THE DUTCH CANADIAN CHURCH: DIVERSITY AND DISSONANCE, 1900-1960

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Any observer of the Canadian religious scene knows that there are a number of churches in Canada whose membership is primarily composed of Dutch-Canadians. Yet, not even one of those churches makes a claim to being a Dutch church. Not one places any particular emphasis upon the retention of its cultural or linguistic heritage and all refuse to be labelled as ethnic churches. All claim to be Canadian churches that share a common commitment to historical Reformed traditions that transcend mere ethnic or national designations.

Non-Dutch Canadians, of course, know better. In Canada, any church whose membership is predominantly Dutch is a "Dutch Reformed Church". The theological intricacies that separate the Canadian Reformed Church from the Netherlands Reformed Congregation or, for that matter, from the Christian Reformed Church are to them as understandable as the theories of nuclear physics, and as relevant. No amount of correction seems to be able to convince Canadians that the mythical "Dutch Reformed Church" does not exist and does not share the supposed antediluvian social and political views of its South African counterpart. In areas of high Dutch population concentration, where the immigrants have reaped some measure of economic success and seem to encourage ethnic exclusivity with their Christian parental schools, some Canadians have been known to speak rather pejoratively of the Dutch *Deformed* church. Little wonder, that many immigrants carefully emphasize that they belong to a church "just like the Presbyterian."

Before I discuss the "visible" Dutch-Canadian churches, however, it's well to remember that the majority of the immigrants who made their way to Canada from the Netherlands in the last hundred years did not become members of any Dutch church. Canada, like the United States, has had a long history of religious diversity. While the Roman Catholic church was the established church during the early French regime, the English conquest in 1760 introduced tolerance and religious freedom. The mass migrations from Europe and the United States in the nineteenth century introduced a variety of religious traditions that made the establishment of a state church an impossibility and guaranteed the "manyness" of religious expression in Canada.

Dutch immigrants have, from the beginning, expressed surprise at the varieties of churches and sects in Canada. Like Americans, Canadians seem to be much more religiously minded than the Dutch, at least in the outward expression of their faith. Presented with a catholic menu; racially, culturally, and socially acceptable to Canadians (thereby assuring a fairly easy integration) and faced with the relative scarcity of Dutch immigrant congregations, most Protestant immigrants prior to the 1950's chose to find a church home among Canadians.[1]

At the turn of the century, the Methodist and Presbyterian churches seemed to be the chief beneficiaries of Dutch immigration. After 1925, the United Church of Canada (the result of a union of Methodists, Presbyterians and Congregationalists) proved most appealing. The Presbyterian Church of Canada was of particular interest to the Calvinists, but no one Canadian church maintained an exclusive attraction for the Dutch. The small number of Reformed churches which developed across the country prior to 1940 hardly offered any competition to the established Canadian churches.

In the immediate post World War II period, the Presbyterian and United churches continued to absorb Dutch immigrants, although now they had to compete with a growing number of "Dutch" churches. Handicapped by the lack of any mechanism of social outreach, the Canadian churches failed to capitalize on the massive Dutch Protestant immigration. It would not be until the 1970's and the 80's that a slow shift could be seen taking place. Disagreements over the role of women in the church; the desire for more active involvement in Canadian religious life and the desire to shed the restricting confines of the ethnic church ghetto, led an increasing number of people out of the Dutch and into the Canadian churches.

My focus on the "invisible Dutch church" would be incomplete without mention of the Canadian church which has the greatest number of Dutch adherents; the Roman Catholic Church. Dutch Catholics began emigrating to Canada at the turn of the century, however, Catholic immigration to Canada remained proportionately quite small prior to 1947 because of concerted opposition from the Dutch episcopacy. Church leaders believed that Canada was a Protestant nation and therefore spelled a spiritual danger to unprotected Catholic immigrants. Experiments with "colony" settlement in the first two decades of the century turned out little short of disastrous, as immigrant recruiting priests transmogrified into immigration sharks. Unprotected emigration and settlement, the only kind

there was at the time, was consistently opposed.[2]

The situation changed dramatically after 1947 because of altered circumstances in both Canada and the Netherlands. Canada was suffering serious rural depopulation as demobilized Canadian soldiers streamed into the urban areas and refused to go back to the farm. Government officials believed that only mass immigration could help stem the coming of a serious agricultural crisis. Many Catholic bishops were faced with the unwelcome prospect of dioceses with declining populations, closed churches and empty schools. In the Netherlands, the Catholic and Calvinist rural areas were facing grave problems of overpopulation as birth rates had continued high both during the Depression and war years. The Dutch government, faced with the massive task of reconstruction, saw emigration as a safety valve and actively encouraged the depopulation of its own countryside.

