

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 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 fourteen 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 United States count another 3,500 souls.ⁱⁱ

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 plights 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.ⁱⁱⁱ

The five congregations in Eastfriesland were founded between 1854 and 1862, mainly by ministers from the seceded 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 in either Bentheim and the Netherlands.

The County of Bentheim was till 1945 except several villages nearly completely reformed. Reformed thoughts and beliefs have old roots over here. It is in geographic and religious way a pretty much closed area, surrounded either by Catholics or by marshland, nobody could come through. For all churches still today it seems to be a kind of nature reserve of God.

In Eastfriesland Lutherans and Reformed are mixed up. One village may be totally Lutheran, the next one totally Reformed. About three quarter of the population is Lutheran, less than one quarter is Reformed. 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 laborer were much bigger than in the County of Bentheim.

Today there are two Reformed Churches in Northwest Germany, the Reformed Church (Synod of Reformed Churches in Bavaria and Northwest Germany) and the Oldreformed. The first one has about 200.000 members, the later 7000. The first one is one of 24 regional churches building together the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD). Every state in the Federal Republic of Germany has at least one regional church, some have even more. These regional churches get most of their taxes through government help. 10% of the tax a person has to pay for the government is the tax for the churches. The second one is no member of the EKD.

There are few and only very small Freechurches in Germany. The largest ones like the Baptists have about 100.000 members at a population of 81 million people. That means Freechurches are nearly unknown in Germany. The Oldreformed Church is a Freechurch. Free of every government involvement, living from the freely given money of her members with no bishops or superintendents or whatever. The "highest" Oldreformed assembly is the consistory, sending its delegates to classis or synods. An average local Freechurch in Germany will have about 100 to 500 members and one minister. An average regional (state) church has about 3000 members and also one minister. Church life and attendance is much more active in the free than in the state churches. The free churches often have some pietistic features, the Oldreformed at least has had them. The Oldreformed Church has the three forms of unity as her confession, the Reformed only the Heidelberg Catechism. The

Oldreformed is formed e.g. by article 28 and 29 of the Dutch Confession of Faith at the true and the false church. The Reformed Church never had these discussions.

In theology today there is nearly no difference between Reformed and Oldreformed. There have been big problems, when the orthodox Oldreformed came into existence against the at that time very liberal and modern Reformed Church. Today both have changed and assimilated.

The Oldreformed are still today more a unity and they are very active in their church life. Most of them attend a church every Sunday, in reformed churches only ten percent will come every Sunday, in the average in Germany less than five percent go this often.

The differences between both churches today lay in the structures and the different way of being a church. The small one has many choirs, circles and all kinds of different clubs working all on their own, and catechism classes for seven to nine years. The big Reformed Church will always ask her minister. It is pretty much minister centered. Without a minister not much will happen in this church. And he will have to care for so many members, for three times or more as many as his Oldreformed colleague. He will have only two or three years catechism class and teach his students the same learning matter his Oldreformed brother will teach in his church. Oldreformed catechism classes will be given for six to nine years before once a year a group of young people will make confession of faith in front of the congregation.

Reformed and Oldreformed work together very well since about ten or twenty years. They come closer and closer together. But to come so far, they had to go a long way. We look back:

Persecution

Freedom of religion came in the Kingdom of Hannover only gradually after 1847. Till 1847 the law forbade the citizens to leave the official church and to found an independent one. Up till 1866, when the Kingdom of Hannover 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. Since 1873 marriage and birth records were written by the local government and not anymore by the churches. Even till 1873 every new born 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 old reformed congregations had to pay taxes for the local Reformed Church even after 1900.

