion. They should also be well versed in the history and culture of the people. Too often missions are only superficially understood because missionary education is frequently superficial. Poorly educated missionaries, Kuiper warned, run the risk of “awakening the natural antipathies” of the people with whom they work.93

Although Kuiper had the last word in denominational publications, Lee Huizenga had the last public word. Citing him as the person “who is credited with doing more than any other person to interest the Christian Reformed Church in foreign missions,” the June 12 issue of the Grand Rapids Herald ran the headline, “Favors Africa as Missionary Field: Lee S. Huizenga, pastor and doctor, will so inform synod.” John De Korne, too, was determined that the church should decide on Africa, stating in a personal letter to a Band member, now pastoring a church, “my own opinion remains that Africa offers by far the bigger appeal,” though he conceded China was looking stronger than it had, and that “they are both good fields, and the synod cannot go wrong on either one of them.”94 Both men planned to attend the synod, setting up a display of maps and artifacts from both mission fields and making their pitch on the floor of synod.

When it met, Synod 1918 appointed a subcommittee to present a proposal to the full body for selecting Africa or China. Writing some years later, Henry Beets, chair of this committee, recalled that “after lengthy discussions, synod accepted the advice of this committee to the effect that not the Sudan, but China should be the country in which our first foreign missionary enterprise should be undertaken.”95


93Ibid.

94De Korne to Samuel Dykstra, May 5, 1920; De Korne, personal folder. In the same letter, De Korne comments, “Your classis must have been pretty much under the influence of the editorial of Prof. Kuiper or similar influences at the time you decided on that instruction to synod [about China].” In addition to lobbying from the home front, those supporting Africa made sure that Johanna Veenstra’s first letter from Africa, “First Impressions,” appeared serially in the Banner. See Johanna Veenstra, “First Impressions,” parts 1–3 (of 10), Banner 54 (December 25, 1919): 804; 55 (April 15 and May 13, 1920): 237 and 301.

95Beets, Toiling and Trusting, 222.
Arriving at China

The decision for China as the first overseas mission field of the CRC was filtered through a very cautious, politically oriented group of people. The deciding principle for China was strategic significance, or strategicity, as Henry Beets termed it. By this, CRC leaders meant the importance of choosing a field that had strategic significance for expanding Christianity, or, as they termed it, expanding the kingdom of God. All in the denomination shared a commitment to finding a strategic field, but their definitions differed. The Student Volunteer Bands believed that it was a strategic moment for doing mission work in the Sudan in order to form a bulwark for preventing Islam from spreading south and eventually taking over the entire continent of Africa. For denominational leaders, however, strategic meant preaching Christianity to a nation that, if converted, would have a “leavening” effect on the whole world. The church’s frustration with mission work on the Indian field was a significant factor in the decision for China, as did the larger Protestant missionary establishment’s identification of China as of great strategic importance. Their conclusion that Africa was a backward continent populated by the child races, holding out little prospect for making a contribution to the expansion of Christianity, closed the door on a decision for that continent.

Was this decision for China racist or culturally chauvinistic, as Harry Boer, Gerald Zandstra, and others in the denomination have alleged? Of course it was, but these critics seem to imply that a choice for Africa would have been less racist. In fact, those on both sides of the argument—for China and for Africa—were racist (not to mention the widely held racist attitudes toward Native Americans). In their denigrating Africans and touting the superiority of the Chinese, those in favor of China were obviously racist (not to mention Henry Beets’s yellow-peril argument). Those in favor of Africa, however, believed Africans were better objects for missionary work because of their supposedly inferior culture. As the child races, they argued, Africans were more open to hearing and responding to the message of the gospel than the Chinese, who boasted an ancient and sophisticated civilization. Both sides of the argument were racist, yet none of the sentiments expressed in the discussion were original; everything they said about Africans and Chinese reflected sentiments or parroted statements from the larger Protestant missionary discourse of the period. While absolutely in no way justifying the racism expressed in the discussion, these sentiments do show how closely connected those interested in missions in the CRC of that time were to the larger Protestant missionary discourse and just how common were ideas about racial superiority and inferiority in Eurocentric Christianity.

