

German Oldreformed Emigration: Catastrophe or Blessing

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Oldreformed in Lower Saxony

The Evangelisch-altreformierte Kirche in Niedersachsen (Evangelical Oldreformed Church in Lower-Saxony, the ORC) is a small denomination close to the Dutch border, in the northwestern part of Germany. I have been a pastor in this church for more than twenty years now and written her history in 1988.¹ There are five ORC churches around Emden in the Classis of Ostfriesland (Eastfriesland) and eight in the County and Classis of Bentheim. Fifteen years ago the church of Kohlbrügge, the Niederländisch-Reformierte Gemeinde Wuppertal-Elberfeld, became a part of this Oldreformed Church. These 14 churches together claim approximately 7.000 members today. One thousand of them live in the Classis of Eastfriesland in Germany, while the Ostfrisian churches in the US count another 3.500 souls.²

Approximately 5.500 Oldreformed people live today in the County and Classis of Bentheim in Germany. In the northern part of the county of Bentheim about 20 percent of the inhabitants belong to the ORC; in the southern part it is less than half of one percent, making a combined average of five percent Oldreformed in the County.

The ties with the Dutch Seceders have been strong from the start of the ORC in 1838. In 1923 the Oldreformed even secured the rights and obligations of a Particular Synod of the Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland (GKN). However, while the GKN in the Netherlands grew, the Oldreformed in Germany remained small. Today the Dutch count one hundred times the number of Oldreformed people in Northwest Germany. The GKN has about 700.000 members, about 4.4% of the total population in the Netherlands. In the Netherlands live about 16 million people.

¹ G.J. Beuker, Umkehr und Erneuerung. Aus der Geschichte der Evangelisch-altreformierten Kirche in Niedersachsen 1838 – 1988. Bad Bentheim 1988, 542 p.

² Herbert J. Brinks, Ostfrisians in Two Worlds in: Peter de Klerk and Richard R. De Ridder, eds., *Perspectives on the Christian Reformed Church* Grand Rapids 1983,30. This means that today there are many more descendants of the ORC in Eastfriesland living in the US than in the old country.

The five congregations in Eastfriesland were founded between 1854 and 1862, mainly by ministers from the separated churches in the county of Bentheim. At that time Dutch seceders were not allowed to live and preach officially in Eastfriesland. The secession in Eastfriesland was more a local independent movement in the early years and less organized than the sister movements either in Bentheim or the Netherlands.

Till 1945 the County of Bentheim was almost homogeneously Reformed. Religiously and geographically, it was isolated: the population of neighboring counties was Catholic; and the area was surrounded by marshland. It appeared and still appears as “a nature reserve of God”, because of the very active church life.

In Eastfriesland Reformed villages bordered and border Lutheran ones, to which three quarter of the population belonged. In 1880 about nearly 200.000 people lived in Eastfriesland, and only 30.000 in the county of Bentheim. In Eastfriesland the social differences between the big farmers and the poor land laborers were much greater than in the County of Bentheim.

Compared with the official regional church, the Reformed Church (Synod of Reformed Churches in Bavaria and Northwest Germany) with about 200.000 members, the ORC is very small. Its 7.000 members are also a small group compared to the other free churches, such as the Baptists, who count about 100.000 members in a nation of 81 million people. Being free from the German state means having to care for one's own religious services, while the official churches are maintained by means of taxes.

An advantage of the small size is that church life is livelier and attendance much higher than in state churches. The Oldreformed Church has the three forms of unity as her confession, the Reformed only the Heidelberg Catechism. today Reformed and Oldreformed hardly differ in theology. The main difference is in structure and involvement of members in church activities. Since the 1980s there has been increasing cooperation between Reformed and Oldreformed. This is a unique situation compared to their history.

Persecution

Freedom of religion came in the Kingdom of Hanover only gradually after 1847. Till 1847 the law forbade citizens to leave the official church and found an independent one. Up till 1866, when the Kingdom of Hanover became part of Prussia, the reformed Minister could demand a public confession of faith stating that the young Oldreformed couple never had desired to leave the Reformed Church. Beginning in 1873, marriage and birth records were written by the local government and no longer by the churches. Up till 1873 every newborn child had to be registered in the official church and every couple had to see the Reformed minister of their municipality in order to get a marriage certificate. In some places members of Oldreformed congregations had to pay taxes for the local Reformed Church even after 1900.

The severe persecutions by church and government made many Oldreformed, families and even nearly complete congregations, emigrate to the US. Jan Berend Sundag, one of the leaders and a future minister of the ORC was imprisoned about 15, may even be up to 38 times, mostly between 1838 and 1845, for preaching the gospel. The jail terms ranges from a few days up to four weeks.³ Others, like Harm Hindrik Schoemaker, Albert Diek, Gerd Broene, Gerd Huisken, and Willem Oelerink were imprisoned for the same reason.⁴ The financial punishment was doubled every time a policeman caught someone at a forbidden church service. Some people lost many possessions for attending these services.⁵ Often armed policemen disbanded the worship meetings.⁶ This triggered the emigration movement in 1847 and all but one of the founding consistory members of the two ORC congregations in Hoogstede and Emlichheim left the country.⁷

These two consistories had been established on the 25th of may in 1845 in the neighboring Dutch city of Coevorden. This is about ten kilometers distant from Emlichheim and nearly twenty from Hoogstede. It was impossible at that time in 1845 to institute a seceded church in the Kingdom of Hanover without being imprisoned. The Hoogstede ORC ceased its existence soon afterwards in 1850, because most of the members had gone to the US. It was not reestablished until 1953.