The severe persecutions by church and government made many Oldreformed people, families and even nearly complete congregations emigrate to the US. Jan Berend Sundag, one of the leaders and later minister of the ORC was imprisoned 28 times mostly between 1838 and 1845. He was in jail between some days and four weeks for preaching the gospel.^{iv} Others like Schoemaker, Diek, Broene, Huisken and Oelerink too were imprisoned for the same reason.^v The financial punishment was doubled every time for everyone who was caught by the policemen at a forbidden church service. Some people lost many possessions for attending these services.^{vi} Services were broken up by armed policemen.^{vii} 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 the church of Hoogstede emigrated to the United States about 25 of the 250 members. Among them were large families and singles, children and adults. A hundred years earlier all but one of the founding consistory members of the two ORC congregations in Hoogstede and Emlichheim had emigrated. 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 from Emlichheim and nearly twenty from Hoogstede.^{viii} It was impossible at that time in 1845 to institute a church outside the official church in the Kingdom of Hannover without being imprisoned. The ORC of Hoogstede ceased its existence soon in 1850 because most of the members had gone to the US. It was not re-established until 1953.

The church of Emlichheim had to elect new elders and deacons in 1847 because the consistory had left for America.^{ix} In the next 35 years, about twenty percent of the members of the ORC of Emlichheim followed them. These more than one hundred members mostly became a part of the Graafschap Christian Reformed Church, which was founded in 1857. I suspect that among them there are many more than the four percent who were registered as having religious reasons for their departure, while for over ninety percent economic motives were listed.^x 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.

Links with the Netherlands

The first ORC started in Uelsen January 1st, 1838. The Reverend Albertus van Raalte from Ommen in the Netherlands was invited to install the elders and deacons of the first ORC Uelsen consistory. 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 found the new ORC. Other places followed in the years 1845, 1848, 1849, 1887, 1911 and 1953. Because of the persecutions the two local consistories of the German churches of Hoogstede and Emlichheim were instituted in the Dutch neighboring city of Coevorden in 1845. Since 1848 the first few German Oldreformed churches and their ministers founded the new churches. The spread of the independent Oldreformed churches was no policy from the seceded churches in the Netherlands, but a rather familiar activity. Since a century and a half Germans in the border region had spoken the Dutch language and called Dutch ministers. Many of these ministers came from the university of Groningen. Dutch and Germans in the borderland shared a common culture.

The news about the Secession from the Hervormde Kerk in the Netherlands in 1834 spread in Germany, but did not cause the German ORC. Nevertheless, 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, while Jan Bavink had completed his study from 1845-1848 at Hoogeveen. The 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 in 1854, some Germans came to study there. Once in the Netherlands, they did not want to return to Germany. They stayed in the Netherlands to serve Dutch churches.

For this reason and because it became too expensive for German students to study in the Netherlands and when the need for new ministers in the ORC rose in 1880, the ORC decided to start a theological school at Veldhausen in the County of Bentheim. Besides the few German students at Kampen there have been theological students in the County of Bentheim between 1848 and 1880 studying at the parsonages of Wilsum and Veldhausen. Only at Veldhausen there were at least 16 students between 1860 and 1880.^{xi} The German Oldreformed Theological School moved later to Emden and existed till 1923. That year, 1923, the ORC temporarily became a part of the Gereformeerde Kerken in the Netherlands, the GKN. And this "provisional" connection still exists today, after more than 75 years. Three of the 68 members of the General Synod of the GKN come from the ORC. ^{xii}

Bridges to the US

Historian Herbert Brinks calculated that the ORC: "... lost a large percentage of its ministers to emigration. Thirty percent of the pastorate from Ostfriesland and 15 percent from Bentheim were drawn to the New World."^{xiii} He gives the names of eleven ministers emigrating between 1866 and 1912. To illustrate the drain of the ORC, 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 had left for the US.^{xiv} The ministers were held responsible by the local government and the police for unrest. Police, local government and the local reformed church in 1882 in Emlichheim tried to prevent the building of a Oldreformed church. Even 1884 windows of the parsonage of Henricus Beuker in Emlichheim were broken by people, who did not want to have an oldreformed minister at this place. ^{xv} Also personal frustration might have stimulated their departure. Their congregations hardly increased. They decided to start over again with the same zeal in the US. It seems to me like a closed circle: ministers left their congregations and emigrated. Since many members of their congregations followed them, the congregations became weaker and less capable of supporting their minister. Rev. J. Plescher and H. Potgeter left Neermoor for the US in 1885 and 1889 too for financial reasons. Other congregations also were pretty small and poor. But of course a

minister never will write or tell somebody that this is a reason to leave for another church. Many must have been frustrated living and working in poor circumstances.