Nor was strategic significance the only reason given for the choice of China. The church also wanted to be sure the location was suitable for the missionaries and their families. John De Korne expressed his willingness
to suffer on the mission field, but church leaders were reluctant to send the church’s representatives to their doom. Thus, the church was committed to sending a doctor with its first mission party, both to do mission work, and, just as important, to provide care for the mission. Because China had a wholesome climate and relatively good means of transport and communication by telegraph, it seemed more suitable for the missionaries and their families. The church was also concerned about money. They wanted to make sure that the cost of a field was commensurate with the denomination’s ability to finance it, and that their converts would eventually be self-supporting and independent. Equally important was the church’s commitment to educating the missionaries’ covenant children. Here again, they claimed that China offered better possibilities, though they never spelled out exactly why.

As important as these practical matters and strategicity were in favor of choosing China, there was still another, even more fundamental, reason for choosing China. Above all, the CRC wanted to preserve its Reformed identity, and China offered the best possibility, they thought, for doing so. For the CRC, being Reformed meant standing in the nexus of sixteenth-century Calvinistic tradition. It meant upholding the confessional standards of the Reformed churches of the Netherlands and specifically the Heidelberg Catechism, the Belgic Confession, and the Canons of Dort. Preserving this Reformed identity was the *raison d’être* of the CRC. It had been a key theme in the denomination’s narrative explaining the Seceders 1830s break with the state Reformed church in the Netherlands (Hervormde Kerk in Nederland) and their flight to America in the 1840s.\(^{96}\) Preserving their Reformed identity provided the CRC with justification for splitting with the RCA in 1857.\(^{97}\) Ultimately, preserving this Reformed identity was even more important than preserving their Dutch identity. As many in the church came to realize during the painful process of Americanization, the church needed to move from being “Dutch and Reformed” to being “American and Reformed.”\(^{98}\) Their Reformed identity became a sort of surrogate for their now-fading Dutch identity.

Naturally, this fierce commitment in the CRC to preserving Reformed identity extended to missions. If missions discussion in the church did not always touch directly on the question, that issue was always just beneath the surface and clearly emerged as an important reason for rejecting Africa. As its last, and possibly weightiest, reason for rejecting Africa, Synod 1920 admitted, “The close cooperation with Churches of less pure confession which belong to the Sudan United Mission, fills us with fear for the

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\(^{96}\) George Harinck and Hans Krabbendam, eds., *Breaches and Bridges: Reformed Subcultures in the Netherlands, Germany, and The United States* (Amsterdam: VU Uitgeverij, 2000), 24.


\(^{98}\) Bratt, *Dutch Calvinism*, 41.
maintenance and propagation of our Reformed principles.”

In China, on the other hand, the CRC thought it had a “splendid opportunity” to work with the RCA. Never mind that this was the same church with which they had broken sixty years earlier; working with the RCA was as close as they could get to working with a like-minded church with a similar (Dutch) background, and working with the RCA provided the best opportunity for preserving Reformed identity.

Going to China not only provided the more likely venue for preserving a Reformed identity, it also provided a better place for propagating this Reformed faith. According to church leaders, unlike Africans, the Chinese had a long history and sophisticated culture, most apparent in their rich language and literature. Although this gave them a sense of cultural superiority that made them resistant to Christianity, it would enable the Chinese, they believed, to handle a more sophisticated version of the faith, the CRC’s Reformed faith, in other words. Some CRC leaders saw a connection between the Chinese and themselves. As synod noted in its list of reasons for selecting China, “The conservative, intellectual spirit of the Chinese is more in harmony with our people than the emotional nature of the African natives.”

Even while advocating Africa as a field, De Korne and Huizenga had to admit that these qualities would provide many points of contact, which, for them, meant communicating the Reformed faith. Thus, the church chose China because of its greatest strategic significance and because of the potential for establishing a distinctly Reformed church.

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99 Acta 1920, Art. 2, 49–50 (trans.). It is unclear why synod felt it had to narrow ecclesiastical partnership to the SUM, since the United Presbyterians were working there as was the Dutch Reformed Church (Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk).

100 Acta 1920, Art. 34, 2, a–f, 50 (trans.). The validity of this claim would make an interesting study.