The church of Emlichheim had to elect new elders and deacons in 1847 because the consistory had left for America.⁸ In the next 35 years, about twenty percent of the members of the ORC of Emlichheim followed them between 1847 and 1882. This is at least double to the numbers you hear in the Netherlands.⁹ Most of these more than one hundred members became a part of the Graafschap Christian Reformed Church, which was founded in 1857. I suspect that among them there were many more than the four percent who were registered as having religious reasons for their departure. although for over ninety percent economic motives were listed.¹⁰

Many more people from the northern part of the county emigrated than from the southern part. The poor northern part had connections with Van Raalte, the more affluent southern with De Cock.

The emigration started in 1847 and went on for other reasons till after World War I and even World War II. Even after World War II nearly ten percent of my congregation of Hoogstede emigrated for the US, about 25 of the 250 members. Among them where large families and singles, children and adults.

³ Beuker, Umkehr und Erneuerung, 288.

⁴ Ibid. 248.

⁵ Ibid., 427-431 (Printed publications of the government against the ORC, 1838-1867).

⁶ Ibid.,259.

⁷ They were chosen at the house of Steven Lucas at Vorwald on May 20, 1845 and at the house of Geert Zaalmink in Tinholt the 22nd.

⁸ See my Abgeschiedenes Streben nach Einheit, Leben und Wirken Henricus Beukers 1834 – 1900 Kampen / Bad Bentheim 1996, 30 – 35.

⁹ James D. Bratt, *Dutch Calvinism in modern America, A History of a conservative subculture*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984),8: „Between 1844 and 1857 almost ten percent of all seceders left the Netherlands for America.“

¹⁰ ibid.

In Germany situation got better after 1848, and still better in 1866. Freedom of religion in the county of Bentheim came in 1848, and 1866 the Kingdom of Hannover became part of Prussia. After 1848 people in that area were able for the first time in history to have their own church. Until then it was “Cuius regio – eius religio” the religion of the area is that of its ruler. In reality that had stopped years and years before. But before 1848 there had been no freedom of assembly. Freedom of religion without freedom of assembly was not very helpful.

Links with the Netherlands

The first ORC started in Uelsen January 1, 1838. The Reverend Albertus van Raalte from Ommen in the Netherlands was invited to institute the elders and deacons. Two years later, in 1840, Hendrik de Cock followed van Raalte and founded the church in Bentheim. The German people did not want to start a church at their own initiative without office bearers installed by an ordained minister. Since not a single Reformed minister in Germany had joined the Oldreformed, they asked Van Raalte and De Cock to help them. Because of the persecutions the two local consistories of the German churches of Hoogstede and Emlichheim were established in the neighboring Dutch city of Coevorden in 1845. Beginning in 1848 the first German Oldreformed ministers founded new churches. This spread of the independent Oldreformed churches was not planned activity by the Seceded churches in the Netherlands, but resulted from the close ties between Dutch and Germans in the border region of the reformed County of Bentheim, who not only shared the Dutch language but also ministers. German people near the boarder since about one hundred fifty years had spoken the Dutch language and called Dutch ministers. Many of these Reformed ministers came from the university of Groningen. The Dutch Seceders were instrumental in building the ORC. Germans attended various synods of the Seceded churches in the Netherlands. Jan Berend Sundag studied in 1839-1840 with the Rev. Hendrik de Cock at Groningen, and Jan Bavinck completed his studies between 1845-1848 at Hoogeveen. These first two ORC ministers were ordained not earlier than 1848 by the Dutch Rev. W.A. Kok from Hoogeveen. This was one year after the mass emigration to the US had started. When the Seceders opened their seminary at Kampen 1854, some Germans came in the first years to study there. Once in the Netherlands, they did not want to return to Germany. They stayed in the Netherlands so serve Dutch churches.

For this reason and because it became too expensive for the German students to study in the Netherlands, new ministers were trained at local parsonages e.g. at Wilsum, Veldhausen or Emden. When the need for new ministers in the OCR arose in 1800, the ORC decided to start a theological school at Veldhausen in the County of Bentheim. At least sixteen students were trained at local parsonages between 1860 and 1880.¹¹

The German Oldreformed School moved later to Emden and existed till 1923, when the ORC temporarily became a part of the Gereformeerde Kerken in the Netherlands, the GKN - a “provisional”

¹¹ Beuker, Umkehr und Erneuerung, 309.

connection that still exists today. Three of the 68 members of the General Synod of the GKN come from the ORC.¹²

Bridges to the U.S.

Historian Herbert Brinks calculated that the ORC “lost a large percentage of its ministers to emigration. Thirty percent of the pastorate from Ostfriesland and fifteen percent from Bentheim were drawn to the New World.”¹³ He gives the names of eleven ministers emigrating between 1866 and 1912. To illustrate the drain on the ORC, a description of the situation in Uelsen may suffice. In 1881 J.H. Vos left. His three successors followed him: W.R. Smidt in 1882, H. Potgeter in 1885 and J.H. Schulz in 1892. This means that in the decade between 1881 and 1892, four of the eight ministers who served the church at Uelsen since 1848 left for the US..¹⁴

The ministers were held responsible by the local government and the police for unrest and trouble. Even in 1884 the windows of the Oldreformed Henricus Beuker parsonage in Emlichheim were smashed by people in protest.¹⁵ Also personal frustration might have stimulated their departure. Their congregations hardly increased. All of the first ministers have worked with a missionary zeal. As their work did not show the results they expected, a rapidly growing ORC, they started again with the same zeal in the U.S.. It was a downwards spiral: ministers left their congregations and many members followed them, weakening the congregations, which were afterwards less able, to support a new minister.