The situation in the US proved to be too tempting. Herbert Brinks discovered that ten out of the fourteen German ministers who served the ORC in Ostfriesland between 1854 and 1900 received calls from the Ostfrisian-Americans, and seven accepted the call.^{xvi} Brinks goes on: "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."^{xvii}

The before 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 Zaalmink and Lambert Tinholt (1806-1849) as elders, Jan Steffen and Hindrik Nakken as deacons.^{xviii} All of them except Jan Steffen emigrated in 1847. Maybe Steffens followed in 1865.

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.^{xix} So 45 years after the founding of the ruling body of Graafschap Church, more than 75 percent of the members were born in Germany.

The lack of job opportunities caused a demographic trend which froze the growth of the churches in Eastfriesland at about 700, which was the level reached in 1880. About five percent of the Eastfriesians emigrated only between 1859 and 1871 to the US.^{xx} In Bentheim the ORC increased much more from 1650 members in five churches in 1880 to 2000 members in 1920, 4000 in 1960 and an expected 5850 in eight congregations by the year 2000.^{xxi} These figures makes Bentheim the center of the ORC.

The emigration movement to the US from Bentheim took off in the years 1847 and 1848 when 224 people left, against an average of less than ten people in the previous decade. This spur melted down to an average of 27 persons a year from 1849-1863, while it increased again to 611 people in the five years between 1864 and 1869. The next wave started in 1880 till 1884 when an average of more than 150 people a year departed.^{xxii} The total population of the County of Bentheim in 1880 was 30996 people.^{xxiii} 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. This means that in 1847 the County of Bentheim had an emigration rate almost as high as the provinces with the highest rates in the Netherlands: Zeeland (0.6 percent), Overijssel (0.3%) or Drenthe (0.27%).^{xxiv} Zwenna Harger has listed 3197 names of people emigrating to the US from the County of Bentheim between 1832 and 1978. Especially the two highs of 1864 to 1869 when two percent of the population emigrated to the US and 1880 to 1884 when an unprecedented 2.5 percent left, stand out.^{xxv}

Of these 3197 people 2034 went to Michigan. 155 went to Ohio, 55 to Canada, 34 to Illinois, 20 to Kansas, 16 to Iowa, 14 to New York. The rest went to other or unidentified places. An estimated 50 percent of these emigrants from the County of Bentheim were Oldreformed in the years between 1847 and 1850. The following years 1851 till 1853 mostly Roman Catholic inhabitants from the village Wietmarschen emigrated. They did not come to Michigan. In the next years, 1854 till 1857 about one third of the emigrants belonged to the ORC.

Though social degradation and perhaps legal punishments scared people in Germany to join the ORC, in 1880 to become Oldreformed in the County of Bentheim, these obstacles were not present in the U.S. Therefore the Oldreformed congregations in the U.S. increased more than the ORC in the County of Bentheim.

Reformed and oldreformed people coming both from the County of Bentheim settled down in Michigan next to each other. From 1847 to 1857 they were able to belong to one church.^{xxvi} 1857 the CRC was founded at Graafschap, Noordoos, Grand Rapids and Polkton, places in Michigan.^{xxvii}

Despite the mass of emigrants from Bentheim, the first ordained ORC ministers did not emigrate from the County of Bentheim but from Eastfriesland. The first minister to emigrate, was J.B. de Beer who left Emden in 1866, in 1868 followed by K.B. Weiland also from Emden; in, 1872 N.M. Steffens left Neermoor and in 1877 G.K. Hemkes Bunde.^{xxviii} 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.

Nearly half of the Eastfriesian oldreformed ministers went to America, the other half mostly went back to the Netherlands. Except Reverend L. Stroeven, who was in Bunde 1881 till 1919 no Oldreformed minister in the past century was longer than ten years in Eastfriesland. Most of them even were less than five years. Again and again young theological students started their career as a minister in Eastfriesland and pretty soon moved on.