This coincidence of needs meshed nicely with the growing desire of a large part of the Dutch population to abandon a nation that seemed to be on the brink of economic, political, and social ruin. Dutch Catholic organizations were formed to direct and stimulate the emigration. Dutch priests were recruited to help settle the emigrants in Canada. The Dutch government provided overall direction in the Netherlands and the Catholic authorities saw to the rapid settlement of their new parishioners.

The Canadian episcopacy opposed "national" settlements and placed the emphasis upon the dispersion of the Dutch among other newly arriving immigrants. Language acquisition, ethnic blending, and conformity to the values of Canada's Anglo-Saxon culture became the priorities of the day. The Dutch immigrants, for the most part, were happy to comply as they became actively involved in church activities and their children entered the parochial schools. While the first generation immigrants remained indisputably Dutch, their children made a rapid transition from one culture to the other. There is nothing definably "Dutch" about the Canadian Roman Catholic Church today. Unlike other ethnic groups, the Dutch do not have their own parishes with unique celebrations or traditions. The immigrants have silently added one more ethnic stream to the increasingly diverse Canadian Catholic church.[3]

The history of the "visible" Dutch-Canadian church is the history of a minority; the Calvinists. The majority of Dutch immigrants, as we have seen, either abandoned their religious roots or adapted, integrated or assimilated them into the Canadian churches. Only a minority of immigrants, those committed to the historic Reformed traditions, sought to preserve their unique religious identity in the Canadian environment. In doing so, they created religious communities that reflected the experiences, divisions, and traditions of at least two, and perhaps three nations.

The opening up of the Canadian prairie west in the last decades of the 19th century coincided with increasing difficulties experienced in American agriculture. Beginning in the mid 90's, American farmers, both native born and immigrant, began to examine the possibilities in the "Last, Best, West" north of the Forty Ninth. Dutch Americans, scattered across the farm country from Montana, sold out their holdings and joined millions of other immigrants on their trek to the "Land of Opportunity". Settling north and south of a broad fertile belt that ran from Winnipeg to the Rocky mountains, they began to reconstitute their traditional ways in a new environment. The church was one of the first institutions to be re-established.

Winnipeg, Manitoba and Nobleford, Alberta became centers of Dutch settlement after 1900 as they drew immigrants from the Dutch "kolonies" in the United States and directly from the Netherlands. By 1911, three Christian Reformed and one Reformed congregation had been established in the Nobleford area. Christian Reformed congregations would also be established in Winnipeg, Edmonton, and in various places across the prairie but the Reformed Church in America failed to make any further gains in Canada. In the beginning, none of the congregations were self-sustaining and depended upon pulpit supply and financial support from the United States as monetary support was not forthcoming from the Netherlands. However, perceived as being "Dutch" churches, since their services were in the Dutch language, they failed to recruit members from the larger Canadian society and thus remained marginal at best, and simply ceased to exist at worst.[4]

In the 1920's the immigration focus shifted away from the homestead west to the more developed and urbanized areas of Canada. While the old settlements continued to grow, new concentrations of immigrants began to appear in the southern and western Ontario regions and in British Columbia. The Board of Home Missions of the Christian Reformed Church which had been at the forefront in organizing new congregations in the prairie west in the 1900-1914 period, now redirected its energies to these new fields. Although there was plenty of moral support from the Gereformeerde community in the Netherlands, the new congregations remained dependant upon the American church for its preachers and its financial support. The congregations slowly spread through Ontario and the Canadian west and while they would have a difficult time surviving the great Depression they would eventually serve as the cornerstones of a renewed church.[5]

The end of the war in 1945 ushered in a new and more active period of emigration from the Netherlands to Canada. Between 1947 and 1970, some 185,000 Dutch immigrants entered the country. The first organization in the field prepared to help in their placement was the Immigration Committee for Canada of the Christian Reformed Church. Funded primarily by the American church, its fieldmen and home missionaries took responsibility for placements, found jobs and helped to organize new congregations. After 1950, the Reformed Church in America belatedly began working with immigrants after having initially recommended that Hervormde immigrants join Canadian churches. Both the Reformed and Christian Reformed agents dealt primarily with their co-religionists, leaving some 30 to 35% of the immigrants to be dealt with by the Dutch agricultural attache or the Roman Catholic authorities.[6]

It was clear from the beginning that the Christian Reformed Church had the jump on the competition. Churches throughout Canada functioned as keystones for the formation of new settlements and congregations. Charges of "raiding" were voiced by Reformed officials who feared Christian Reformed congregational building at their expense. There is little doubt that the Christian Reformed Church was much more aggressive in its approach to the work with the immigrants and therefore reaped the benefits. Today the church has over 200 congregations and affiliated Christian elementary and high schools, making it the largest and most successful of the "Dutch" churches.