Herbert Brinks discovered: “Of the fourteen German ministers who served the ORC in Ostfriesland between 1854 and 1900, ten received calls from the Ostfrisian-Americans, and seven responded favorably.”¹⁶ Brinks continues: “Emigration affected the Neermoor congregation with exceptional force as more than a third of that church’s parishioners had gone to North America by the 1880s. This loss crippled the church to such an extent that it could no longer support a pastor... Neermoor’s first pastor, Nicholas M. Steffens, left East Friesland in 1872 and became an important leader in the RCA, while the ministers, Klaas B. Weiland, John Plescher, Herman Potgeter, Gerrit K. Hemkes and Frederick Schuurmann formed a virtual procession leading from the German border to the CRC.”¹⁷

¹² Till 1958 there were even four delegates from the ORC.

¹³ Brinks, *Ostfrisians*, 22f

¹⁴ See my book *Gemeinde unterwegs... Die Evangelisch-altreformierte Kirchengemeinde Uelsen seit 1838* Bad Bentheim 1984, special the pages 53 – 60.

¹⁵ Beuker, *Abgeschiedenes*, 178, 185

¹⁶ Brinks, *Ostfrisians*, 29.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* The mentioned elders and deacons of the year 1845 from Hoogstede and Emlichheim were from Emlichheim: Steven Lucas (1793-1863) and Jannes (Hendrik?) Rutgers (1806-1856) as elders, Albert Poppe (1794-1884) and Gerrit Bouws (1810-1851) as deacons. From Hoogstede came Geert Zaalmlink and Lambert Tinholt (1806-1849) as elders, Jan Steffen and Hindrik Nakken as deacons. All of them except Jan Steffen emigrated in 1847. Maybe Steffens followed in 1865. (See my article “Blick in die Geschichte der Evangelisch-

**In the next part you will find the following uncorrected text of my speech.
In the printed book, mentioned at the top, the text is different. GJB April 27, 2001**

4. The County of Bentheim as a center of the ORC and the coming CRC

Numbers and times of emigrations

Already in 1880 there were about 700 Oldreformed living in the five ORC churches at Eastfriesland. This number kept pretty much the same till today. In the year 2000 there will be little more than 1000 members of the ORC in these five churches. There was no growth, because the young people of Eastfriesland often could not get work over there. They went all over Germany – where they became members of different churches. There was and is no ORC in Germany except in Eastfriesland and the County of Bentheim.

In this county the ORC grew pretty much. In 1880 here were about 1650 members in five local churches. 1920 there were more than 2000 members, 1960 there were more than 4000 and in the year 2000 there will be nearly 6000 in eight local congregations.¹⁸

The center of the ORC lied and lies still today in the County of Bentheim. One can find exact numbers of inhabitants and emigrants for this county through the years. In the fourteen years between 1832 and 1846 in the average less than ten persons a year left the County of Bentheim for the U.S.. In the two years 1847 and 1848 there were 224 persons! In the next fourteen years 1849 to 1863 there was an average of about 27 persons a year. Only in the five years 1864 to 1869 there were 611 persons. 1870 to 1879 there was an average of 26 and in the five years 1880 to 1884 there were another 767 persons. This means in these five years an average of more than 150 persons a year.¹⁹ The total population of the county of Bentheim in 1880 was 30996 people.²⁰ An average 0,47% of the population left in 1847. But there have been villages like Tinholt, where 20% left, or Kalle or Hoogstede where about 5% left.²¹ The average in the Netherlands for 1847 was 0.17%, the province of Zeeland had the highest

altreformierten Gemeinde Hoogstede 1845-1850, 01.05.1953-10.05.1993“ in *Gemeindeverzeichniss* (privately printed 1993),29).

If one looks at a list of the first consistory members of the Graafschap CRC, founded in 1857, he finds some of these names appearing again. There were two Lucases in the consistory at that time; Jannes Rutgers also belonged to it. More and more emigrated members of the county of Bentheim set the tone of the consistory of Graafschap. In 1902 all of the elders of Graafschap Church except one were born and raised in the german county of Bentheim. Only one elder and two deacons were dutch.¹⁷ So 45 years after the founding of the ruling body of Graafschap Church, more than 75 percent of the members were born in Germany.

¹⁸ Numbers from the Yearbooks of the GKN and earlier churches.

¹⁹ Swenna Harger and Loren Lemmen, The county of Bentheim and her emigrants to North America. This book war printed in 1990 and was reprinted four times. A German copy came out in 1996 (ISBN 3-922428-42-8).

²⁰ Volkszählung 1880. Records in the Staatsarchiv Osnabrück.

²¹ P.R.D. Stokvis, De Nederlandse trek naar Amerika 1846-1847, Leiden 1977,5 gives the numbers for the dutch provinces.

rate with 0.6 %, Gelderland had 0.4% Overijssel had 0.3% and Drenthe had 0.27%. All the other provinces are lower. This means that in 1847 the county of Bentheim relative to its populations was left by nearly as many people as left Zeeland and nearly two times as many as left Overijssel or Drenthe.²² Zwenna Harger²³ has listed nearly 3197 names of people emigrating to the US from the county of Bentheim between 1832 and 1978. This is more than ten percent of the above mentioned total population from 1880. Especially 1864 to 1869 two percent of the population emigrated to the US and 1880 to 1884 even 2 ½ percent.