The Eastfriesian farmers were used to good soil for farming. They would never think to farm at Michigan sandy grounds. For this reason they never thought about settling down in Michigan. They went to Minnesota and elsewhere. The places Bunde and Emden were founded in Minnesota in 1887 and 1890 named after cities in Eastfriesland. Other Eastfriesian people emigrated to Iowa.^{xxix}

The people of the County of Bentheim are used to very poor soil. The sand dunes of Michigan were better than the soil of the Old country. The village Graafschap a few miles west of Holland, Michigan, became their haven in the new world. They had meat and white bread as much as they wanted, after the first years of hardship had passed. They felt rich and in comparison with the people at the farms in the northern part of the County of Bentheim in Germany their situation improved. The circumstances were much poorer in the northern part of this County than in the southern part. The early contacts with Van Raalte might have encouraged the emigration in the northern part of the County, while the attachment to Hendrik de Cock, who died already 1842, and the more prosperous situation did not encourage departure from the only ORC congregation in the southern part of the County.

The lack of ministers in the early ORC might have motivated the early emigrants from Bentheim. The first cohort of non-ordained ORC laypreachers, such as Harm Hindrik Schoemaker from Haftenkamp and Harm Hindrik Broene from Höcklenkamp saw their task in the Old Country.

The political struggle between the Kingdom of Hannover and Prussia caused the wave of emigrants in the period between 1864 and 1869, when more than 600 people left for the US. I guess one quarter or one third of them were members of the ORC. Most were reformed. 75% to 80% of the County inhabitants belonged to the Reformed Church. So the Oldreformed people still were highly overrepresented.

It is not very 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. You can think as a main reason for the high emigration rate more at the agricultural crisis in these years causing a mass emigration in the Netherlands too.

The ORC ministers as Pillars of the CRC

Between 1847 and 1900 about 66 ministers of the Christelijke Afscheidene Kerk and the Doleerende Kerken went to the US. 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.^{xxx} 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? This is probably one reason. Another one is: The Oldreformed in the County of Bentheim had suffered much longer and more severe persecution by church and government than the Dutch people. They were clinched more to the church of the secession. They could not endure people thinking the secession in

the Netherlands had not been necessary. The letter of secession of the consistory of Graafschap, Michigan to the Classical meeting of April 8th, 1857 is telling: Graafschap does not want any hymns. They are contrary to the church order. Already in the secession in the German County of Bentheim the church order was very important. Graafschap Michigan consistory is going on: It does not want to invite openly everyone to the Lords Supper. There must be more catechism preaching, catechetical classes and house visitation. New written books have to have a consent of other denominations. All these points are known to the people of Graafschap from what had happened in their old County 1838 to 1848. "And what grieves our hearts most in all of this is that there are members among you who regard our secession in the Netherlands as not strictly necessary, or think that it was untimely" is one of the main points 1857 in Graafschap, Michigan.^{xxxix}

The only Oldreformed exception going to the RCA was Nickolas Martin Steffens (1839-1912). Steffens was a promising and very intelligent young man, who loved mobility.^{xxxix} He was born in Emden and became a teacher at a girl's High School in Oldenburg at age 17. A few years later he worked as a missionary for the Free Church of Schottland among the Jews of Istanbul. He married a Scottish girl and returned to his native town and became a student at Kampen, apparently for six months or a year. Steffens passed his exams at Kampen with honors 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 parishoners often had not enjoyed before. Steffens taught the theological students at Veldhausen and Emden between 1865 and 1872. With Jan Bavinck he is considered 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. In 1872 he left for the US to serve the Reformed Church at Silver Creek in Illinois. In 1875 he became a Presbyterian minister in New York, in 1878 a Reformed minister in Zeeland, Michigan, and 1883 in Holland, Michigan. In that town he became a professor at Western Theological Seminary in 1884.^{xxxix} With a break between 1895 and 1903 when he taught at Presbyterian Theological Seminary in Dubuque, he was affiliated with Western Theological Seminary till his death in 1912.^{xxxix} In the US he wanted to incorporate the immigrants of the seceded churches in the Netherlands into the RCA. His son also became a minister at the Reformed Church in America.