Success, however, did not necessarily mean happiness and contentment. Calvinism is by definition reforming in impulse and Calvinists fractious by nature. Conflicts over matters of common grace, the Church Order and other doctrinal matters, which had been so much a part of the Dutch experience, reasserted themselves in Canada. While a sense of unity in the face of adversity, and perhaps financial necessity, restrained argument in the first difficult years of settlement, by the beginning of the 1950's old differences once again rose to the surface. The resulting conflict oftentimes led to the withdrawal of the dissenting minority.[7]

Such disagreements led to the founding of the Canadian Reformed Church in 1950 and the Free Christian Reformed Church in 1955. Some members of the Hervormde Kerk of the Netherlands who had joined the Christian Reformed Church joined the Reformed Church in America as it began to expand in Canada in the 1950's or moved on to Canadian churches. Their general complaint was that they had been treated as "second class Christians" by the more Calvinistic Christian Reformed. Members of the Nederduits Gereformeede Kerk who had initially joined the Christian Reformed Church made their exit in the 1950s and established the Netherlands Reformed Congregation with its "dour theology" emphasizing the restricted nature of salvation. The Reformed tradition clearly had a variety of expressions!

The divisions and separations were seldom carried out in a kindly and Christian manner. Each group seemed to isolate itself in a bastion of self righteousness. Contacts across the Reformed divides were almost as rare and as meaningful as relationships with the Roman Catholic and unchurched who had accompanied the Calvinists to their new homeland. Although the Calvinists were regarded as a distinct group by the other Dutch and the Canadians, few outsiders realized that the tribe itself was broken up into distinct subtribes which had their own languages and traditions.

The factiousness which produced an increasingly diverse Reformed community in Canada was also a familiar part of life in the individual churches. Serious congregational conflicts arose on a myriad of subjects; over the adoption of the English language sermons; the acceptance of a new hymnal; the calling of a Dutch minister versus an american one; the building of Christian schools. Opinions never seemed to be lacking and principles were meant to be followed to death or at least until one was threatened with the denial of the sacraments or worse. Diversity rather than unity, dissonance rather than harmony, seemed to be the natural state of the Dutch-Canadian church in its formative years. In that, of course, it was the true and legitimate child of its Dutch and American parents.

Yet, in the midst of division and conflict there was also a growing belief that the Reformed tradition had something unique to give to Canadian society. The only way to accomplish the transfer was for the Dutch immigrant and his church to surrender their ethnicity and become truly Canadian while at the same time retaining their Reformed heritage. T.C. Van Kooten, in *Living in a New Country*, expressed the belief that:

> ...the immigrant must go beyond negative criticism. He must have a basic interest in the true welfare of his new country and of his fellow countrymen. He must seek to approach them with a friendliness that is not camouflaged self-interest, but a genuine concern for them as individuals with whom he would share a heritage. He must ever prove the sincerity of his

> approach with a friendliness that is eager to give what he has. Let him pave the road of integration with solid service. The way seems arduous and long, but as he works he feels less and less like a "stranger in a strange land." His new countrymen watch him work, and they judge him the same.[8]

Perhaps, in the end, only Canadians and Canadian society can truly judge the legacy of the "Dutch" church.

Endnotes

1. While it is not possible to retrieve statistics about ethnicity from church memberships, census information indicates that the majority of Dutch immigrants belong to "Canadian" churches. The 1981 Canada Census indicated that of the 408,235 Dutch Canadians, 88,445 were Roman Catholic, 61,350 United Church of Canada, 67,070 Christian Reformed, 44,240 of no professed religion and the remainder adherents of other churches.

2. Central Emigration Foundation Holland to W. B Roadhouse, 7 December 1927, Netherlands Emigration Service Collection, Glenbow-Alberta Institute, Calgary and Heritage Hall Archives, Calvin College, Grand Rapids, Michigan.

3. For a survey of the postwar conditions which encouraged Dutch emigration, see Herman Ganzevoort, *A Bittersweet Land: The Dutch Experience in Canada, 1890-1980.* Toronto: McLelland and Stewart, 1988, chapter 5.

4. A. Disselkoen, "A History of the Winnipeg Christian Reformed Church, 1890-1958" (1973), unpublished manuscript in author's possession, pp. 1-2. For a history of the Reformed churches in southern Alberta, see T. Hoffman, *The Strength of Their Years: The Story of a Pioneer Community.* St. Catherines: Knight Publishing, 1983.

5. Consistory and Congregation Minutes of the Canadian Christian Reformed churches, Heritage Hall Archives, Calvin College, Grand Rapids, Michigan.

6. G. Olsterman, et al. *To Find a Better Life: Aspects of Duth Immigration to Canada and the United States, 1920-1970.* Grand Rapids: The National Union of Christian Schools, 1975, p. 94.

7. Interviews with Revs. D. De Jong, J. Hielema, Calgary, 1979-1980.

8. T. C. Van Kooten, *Living in a New Country.* Grand Rapids, 1959, p. 157.