Of these 3197 people mentioned 2034 went to Michigan. There are 814 people, we do not know, to which place or state they emigrated. Most of them will have gone to Michigan too, because you find back many of their names in Michigan. 155 went to Ohio, 55 to Canada, 34 to Illinois, 20 to Kansas, 16 to Iowa, 14 to New York. The rest of 49 people came to different places.

These mentioned 3197 people from the county of Bentheim were mostly reformed or oldreformed. There are no special statistics at their confession. The county was reformed for about 74 percent and oldreformed for about 6 percent in 1880.²⁴ One can be sure in 1847 till 1850 about halve of the emigrants were oldreformed. 1851 till 1853 mostly catholic people from the catholic village Wietmarschen emigrated. They did not come to Michigan. 1854 till 1857 again more and more Oldreformed are in between the emigrants, about one third.

Different people did not dare until 1880 to become oldreformed in the county of Bentheim. They were afraid of punishment and social decline. But they became oldreformed pretty soon in the US after their emigration and after the founding of the CRC in 1857. In all the following years the oldreformed emigrants will be about 5%, their normal part of the population of the county of Bentheim.

Reformed and Oldreformed people settled down in Michigan next to each other. There were no hate or problems. They understood each other as believers and Christians. 1847 to 1857 they were able to belong to one church. They helped each other were they could.

The first ordained ORC ministers did emigrate not from the county of Bentheim but from Eastfriesland. It was not until 1866. Than Rev. J.B. de Beer left Emden, 1868 Rev. K.B. Weiland left Emden, 1872 N.M. Steffens came from Neermoor and 1877 G.K. Hemkes from Bunde.²⁵ Nearly half of the Eastfriesian oldreformed ministers went to America, the other half mostly went back to the Netherlands. These ministers had had no connections with Albertus van Raalte or Hendrik de Cock. Both of them were gone for these ministers too early. The one emigrated in 1847, the other died in 1842.

²² Stokvis gives not percent numbers the tenth part of a percent!

²³ Swenna Harger 1990,88-143.

²⁴ 17% were catholics and 3% lutherans in 1880.

²⁵ In later years he became a professor at Calvin Seminary. Born in the county of Bentheim and emigrating as ordained ministers were Jan Hindrik Vos 1881 from Uelsen, Jan Plescher 1885 from Neermoor, Hermann J. Potgeter 1889 from Neermoor, Jan Hindrik Schultz 1892 from Uelsen, Jan Robbert 1893 from the Netherlands, Henricus Beuker 1893 also from the Netherlands and Frederik Schüürmann coming 1912 from Campen.

The story of the oldreformed Eastfriesians is told already by Herbert Brinks in his article in the book "Perspectives on the Christian Reformed Church", Grand Rapids 1983. Brinks writes at "Ostfriesians in two worlds". The Eastfriesian farmers were used to good soil for farming. They never would think about to be a farmer at Michigan sandy grounds. The Michigan soil was too poor for their understanding.

The people of the county of Bentheim are used to very poor soil. It is better in Michigan than in the Old country. They were happy in their village Graafschap next to Holland, Michigan. They had meat and white pretty bread as much as they wanted, after the bad starting years were gone. They felt rich and in comparison with the people at the farms in the northern part of the county of Bentheim in Germany they were. The circumstances were much poorer in the northern part of this county than in the southern part. The early contacts to Van Raalte have encouraged the emigrations in the northern part of the county and the still earlier contacts to Hendrik de Cock, who died already 1842 have slowed down the emigration nearly to zero in the ORC of Bentheim, the only one in the southern part of the county.

In earlier days in the county of Bentheim only members of the ORC and no preacher went to the US. Till 1848 there were even no ordained ministers at all in the ORC. The preaching members thought, it would never be possible because of the law to become a regular ordained ORC minister in Germany. There was no future for them. Thus many oldreformed people emigrated already in 1847 and 1848 and others later on like the Broene family from Höcklenkamp near Uelsen in 1866. Two Broene sons studied in the US and became ministers in the CRC.

No (at that time) laypreacher accompanied their flock. Harm Hindrik Schoemaker from Haftenkamp, Harm Hindrik Broene from Höcklenkamp and other preachers did not emigrate. They saw their task in the Old Country.

In 1866 the kingdom of Hannover became part of Prussia. In this political struggle you can see many more people leaving the county of Bentheim than normal. Between 1864 and 1869 more than 600 people left for the US.

It is not clear to me, why so many people left the county of Bentheim between 1880 and 1884. They must have had special reasons. Never earlier and never later on so many people emigrated in such a short time from the county of Bentheim. Nearly all of them were reformed. In 1882 the Reformed Church of the county of Bentheim became part of a much larger Reformed Church in Northwestgermany. Was this a reason? Were the people afraid of the greater church unit? There was at least also an unecumenical stream in the Reformed Church in the county, which wanted to stand also in the future on its own and did not appreciate the larger church.

5. The ORC Ministers as Pillars of the CRC

Of all the ministers emigrating from the ORC, and the ones studying for minister in the US, (together there must be about thirty of them,) only one became a minister of the RCA, N.M. Steffens. All the

others went directly to the CRC, founded in 1857. The first twenty years 1847 to 1866 no ordained ministers of Bentheim or Eastfrisia emigrated at all.