The ORC was surprisingly strong in the formation of a theological cadre for the CRC. Before the Theological School at Grand Rapids, today Calvin Seminary, was founded in 1876, the church of Graafschap and her minister D.J. van der Werp trained new pastors from 1865 on.^{xxxix} In 1873 and 1875 the CRC synod called Jan Bavinck, an ORC minister in the north of Bentheim who had moved to Kampen to instruct the students. After he had declined twice, the synod found the Rev. G.E. Boer available.^{xxxix}

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 in 1882 and 1883 and then resigned, because he wanted to pursue graduate studies. The Rev. G.K. Hemkes, once again a former minister of the ORC in Bunde, in Eastfriesland, took his place.^{xxxix} Hemkes began teaching some of his lessons in the German language in Grand Rapids in 1886.^{xxxix} In 1888 Dr. Geerhardus Vos came back after completion of his doctoral thesis at the University of Straßburg.^{xxxix} Vos's mother was a sister of Henricus Beuker^{xl}, who succeeded Vos in 1894. 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. The leading seminary professors came from Germany. Their departure was certainly a bloodletting, even a catastrophe for the ORC.^{xli} But they also weakened the "Afgescheiden" factor in the later union with the "Dolerenden". Henricus Beuker and Jan Hendrik Vos where 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.^{xlii}

Through their work and publications they smoothed with the CRC. 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 and to avoid the overwhelming presence of Abraham Kuiper.^{xliii}

The German Oldreformed Identity in the US

The Oldreformed immigrants not readily merged with their Dutch coreligionists. They had endured religious persecution both by government and church. Their experiences with their Reformed mother church in Germany was much worse than the experiences of their Dutch neighbors. Though they were able to speak and understand Dutch without any problems, their social primary contacts were with each other rather than with the Dutch. Their miniature church made them feel uncomfortable in the big RCA, where decisions were made in far-removed synods.

The ministers coming from Bentheim and Eastfriesland worked and gathered their people and other protestant German emigrants. There were not so many differences between Presbyterian, Reformed and Christian Reformed people. They worked close together. The power of the blood was stronger than church boarders were. Even belonging to different churches they felt one – as all of them came from the Old Country in Eastfriesland.

Already in 1852 the Dutch minister Adrian van Vliet founded the "Dubuque German College and Seminary" for the Presbyterian Church. 1916 260 students were enrolled mostly coming from Illinois and Iowa.^{xliiv} A Reformed classis Oostvriesland was founded in 1892 at Pleasant Prairie. They founded also a school for German teachers and ministers at German Valley, Illinois. At this place there was the oldest colony of Eastfriesian people. 1916 there were about 50 students coming from Illinois, Iowa, South Dakota and Minnesota. This so called "Pleasant Prairie Academy" belonged to the Reformed Church of America (RCA). And finally in 1916 the Eastfriesian CRC members instituted a own Theological School at Grundy Center, Iowa mainly to get German ministers in the CRC.^{xlv} The last one was the most weak one of all mentioned schools.

Many German papers came out. "Der Presbyterianer" started in 1867, the "Ostfriesische Nachrichten" in 1881, "Der Mitarbeiter" in 1890 (earlier name: "Freiheitsbote"), and "Der Reformierte Bote" in 1898. All of these papers still existed in 1916.^{xlvi}

I guess, there were no contacts between the German Reformed Church in the US and the emigrating Oldreformed people. I never heard or read about these contacts. All Oldreformed and even some Reformed people of the county of Bentheim in the US became members of the old Dutch Reformed Church. Also in Germany both of them had never had contacts to what Reformed Church in Germany ever. Till 1882 the Reformed Church of the county of Bentheim stood all on its own. Also in the Reformed Church of the County most ministers came since the Reformation from the Netherlands and the rest came from universities and Reformed Theological High Schools in Germany which were connected strongly with the Netherlands. So no one thought in the US of making contacts to German Reformed. The Eastfriesian people in Minnesota may have done. They may have some contacts. But it is difficult for me to find out, where and when and how intensive these were.