Between 1847 and 1900 about 66 ministers of the Christelijke Afscheidene Kerk and the Doleerende Kerken went to the U.S.. Half of them became Christian Reformed, the other half became Reformed (RCA). At least ten of the 66 had been ministers in the county of Bentheim and in East Friesland, and all of them, except one, became ministers in the CRC.²⁶ This means, the German direction was different. Did they have theological reasons or were it personal reasons to enter the CRC? Was it probably because everyone knew everyone and was related to everyone?

Nickolaas Martin Steffens (1839 – 1912) to the RCA

The one mentioned oldreformed exception was Nickolas Martin Steffens (1839-1912). Steffens was very intelligent. But he could not endure, to be in the same church for a long time. My “Separated Striving for Unity” (a dissertation on Henricus Beuker written in 1996 in German) contains some notes on him.²⁷ He was born in Emden and became a teacher at a girl’s High School in Oldenburg at about age 17. A few years later he worked as a missionary for the Free Church of Schottland among the Jews of Istanbul. While there he married a Scottish girl. He then came back to his native town and became a student at Kampen, apparently for six months or a year. Steffens sustained a very good exam at Kampen in the Netherlands and became a minister first at Neermoor in Eastfriesland, than at Veldhausen, and finally in his native city of Emden. He wrote sermons, papers and brochures. He wrote for example in the Dutch language about “the good right of the Old Reformed Church”. He wrote for friends and for enemies. No one before had done so much for the Old Reformed. He wrote letters to the government, indicating that he no longer wanted to pay church taxes for the state church. He encouraged people to marry in the ORC churches instead of in the state church. He went with his church members to court, and appeared at trials before judges. He fought for legal rights which his parishioners often had not enjoyed before.

He left for the US in 1872. He served several churches in the US, and became a professor at 1884 at Western Theological Seminary²⁸ where he remained until 1895, and again 1903 till his death in 1912. In between he taught at the Presbyterian Theological Seminary in Dubuque. I would like to have someone write a biography or doctoral thesis on him. Such a study would be helpful toward a fuller understanding of the separated churches in Germany, the Netherlands, Scotland and the US. Steffens widened the view of the ORC. His connections with Breslau or Görlitz or other cities at Silesia, now lying behind the German–Polish Boarder made possible many good contacts from East to West and West to East, from the ORC to the Free Churches in Silesia. These contacts are there still today.

²⁶ Beuker 1996,294.

²⁷ Beuker 1996,13 + 314.

²⁸ Wynand Wichers, A Century of Hope 1866 1966, Grand Rapids 1968, 112. 1887 till 1891 Steffens daughter Fannie A. Steffens (Gleysteen) was the only girlstudent at Hope College (Wichers 1968,90).

Steffens taught the theological students at Veldhausen and Emden between 1865 and 1872. You can see him next to Jan Bavinck as the founder of the Theological School first at Veldhausen and later at Emden. Steffens did not stay long enough to be a real help for the ORC. He spoke English, France, German, Dutch, and Italian fluently. He could teach also the Latin, Greek and Hebrew languages. His son also became a minister at the Reformed Church of America.

After emigrating Steffens himself first was a minister at Silver Creek in Illionois. In 1875 he became a Presbyterian minister in New York, in 1878 a Reformed minister in Zeeland, Michigan, and 1883 in Holland, Michigan. In the US he wanted to incorporate the immigrants of the separated churches in the Netherlands into the RCA. He wanted to be a good Calvinist. He did this so well, that he became a very lonely man. In 1886 the University of Jena in Germany made him doctor honoris causa.²⁹ It would have been a great help for the ORC, if he not would have gone for the US. And for him too it might have been good if he had not done so. He never really felt at home in the new country. He always had a dream. He always wanted to come back. But he could not; times were too poor.

Calvin Seminary professors

Around 1900 many CRC ministers had come out of the Old Reformed Church.³⁰ One of the latest sons of the ORC living and working in the CRC was Gordon Spykman (1926 – 1993).

The Theological School at Grand Rapids, today Calvin Seminary, was founded in 1876. Rev. G.E. Boer was the first minister teaching students full-time in Grand Rapdis. But already in earlier times, the church of Graafschap and her minister D.J. van der Werp taught the students. Van der Werp started teaching in 1865 at Graafschap and went on at Muskegon in 1872.³¹ In 1869 he was the only pastor teaching the students. He often was exempt from housevisiting because of the demands of his teaching. Besides this he had his congregation and he also had to write the paper “De Wachter”.³² He was succeeded in 1876 by Rev. G.E. Boer. One year earlier, in 1875 and also already in 1873, the CRC synod had called Jan Bavinck, earlier (1848-1853) minister of the northern part of the county of Bentheim and at that time minister at Kampen in the Netherlands.³³ He declined.

A few years later, in 1882, a student, son of another minister from the county of Bentheim, Gerhardus Vos (1862-1949), was asked to be the second teacher at the school at Grand Rapids. He worked there 1882 and 1883 and then resigned, because he wanted to study further himself. The Rev. G.K. Hemkes, once again a former minister of the ORC in Bunde, in East Frisia, took his place.³⁴ Hemkes began

²⁹ Jürgen Hoogstraat, *Von Ostfriesland nach Amerika*, Norden 1990,126-129 gives the story of Steffens.

³⁰ Wayne Brouwer is writing: „This Old Reformed Church in Germany ... has provided our denomination with no less than thirty pastors, many of whom became leaders and teachers of stature among us. (The German element in the CRC in: *The Banner*, April 11, 1980, 13).