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 denominational periodicals were published for the German ORC immigrants between 1870 and 1915 in the German language, e.g. "Der Reformierte Bote" and others. For a moment the two churches, the CRC in America and the ORC in Germany 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 remained only a plan. The distances were much too big. I guess the way of life, the preaching and acting were too different. The Synod of the Oldreformed Church has called in 1873 and 1877 in vain a German Dr. H.J. Rütenick teaching in the US, to become a teacher at the Oldreformed School. He preached 1873 two times in Emden in Germany at the Oldreformed Church. The Dutch church of the secession gives her permission and promises to help with the financial side.^{xlvii} 1879 Rütenick declines finally the call.

The later founding of Dubuque has nothing to do with the closing of the Oldreformed Theological School in Emden in Eastfriesland in the 1920s. Nevertheless the German influence continued to increase in the CRC mostly through Dubuque.^{xlviii} On October 4, 1916, a CRC Theological School at Dubuque opened to train immigrant ministers in the German and the Dutch languages. The three professors were Dr. W. Bode, Rev. J. Timmermann and Rev. D.H. Kromminga.^{xlix} All three had their roots in Eastfriesland and not in the County of Bentheim. The well known names of the ministers leaving for the United States caused others to emigrate too. Henry Beets, a leading minister in the CRC was a good friend of the Germans in the CRC and the ORC.

World War I made it hard for Germans to maintain their identity. 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 Robbert¹ (1857-1922), son in law of the Calvin Seminary professor Dr. Henricus Beuker, for example, became mentally ill as he thought about this fact. The problem existed for all Americans of German descendant fighting in the War. After the First World War, being German and having German roots never again was what it had been earlier.

During the War even the use of the German language in some public places in Michigan was forbidden. Many German papers in America ceased publication and German services were discontinued. The school at Dubuque was in a different situation. The Eastfriesian churches had come to grow in Minnesota since the 1880s. A long time they thought about how to work under the Germans in their surrounding. But also 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, when they were considered 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 personal contacts between the U.S. and the homeland more difficult. The depression of 1929/30 made the connections nearly impossible. At the same time the older generation of immigrants, who held the connections with Germany alive, passed away. 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. At the other hand in Germany between the World Wars in the ORC nearly nobody could speak or write English.

World War II was not such a traumatic experience for the emigrants from Germany in the US as was the previous war. Most German-Americans belonged to the second and third generations. The identification with the motherland had weakened. And as far as I know, nobody of the new immigrants from Germany coming after World War I has served in the US army or fought against Germany in World War II.

The small Oldreformed Church in Germany (ORC) has had a great influence in the founding and history of CRC in the US. The letter of the consistory of Graafschap, Michigan from 1857 tells early reasons for leaving the RCA and building the CRC. Graafschap started with training students for the ministry. Till 1900 different teachers at the Theological School, today Calvin Seminary, had worked and lived in the ORC.

The Eastfriesians also had a strong influence. But they were not so much centered at one place in the US. And there were not that many Oldreformed Eastfriesians at all. Their influence was much less than the one from the county of Bentheim. Nevertheless the Eastfriesians lived more at their own. Most of them could not understand the Dutch language.

The upcoming Seminary at Dubuque in 1916 is to be seen in a history of Presbyterian and Reformed attempts to give German speaking people room in their churches. The identification with the German language bound and brought people closer together. There were no big oppositions between the German groups and colonies even belonging to different churches. The familiar sound of home filled the ditches that may have in between them. Of course every church had her own German paper and school to pull German talking people not only of the own but also from other churches. World War I broke all these attempts although German and Dutch elements were alive and well till after World War II.

In interbellum Germany the ORC became much more vulnerable and the Dutch connection weakened. It still lacked full public rights. Their Church buildings were private property with no public signs such as church bells, which was higher taxed. They were not allowed to have or ring own bells in their churches. It was nearly impossible for oldreformed persons to become a government official. This meant that the church was overrepresented in the lower classes, mostly farmers and laborers. During the rise of the Nazis in the 1930s the ORC was suspect because of the use of the Dutch language. In 1936 the Dutch language was forbidden by the government. There have been even plans to deport all the members of the ORC far to the East. The church itself warned against the Nazi threat. Already in the beginning of 1933 the ORC had issued a "Kundgebung", a "Declaration of the situation of the church in the presence"ⁱⁱ. It stated very clearly that the church had to obey only Jesus Christ as her Lord, as did also the Declaration of Barmen in May 1934. Contact with the American brothers was severely restricted.