³¹ Beets 1918,147-151

³² In 1880 a same kind of Theological School startet at Veldhausen, later at Emden at the ORC. Rev. Johannes Jäger taught all on its own for about 40 years till 1920 all of the coming ministers of the ORC. At least ten of his students became a minister at the CRC in the US.

³³ In 1883 Henricus Beuker declined the call of the School, the same did N.M. Steffens in 192 and D.K. Wielenga from Kampen.(Beuker 1996,300).

³⁴ G.K. Hemkes (1838-1920), Leek 1866, Stadsmusselkanaal 1874, Bunde 1874, to the US 1877. G.K. Hemkes Just to mention in passing: G.K. Hemkes and the erlier mentioned W.R. Smidt came in opposition to each other in the question of baptizing children. They wrote different brochures around 1913, Hemkes had written before

teaching some of his lessons in the German language in Grand Rapids in 1886.³⁵ In 1888 Dr. Geerhardus Vos came back. Vos's mother was a sister of Henricus Beuker³⁶, who succeeded Vos in 1894. Vos had written his doctoral thesis at the University of Straßburg in 1888³⁷. He had come to America, to Grand Rapids, in 1881 with his father, the minister J.H. Vos (1826-1913), who became already in 1883 the president of the synod of the CRC.

In 1894 Beuker succeeded his nephew Geerhardus Vos and became a colleague of G.K. Hemkes at the Seminary in Grand Rapids. In addition to these two who had been ministers in Germany, one in the county of Bentheim, the other at Bunde in Eastfriesland, there was only one more teacher, G.E. Boer from the Netherlands. These seminary professors coming from Germany would have had their work cut out for them in the German congregations in Germany. Their leaving was a bloodletting, even a catastrophe for the ORC. And they did not go alone. They took with them strong believers, preachers and members of the ORC. The people who were strong and often young and courageous and a little daring too – they left. The older ones, the weak and those who were less courageous and daring stayed behind. This had a strong influence on church and congregational life back home.

Freemasonry chanced a number of positions

I suspect Henricus Beuker and Jan Hendrik Vos were the motors in changing from a connection of the Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland with the Reformed Church in America to a connection with the CRC.³⁸ Through their work, speaking and writing, leaders of the De Cock Churches in the Netherlands opened themselves for contacts to the CRC. Beets tells how these leaders took new positions against Dr. N.M. Steffens and a group, who wanted to stay in the RCA, and against those who wanted to allow freemasonry in the churches. While Abraham Kuyper still in 1892 thought and taught that members of the Lodges should be allowed to be members of the Church, for Beuker and Vos this was impossible. “Kuyper adopted a position on Masonry similar to Van Raalte's” wrote Elton J. Bruins in 1983 and Henry Zwaanstra thought the same already in 1973. They were right.³⁹

This means at this point and other points that the emigration of people like Vos and Beuker weakened the position of the old Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerk, the church of De Cock, against the Kuyper churches, the “Doleerende Kerken”. Maybe they and others emigrated in order to strengthen the CRC in the US and to make of this church a church of the Dutch secession. The CRC, like the former De

in 1886. This discussion went on in the ORC in Bentheim, where Rev. Egbert Kolthoff wrote different brochures at the baptism at that time. Earlier around 1888 the German Rev. Hermann Potgeter also informed his people at “De Doop en het Baptisme”. All of them had to fight around 1880 against baptism of adults in Eastfriesland. The Church of the Baptists and the ORC were built at the same time at Eastfriesland. Some members of the ORC of Emden became Baptists and founded the Baptist Church of Emden in 1860. J. Faber, *Afscheidings-theologen over verbond en doop* (Kamper Bijdrage XXXIII, Barneveld 1995) gives a good picture of G.E. Boer, L.J. Hulst, G.K. Hemkes, G. Vos, W.W. Heyns, H. Beuker and F.M. ten Hoor. The speech is printed in English in: Jelle Faber, *American Secession Theologians on Covenant and Baptism*, Alberta 1996.

³⁵ Beets 1918,208; Synodale Handelingen 1888,25.

³⁶ G.J. Beuker, *Abgeschiedenes Streben nach Einheit. Leben und Wirken Henricus Beukers 1834 – 1900*. Theol. Diss. Kampen 1996, 416 p.

³⁷ Beuker 1996,230+327f

³⁸ Beuker 1996, 291 + 308-310; Beets 1918,188.

³⁹ Beuker 1996,302-312 has a own chapter on the freemasonry and the connections between the churches.

Cock Church in the Netherlands, was satisfied with having only a Theological School sponsored by the churches. Abraham Kuyper's thinking was much broader and wider. He wanted and built a university to help christianize not only the church, but the whole society.

View on church(es)

Maybe Henricus Beuker emigrated also because he saw, how heavy the influence of Kuyper would be in the newly united Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland, which had been established in 1892.

Henricus Beuker had his own positions sometimes siding with Kuyper and sometimes against him.

Beuker also had his own paper, DE VRIJE KERK (The Free Church), one of the great papers of the De Cock Church. Beuker founded this monthly paper in 1875 and it was published until 1898. It was an organ of the church of 1834 (De Cock) which sometimes was against the churches of 1886 (Kuyper).⁴⁰

For Beuker and his group and for most of the people of the county of Bentheim the visible and the invisible churches were much closer together than Kuyper thought. Kuyper thought a local church should be able to be a true church, although it might live and work within a wrong system and synod. Kuyper put a heavy accent at the local churches, while the people of 1834 stressed the church as a community through the whole country. They talked about one church, De Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerk, while Kuyper talked of many churches – as the name “Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland” till today suggests.⁴¹

The Old Reformed Church became “Churches” in Kuyperian sense – and it took them about 70 years to become again the “Evangelisch-altreformierte Kirche in Niedersachsen”, the “Evangelical-Oldreformed Church in Lower Saxony.” Churches means in the German language confessions and not only different congregations.

6. The German Oldreformed identity in the U.S.

Graafschapers are an own people

As Van Raalte did, all his followers became members of the Reformed Church of America (RCA).

The union came in 1849 and it lasted until 1857. In this year some local churches founded in Michigan the CRC. There were some of the old reasons heard yet in the old country: They wanted more catechism preaching, no songs, no liberal theology. New reasons were mentioned. The freemasonry question was coming up. The people coming from the county (in German: Grafschaft; in Dutch: Graafschap!) of Bentheim and founding their own place and church at Graafschap (Michigan) stood in the frontier line. Without them probably no CRC had been founded.

They did not found one place and church together with the Dutch people. Much longer than these ones they had endured religious persecution both by government and church. Their experiences with their reformed mother church in Germany were much worse than the experiences of their Dutch neighbors.

⁴⁰ see J.C. Schaeffer, De plaats van Abraham Kuyper in „De Vrije Kerk“, Amsterdam 1997, 219 p.

⁴¹ Beuker 1996, 122-130.

Besides this, their German group was able to speak and understand Dutch without any problems. But they were related much more with each other than with the Dutch people. The Germans, better the people from the kingdom of Hanover, were a small group. They felt themselves one people. Everyone knew everyone. I guess they could not feel very well in a big RCA. The ways of decisions were far too long for them. Their leaders, their consistories and congregations had been in charge all the time – and they were now. It seemed much better to them, to separate from the big RCA. They wanted freedom – also in church live. They had longed for it such a long time. Now they did not want to loose it again, even not to a church body.

Classis Oostvriesland in the US, school at Dubuque

The ministers coming from Bentheim and Eastfriesland worked and gathered their people and all protestant emigrating Germans. A “classis” Oostvriesland was founded, and beginning on October 4, 1916, a Theological School at Dubuque taught the emigrant ministers in the German and the Dutch language. The three professors were Dr. W. Bode, Rev. J. Timmermann and Rev. D.H. Kromminga.⁴² All three have their roots in Ostfriesland. The well known names of the ministers leaving for the United States caused others to emigrate too. Henry Beets, a leading person in the CRC was a good friend of the Germans in the CRC and the ORC. Many letters were written and much information given. For a moment the two churches thought around the 1880s, it might be possible, to have one Theological School mainly for the Eastfriesians either at Emden in Germany or at Dubuque, Iowa. But it was only a thought. Nevertheless the German influence continued to increase in the CRC.⁴³ Most people of Eastfriesland did not understand Dutch so well as the people of the county of Bentheim did. Their different language was a reason for a own classis. And it was seen as a possibility to work among all Eastfriesians coming to the US. It was something like a mission station. Different American churchpapers between 1870 and 1915 came out in the German language, e.g. “Der Reformierte Bote” and others.

World War I in the US

World War One came – and suddenly nobody in America wanted to be German anymore. Some must have been glad, that “Dutch” and “Deutsch” were confused. It was hard for the German people living in America to have their sons fighting, e.g. in France against the Germans, some of whom have been their cousins in the first and second grade. Rev. Jan Robbert, for example, became mentally ill as he thought about this fact. After the First World War, being German and having German roots never again was what it had been earlier.

During War time the German language was forbidden in the US. German papers and german church live in the US never came back to the standards they had had earlier to World War One. The school at Dubuque could not really grow anymore after the War. The German heart was broken. To be a German was nothing to be proud of anymore. The Germans in the CRC kept silent in these years,

⁴² Beets 1918, 372.

⁴³ Beets, De Chr. Geref. Kerk 1918, 211f. Around 1880 the CRC had about 12.000 members, the ORC about 3.000.

when they were spoken of as Dutch people. They understood mostly the Dutch language – why shouldn't they be Dutch? It was much easier for them.

The inflation in Germany 1922/3 made contacts more difficult. The depression of 1929/30 made the connections nearly impossible. At the same time the older people, who held the connections with Germany died more and more. Young people in the US often could speak or at least understand some of their parents or even grandparents mother tongue, but they were not able, to write it. No letters came anymore across the ocean. And there was not yet a telephone. At the other hand in Germany between the World Wars in the ORC nearly nobody could speak or write English.

World War Two in the US

The second World War was not such a traumatic experience for the emigrants from Germany in the US as was the first one. There are different reasons. Most of them were in the US in second, third or even fourth generation. There was no more a strong connection with the motherland. People had settled down and had found their place and work in the American society. They felt no more as German or Dutch but as Americans. And the ones who emigrated in the 1920s did not have to become American soldiers against Germany.

7. A bridge back home

In the 1840s for one local congregation there was a bad time. In the county of Bentheim the church of Hoogstede had to be closed, because nearly all of her members had emigrated. But it was reestablished in 1953.

In the 1870s in Eastfriesland about half of the members of the little church of Neermoor left again the ORC. Some became again reformed as they were earlier, others and especially different ministers emigrated. This church could not pay any longer its own minister. But it survived – although it still today has only about seventy members.

The ORC was weakened, but it did not bleed out by the emigration. Her position in the German community got better with the years. Since 1848 the ORC could ordain own ministers, in the 1880s even an own Theological School was founded, which existed till 1923. To get the full rights of a public church lasted for the ORC till 1951. In this year she became a “corporation of public right”, recognized by the government of the state Lower Saxony.