New Bridges

The emigration movement of the mid-nineteenth century had serious repercussions for the small ORC churches. The congregation of Hoogstede was vacated, because nearly all of her members had emigrated. But it was not the end it was reestablished in 1953. At that time the motherchurch of Emlichheim, to which the few left members of Hoogstede belonged since 1850, had grown so much, it had to be divided in two congregations. 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 various 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. Nevertheless, it took till 1951 to gain full rights of a public church. In this year she became a "corporation of public right", recognized by the government of the state Lower Saxony. The contacts to the US, interrupted by World War II, were revitalized after the war and were important till 1955.

The coming of first Polish and then American soldiers in northwest Germany was experienced as a liberation. The ORC as the other churches provided support for the spiritual and physical need of Germany. The international contacts with the US and the Netherlands proved valuable. Care packages were sent by immigrants and their descendents in America. Fred Oldemulder for example from Graafschap, Michigan had emigrated in 1924 with several others from Emlichheim in the County of Bentheim. Immediately after World War II he organized hundreds of packages for known and unknown people in the County. Also the connections of the ORC with the Netherlands and the US were helpful in acquiring the official recognition of the new German Government in 1951. It had lasted for more than a century to get this status. A new wave immigrants restored the connections with the Old Country. These new immigrants profited from the rising standard of living in the USA and could afford to travel back to Germany five, ten or even fifteen times by airplane. Tourism and internet connections further bridge the distance.

At the same time the contacts of the ORC in Germany with other churches and institutions greatly improved. 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, and also the ORC joined this movement in the 1960s. Oldreformed ministers preached in Reformed churches and vice versa. Once a year Reformed and Oldreformed held joint consistory meetings. Delegates visited each others synods and strengthened connections. Though Reformed and ORC have different confessions, they share the same songbook, the same bible, and roughly the same structures. As churches today in 1999 there are very few or no contacts at all between the ORC and the CRC, though both churches face similar problems. The American way of life 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 travels through Germany. Thrice I organized a tour through the US 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", a kind of High School 7th to 13th grade, 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.^{lii}

PLEASE DO NOT FORGET TO APPEND THE ONE PAGE WITH STATISTICS OF EMIGRATION FROM THE COUNTY OF BENTHEIM YOU HAVE GOTTEN BEFORE:
THANK YOU FOR YOUR HELP AND PLEASE CORRECT MY ENGLISH:

Dr. Gerrit Jan Beuker

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- ⁱ G.J. Beuker, *Umkehr und Erneuerung. Aus der Geschichte der Evangelisch-altreformierten Kirche in Niedersachsen 1838 – 1988*. Bad Bentheim 1988, 542 p.
- ⁱⁱ 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: Baker, 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.
- ⁱⁱⁱ The GKN has about 700.000 members, about 4.4% of the total population in the Netherlands.
- ^{iv} Beuker, 1988,288
- ^v Beuker 1988,248
- ^{vi} Beuker 1988,427-431 (Printed publikations of the government against the ORC, 1838 – 1867.)
- ^{vii} Beuker 1988,259
- ^{viii} 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 22.
- ^{ix} See my *Abgeschiedenes Streben nach Einheit, Leben und Wirken Henricus Beukers 1834 – 1900* Kampen / Bad Bentheim 1996, 30 – 35.
- ^x James D. Bratt, *Dutch Calvinism in modern America, A History of a conservative subculture*, Grand Rapids 1984,8 says; "Between 1844 and 1857 almost ten percent of all seceders left the Netherlands for America."
- ^{xi} Beuker 1988,309f
- ^{xii} Till 1958 there were even four delegates from the ORC.
- ^{xiii} Brinks, Ostfrisians, 22f
- ^{xiv} See my book *Gemeinde unterwegs... Die Evangelisch-altreformierte Kirchengemeinde Uelsen seit 1838* Bad Bentheim 1984, special the pages 53 – 60.
- ^{xv} Beuker 1996,178+185
- ^{xvi} Brinks, Ostfrisians, 29.
- ^{xvii} Brinks, Ostfrisians, 29.
- ^{xviii} G.J. Beuker, Blick in die Geschichte der Evangelisch-altreformierten Gemeinde Hoogstede 1845–1850, 01.05.1953-10.05.1993, in *Gemeindeverzeichnis [Hoogstede] 1993*, 29. (privately printed at the ORC Hoogstede).
- ^{xix} In the articles of Association of Dec. 9, 1902 the Elders of Grafschap Church were Geert Boeve, Berend Kamps, Rieks Bouws, Hindrik J. Heetderks, Herman Tien, Lambertus Scholten and Gerriet Rutgers.
- ^{xx} In 1848 Eastfriesland had 173 247 inhabitants, 1871 there were 189 426 inhabitants. Between 1859 and 1871 11 145 people from Eastfriesland emigrated officially to the US.
- ^{xxi} Numbers from the Yearbooks of the GKN and earlier churches.
- ^{xxii} 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).
- ^{xxiii} Volkszählung 1880. Records in the Staatsarchiv Osnabrück.
- ^{xxiv} P.R.D. Stokvis, *De Nederlandse trek naar Amerika 1846-1847* (Leiden 1977),5. Stokvis gives not percent numbers the tenth part of a percent!
- ^{xxv} Swenna Harger 1990,88-143.
- ^{xxvi} At June 4, 1849 the congregation of Graafschap had about 50 families or 100 members. (John Kromminga, *The Christian Reformed Church*, 1949,27.)
- ^{xxvii} Kromminga 1949,33. Only from the church of Graafschap a letter with six reasons for separation is saved. and cited by Kromminga 1949,34.
- ^{xxviii} 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.

^{xxxix} George Schnücker, *Die Ostfriesen in Amerika*, Cleveland 1917, is thinking in 1917 of about 80.000 people from Eastfriesland living all over the US. Schnücker 1917,311. This book has many informations at the Eastfrisians in America.

^{xxx} Beuker 1996,294.

^{xxxi} Kromminga 1949,34. It is too bad, the letters from the other three places Noordeloos, Polkton and Grand Rapids are lost.

^{xxxii} Beuker 1996,13 + 314.

^{xxxiii} 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).

^{xxxiv} Steffens deserves a full biography, which would describe the international links between seceded churches in Germany, the Netherlands, Scotland, and the US. His connections with Breslau or Görlitz or other cities at Silesia, now lying behind the German–Polish border made possible many good contacts from east to west and vice versa, from the ORC to the Free Churches in Silesia. These contacts still exist today.

^{xxxv} Beets 1918,147-151. In 1880 a same kind of Theological School started 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.

^{xxxvi} 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).

^{xxxvii} 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 earlier 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 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, *Amerikaanse 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.

^{xxxviii} Beets 1918,208; Synodale Handelingen 1888,25.

^{xxxix} Beuker 1996,230+327f

^{xl} Beuker, *Abgeschiedenes Streben nach Einheit*, 416 p.

^{xli} One of the latest sons of the ORC living and working in the CRC was Gordon Spykman (1926-1993).

^{xlii} Beuker 1996, 291 + 308-310; Beets 1918,188.

^{xliii} *Ibid.*, 302-312 has a own chapter on the freemasonry and the connections between the churches.

^{xliv} Schnücker 1917,302

^{xliv} Schnücker 1917,303

^{xlvi} Schnücker 1917,306ff

^{xlvi} Typed Minutes Synod ORC p. 137f, 190f, 201.

^{xlvi} Beets, *De Chr. Geref. Kerk* 1918, 211f. In 1880 the CRC had about 12.000 members, the ORC about 3.000.

^{xlvi} Beets 1918, 372. As far as I know, there had been already earlier a kind of college at Dubuque.

¹ Jan Robbert studied in Kampen in the Netherlands, became a minister 1885 in De Lier, 1891 in Lutten and emigrated with his father in law in 1893. Robbert then was a minister at 3rd Roseland, Chicago, 1901 Kalamazoo, MI and afterwards in different places in Michigan.

^{li} Completely printed in Beuker 1988,470-476.

^{lii} A good address for more information on 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 cooperates 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.