The contacts to the US had broken down pretty much during World War II. After the War they were revitalized – but they did not become very important anymore – except for the years 1947 to 1955.

New troubles and new possibilities in Germany

The ORC in Germany till 1951 was not recognized as an official church by her own government. This meant, the church had no public rights. Her building had to be built by private people. The taxes for private people were much higher than for a recognized church. Oldreformed people were not allowed to have or ring own bells in their churches. No pillar was allowed at a ORC till 1880. It was nearly

impossible for oldreformed persons to become a government official or employee. They still were the lower class in the community, mostly farmers and workers.

The ORC was suspicious to the government of Nazigermany in the 1930s. The Nazis could not understand and control the sermons in the ORC. Most of them were in the Dutch language. Dutch psalms were sung. In 1936 the Dutch language was forbidden by the government in the ORC. Till that time many sermons and songs were in Dutch.

There have been even plans, to deport all the members of the ORC far to the East. In Nazigermany they were a unsafe people at the Dutch boarder with all their connections to the Netherlands.

Already in the beginning of 1933 the ORC had given a “Kundgebung”, a “Declaration of the situation of the church in the presence”⁴⁴. It stated very clear as did also the Declaration of Barmen in may 1934: The church has to obey only Jesus Christ as her Lord.

World War Two came with many restrictions and sorrows for the people in Germany. Who could think of connections with America? Live was unsafe, difficult and poor. To be a Christian and to say no to the regime of Hitler was life-threatening. Young men and adults were forced to be a soldier. Many were wounded, died or were listed as missing. Live was very dark and difficult.

After World War Two in Germany

The coming of first polish and then American soldiers in Northwestgermany was a liberation. Now the people of the ORC and most church people in Germany had a good time. The Christian believe was a strong hold after the War. The churches were crowded with people and newly organized. Now it was good to know people in the US or in the Netherlands. Care packages were sent.

People who emigrated in poor circumstances after the First World War now were a great help. Fred Oldemulder for example from Graafschap, Michigan had emigrated in 1924 with several others from Emlichheim in the county of Bentheim. Now in 1945, 1946 he organized hundreds of packages for known and unknown people in the county.

Now the connections of the ORC with the Netherlands and the US were helpful to get the official recognition of the new German Government in 1951. It had last for more than hundred years to get it. In these years after World War Two the earlier emigrations to the US were a blessing to the ORC. At the other hand again people were emigrating because live in Germany was so poor in these years. People saw and had no future. The new immigrants renewed the connections with the Old Country.

Ecumenical contacts in Germany

At the same time the contacts of the ORC in Germany to other churches and institutions were getting better. The Confessing Church (Bekennende Kirche) during the war had brought people together from different churches and backgrounds. Fighting against Nazi terrorism unified people. The ecumenical movement, the founding of the Reformed Ecumenical Council and of the World Council of Churches both in 1948 at Amsterdam widened the view of European and American Christians.

⁴⁴ Completely printed in Beuker 1988,470-476

For the ORC it took till the 1960s. Then the ORC also jumped in. Oldreformed ministers preached in reformed churches and the other way round. Once a year reformed and oldreformed held a consistory meeting together. Delegates were sent to each others synods and connections deepened. The Reformed and ORC work together very well today. They have different confessions, but the same songbook, the same bible and pretty much the same structures.

New contacts to the US

When times got better after World War Two new contacts were built up. The first people emigrating after the War thought, they never would see their home country again. They went still by ship. In Germany it was 1948 the time of a second currency reform. It meant everybody started with nothing but forty German Marks. Forty, fifty years later some of these immigrants have been back five, ten or even fifteen times by airplane. All of the families in Germany and the US possess a telephone, more and more work with the Internet.

Tourists from the US seek their roots in Germany and the Netherlands. European tourists want to see America – and they are happy to find the names of their own families back in the new world. As tourists there are many contacts.

Churches go their own ways

As churches today in 1999 there are very few or no contacts at all between the ORC and the CRC. The problems in both churches are similar. But American way of live is much different from the German. At the other hand, every year a German Interim group from Calvin College is visiting my local church at Hoogstede for some days, before the group is going all through Germany. People from the ORC sometimes ask me, whether I could organize a new tour for tourists to the US. I did this three times between 1988 and 1996. The Holland Christian High School is coming this spring with a big choir for a European Tour. Mostly they are singing in the county of Bentheim and in some places in the Netherlands. A German Gymnasium at Neuenhaus is planning to exchange students with the descendants of the immigrants in Holland and Grand Rapids, Michigan. A Newspaper in the county is organizing trips for two or three weeks to the US. They stay for some days also at Holland, Michigan. The times of Internet, modern media and traffic make a village of the world.

More information at Osnabrück

A good address for more information at the immigration of the county of Bentheim is the University of Osnabrück. At this university there is a “Institut für Migrationsforschung und Interkulturelle Studien (IMIS)”. It works together with ERCOMER European Research Center on Migration and Ethnic Relations, University of Utrecht, Netherlands, IMES Institute for Migration and Ethnic Studies, University of Amsterdam, Netherlands, and many other Research Centers in Sweden, France, Australia, England, Germany, Italy and Poland.

The internet address is: <http://www.imis.uni-osnabrueck.de>. The post address:

Universität Osnabrück; IMIS Fachbereich 2, Neuer Graben 19/21, D-49069 Osnabrück.

Hoogstede, den 3./19. März 1999

Pastor Dr. Gerrit Jan Beuker